

# Ravel & Saint-Saëns Piano Trios



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## Fidelio Trio

# Ravel & Saint-Saëns

## Piano Trios

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### Fidelio Trio

Darragh Morgan *violin*  
Adi Tal *'cello*  
Mary Dullea *piano*

About the Fidelio Trio:

*'Ravel's Piano Trio was a lyric upwelling [...] the Fidelio players brought it off superbly, and it was a joy'*  
The Sunday Times

*'The sound of this trio is irresistible'*  
The Herald

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

#### **Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor**, Op. 92

1. Allegro non troppo [10:44]
2. Allegretto [6:12]
3. Andante con moto [4:15]
4. Grazioso, poco allegro [4:42]
5. Allegro [8:05]

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

#### **Piano Trio**

6. Modéré [9:13]
7. Pantoum [4:27]
8. Passacaille [7:01]
9. Final [5:09]

Total playing time [59:58]



### Ravel & Saint-Saëns: Piano Trios

Ravel's chamber music is a particularly rich creative field, though there are relatively few large-scale works. Excluding an early violin sonata published long after Ravel's death, the earliest is also the best-known: the String Quartet, completed in 1903 and dedicated to his teacher, Fauré. Two years later, in 1905, Erard's new design of harp was the impetus for Ravel to compose the *Introduction et Allegro* for harp, flute, clarinet and string quartet. Other works were to follow after World War One, notably the striking and austere Sonata for Violin and Cello, and two works for violin and piano: the original version of *Tzigane* and the Sonata for Violin and Piano, a work notable for its brilliant economy of means, and its innovative 'Blues' movement.

Ravel's **Piano Trio** was written at the end of one of his most productive periods, finished just before the outbreak of World War One, and immediately preceded by *Daphnis et Chloé*, *Ma Mère l'Oye*, the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, and the *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*. Before any of these works were composed (between 1908 and 1913), Ravel had already contemplated a piano trio as a project that appealed to him. On 26

March 1908 he included it in a wishlist of works he would like to compose which he sent in a letter to his friend Cipa Godebski. Six years later the idea still attracted him, and the trio was written in March–April and July–August 1914, in Saint-Jean-de-Luz, in the Basque area of Labourd (now part of the Pyrénées-Atlantiques Department), just across the river Nivelle from his birthplace of Ciboure. The location was important: in his 1928 autobiography, Ravel stressed that the work was 'Basque in colouring'. The Trio is dedicated to his teacher André Gedalge (1856–1926), with whom Ravel had lessons in counterpoint at the same time as his composition studies with Fauré.

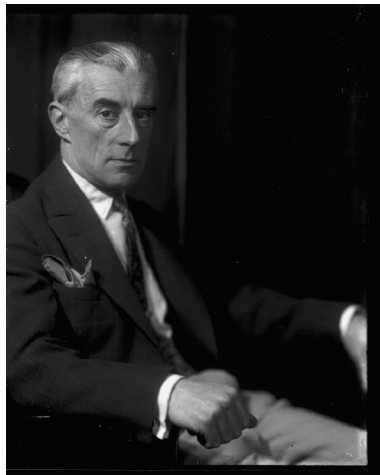
How does the Basque spirit mentioned by Ravel manifest itself in the music? The clue comes from an abandoned sketch for an explicitly Basque work for piano and orchestra called *Zazpiak Bat* (sometimes given as *Zaspiak Bat*) – the Basque coat of arms created at the end of the nineteenth century as a rallying cry for those seeking a union of all the Basque territories. 'Zazpiak Bat' means 'From Seven, One', and the shield includes the three French Basque provinces and the four Spanish ones. *Zazpiak Bat* was left unfinished by Ravel, and its overt nationalist inspiration became covert (apart from Ravel's laconic reference to Basque colouring). But the alluringly

lopsided main theme of the first movement was taken straight from his sketch for *Zazpiak Bat*. In this beautifully constructed movement, Basque folk music comes face to face with Sonata Form and there is never the slightest sense of unease: what prevails is a combination of supreme craftsmanship and real depth of feeling.

The sources of inspiration for the Piano Trio are varied. The second movement, essentially the 'Scherzo', has the title 'Pantoum', a Malayan verse form that was taken up enthusiastically by French poets such as Baudelaire and Victor Hugo. The construction of a Pantoum involves the second and fourth lines of each four-line verse becoming the first and third lines of the next, and its subject matter has to deal with two different ideas presented simultaneously. Arguments have persisted about whether Ravel chose this title for its flavour of exoticism and otherness, or whether he set out to produce a precise musical equivalent of this unusual verse form. Brian Newbould argued persuasively in an article for *The Musical Times* published in 1975 that Ravel followed the rules of the poem quite carefully, and also presented two ideas at the same time: the jagged theme in quavers heard at the start, and the more expansive, dance-like idea first heard on violin and cello. He takes this

process still further in the Trio section, where the slow notes of the theme eventually become a counterpoint to a reprise of the Scherzo – a magical moment as well as a brilliant piece of metrical organization by the composer.

For the slow movement, Ravel turned to the Baroque form of the 'Passacaille', a slow, stately ground bass. The structure is ostensibly simple enough – the same



Maurice Ravel

eight-bar bass is repeated eleven times – but the very formality of that seemingly straightforward form brings out music of profound seriousness marked by a kind of noble restraint: very much in the spirit of its Baroque forebears. The 'Final' is flamboyant, brilliant and marked by irregular rhythms that once again recall Basque folk music. Finished in a hurry, just as war was declared, it is possible to hear an almost desperate sense of elation in this movement (and maybe even forebodings of war in the trumpet-like fanfares of the development section).

Ravel's Piano Trio was given a private performance in November or December 1914 at the home of the cellist Joseph Salmon, who was joined by Georges Enesco on the violin and Alfredo Casella on the cello. Ravel's publisher Durand was present and described it as 'admirable'. The public premiere took place a couple of months later in the Salle Gaveau, on 28 January 1915, at one of the concerts of the Société Musicale Indépendante. Casella was again the pianist, joined on this occasion by Gabriel Willaume (violin) and Louis Feuillard (cello). Durand published the work a few months after this, in June 1915, and critical reaction to the appearance of this edition included a particularly positive assessment by Ravel's friend, the critic Jean Marnold:

There is little in the musical repertoire with which to compare it. The composer is in a direct line of descent from our gentle and profound Couperin, albeit on a larger scale. No pathos, no abstract intellectualism is found in this pure music, whose spontaneous restraint, lightness and buoyancy even Mozart could never have surpassed. No matter whether in the technique of the writing, harmony, polyphony, rhythm or inspiration, everything is new, personal, totally original, and simple – the innate simplicity which is our secret, and which constitutes the perfection of our greatest works.

Camille Saint-Saëns wrote two piano trios. The first was composed when Saint-Saëns was in his late twenties, while **Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor**, Op. 92, dates from almost thirty years later. It was started at Pointe Pescade, Algeria, in March 1892 and completed in Geneva a few months later, in July 1892, with some revisions made later in the autumn. As early as 1886 Saint-Saëns had written to his publisher Durand promising that he would turn to a new trio 'soon' after the 'Organ' Symphony, and by 1891 he told Durand that he needed 'to awaken the little beast which is nibbling away in my head; otherwise I won't be able to do anything worthwhile.' The 'little beast' certainly did Saint-Saëns's bidding, and the Trio turned out to be one of Saint-Saëns's most powerful chamber works. It is dedicated to the Vicomtesse de Guitaut, previously





Anna Hoskier, a fine pianist who had been a pupil of Saint-Saëns, and was the daughter of his banker Émile Hoskier.

Generally speaking, Saint-Saëns was resistant to musical innovations, but he was quite capable of creating inventive musical structures when he felt the need. The form of the Second Piano Trio is unusual in having five movements: two large-scale outer movements frame three shorter ones to create an elegant symmetry. The 'Allegro non troppo' opens with a theme on the strings that seems to emerge from the gloom, rising on the piano's delicate wave-like arpeggios. The sense is of the start of an epic journey, and the treatment of this theme throughout the movement indicates that Saint-Saëns was aiming for music that was both serious and exquisitely crafted. The gravity of the ideas and the expansive way in which they are presented suggest that one influence on Saint-Saëns in this work was a trio completed a decade earlier: Tchaikovsky's A minor Piano Trio, Op. 50.

The second movement, marked 'Allegretto', is a delightfully unusual Scherzo. Written in 5/8, it begins as a gentle intermezzo in E major, after the grandly expressive first movement. This benign mood is interrupted by a brusque minor-key version of the

same theme. A contrasting idea – cast in 5/4 rather than 5/8 – introduces flowing piano semiquavers, heard against more fragmentary ideas in the strings. These themes alternate, with a particularly ingenious variant of the 5/8 theme bringing the music back to the home key of E major for the charming coda.

Marked 'Andante con moto', the third movement is dominated by the passionate falling phrase heard on the piano at the very start and taken up in turn by the cello and violin. This is not a long movement, but it has considerable expressive intensity, in the manner of a lament, but closing in a mood of consolation rather than despair. Like the second, the fourth movement is a Scherzo substitute, in this case a rather dark-hued waltz.

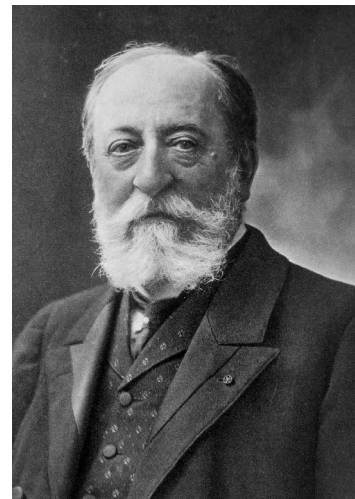
The finale is ambitious and impressive. It gave Saint-Saëns some problems and he returned to it in September 1892, two months after finishing the work. He wrote to Durand that it had been composed in haste, as Saint-Saëns wanted to travel to Italy to see the eruption of Mount Etna in August 1892 (a good decision, since this turned out to be one of the most significant eruptions in its history): 'The finale was written too quickly. I was eager to see Etna; it lacks careful crafting [...] I will make some



little changes throughout.' His friend Charles Lecocq particularly liked this movement, to the delight of the composer: 'I am particularly touched that the finale seemed improvised to you. I took a lot of trouble to achieve just this result, reworking the piece even after it was in engraved [...] It seems as if I've achieved my goal.' A brooding theme in octaves sets a serious tone, and later in the movement Saint-Saëns introduces a new theme for through fugal treatment before the two themes are combined and others are recalled fleetingly. Saint-Saëns's piano writing provides colourful and often sparkling textures that prevent the fundamental seriousness of the musical ideas turning into undue earnestness. Instead, the work comes to a muscular close, firmly rooted in E minor.

A private performance was given in October 1892 with Saint-Saëns playing the piano, Martin-Pierre Marsick the violin and Jules Delsart the cello. Saint-Saëns made a few minor amendments before the public premiere which was given on 7 December 1892 at Le Salle Érard, by Isidore Philipp (piano), Henri Berthelier (violin) and Jules Loëb (cello).

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Camille Saint-Saëns

*Darragh Morgan wishes to thank Florian Leonhard Fine Violins for the loan of a Gennaro Gagliano violin for the making of this recording.*



Photography: Hugo Glendinning

## Fidelio Trio

Shortlisted for the 2016 Royal Philharmonic Society Music Awards, the Fidelio Trio are enthusiastic champions of the piano trio genre, performing the widest possible range of repertoire on concert stages across the world; they are broadcast regularly on BBC Radio 3, RTÉ Lyric FM, WQXR, NPR and featured on Sky Arts documentaries; they have a impressive list of commissions and first performances from the leading and newest composers and have a large discography of highly acclaimed recordings.

Since their debut at London's Southbank Centre, they have appeared at the Wigmore Hall and Kings Place and at festivals from Brighton and Cheltenham to St Magnus and from Gregynog to Huddersfield; regularly performing across the Irish Sea at National Concert Hall, Dublin, Kilkenny Arts Festival and Belfast Festival at Queen's and overseas in Shanghai, Porto, Paris, Venice & Florence, Johannesburg, New York City, Princeton, San Francisco and Boston.

Their extensive and wide-ranging discography includes Korngold and Schoenberg (*Verklärte Nacht* arr. Steuermann); the complete Michael Nyman Piano Trios; and multiple releases championing new music including portrait albums for composers such as Luke

Bedford and Michael Zev Gordon. This release of Ravel and Saint-Saëns trios marks the Trio's debut for Resonus Classics.

Keen to ensure the future of the piano trio, the Fidelio Trio work closely with composition and performance students at institutions across the UK and all over the world including the Peabody Conservatory, Curtis Institute, Stellenbosch Conservatorium and WITS Johannesburg and have been artists-in-residence at St Patrick's College Dublin City University, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, and the State University of New York, SUNY.

They are constantly commissioning new works, giving first performances and, importantly, further performances to introduce them into the repertory. Composers that the Trio has worked closely with include Toshio Hosokawa, Charles Wuorinen, Johannes Maria Staud, Michael Nyman, Gerald Barry, Donnacha Dennehy, Evan Ziporyn, Simon Bainbridge, Judith Weir, to name but a few.

They continue as Artistic Directors of their annual Winter Chamber Music Festival in St Patrick's College, Dublin and continue to be passionate in their advocacy for the piano trio across the world.

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