



Antonin Dvořák: Trio Op. 90 (Dumky)

"A heavenly naturalness flows through this music. This is the reason why it is so popular," remarked the composer and critic Louis Ehlert, fifteen years Dvořák's senior. The Dumky op. 90, composed in 1891, is one of Dvořák's most popular works and also of the piano trio literature. During the time that Dvořák composed his op. 90, he broke with tradition in various compositions and experimented with the formal structure. The Dumky Trio is one such example: the Dumky's form, in a departure from the traditional four-movement form with its relatively fixed structure, allowed Dvořák – in his last work for piano trio – to give free rein to his thoughts and the acclaimed "naturalness" of his music.

The term "Dumka" (singular form of "Dumky") is a diminutive of the Ukrainian word "duma," which means "thoughts" or "prudence." However, in the Slavic regions, Dumka has also been considered for centuries as a type of melancholic, elegiac song, punctuated by mostly short and cheerful sections. It is also known for alternating its tonality mostly between minor and major in the same tone. Many composers, especially those of the 19th century – including Liszt, Wieniawski and Beethoven – were interested in this form. Dvořák drew heavily on these influences.

The six Dumky for piano trio can be seen as the highlight of Dvořák's work with the Dumka. Melancholic cantilenas, passionate outbursts, dance-like episodes, fiery temperaments and folk elements eloquently express the Slavic spirit and cast a spell on the listener. Despite the form, which was unconventional for its time, the Dumky do not lack a structural coherence. Instead, one can almost see a vague resemblance to the conventional four-movement form:

The first three Dumky are played "attacca": one directly after another, thus in a way as a counterpart to an opening movement, although fundamentally structurally different from the sonata form.

The fourth Dumka resembles a quiet second movement; the fifth, similar to a Scherzo; the sixth, a finale. However, this rough comparison to the four-movement form is also paired with other connections between the movements, either through the tonality or the different characteristics of the Dumka form. One could also draw a parallel between the stringing together of the six Dumky and a Baroque dance suite. What is most remarkable is the ingenuity with which Dvořák completes and refines the simple form of the Dumka, as well as how he brings together the individual six movements into one entity.

All six movements share the Dumka's characteristic oscillation between the elegiac and the intermittent good cheer; minor and major; slow and fast tempi – even in varying order.

Dvořák performed the piano part in the very successful premiere of the piece. In the same evening, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Prague's Charles University. The Dumky Trio quickly became one of the most often-played works of chamber music. By this time already a famous composer, Dvořák did not have to worry about financial questions or the goodwill of publishers. Instead, he could – as he wrote to Hans Richter in a letter shortly before the composition of op. 90 – follow "paths which lead us to the highest goals of the magnificent art."

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