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At Phillips, Hermitage Piano Trio does Russian tragedy proud

By Stephen Brookes, December 03, 2012

They were squeezing chairs into every last inch of the Music Room at the Phillips Collection on Sunday, and little wonder: Three of Russia's most spectacular young soloists had teamed up for an afternoon of mostly-Russian music, and it promised to be an extraordinary afternoon, steeped in the kind of magnificent tragedy that Russians do best. And, in fact, it was: From the first hushed notes of Rachmaninoff's "Trio élégiaque," No. 1, to the almost ecstatic despair of Tchaikovsky's Trio in A Minor, Op. 50, the Hermitage Piano Trio turned in a performance of such power and sweeping passion it left you nearly out of breath.

Rachmaninoff wrote his "Trio élégiaque" in 1892 when he was only 19, but there's little in this one-movement work that feels callow or thin. The Hermitage players — Misha Keylin on violin, cellist Sergey Antonov, and Maxim Mogilevsky at the piano — opened the work with great tenderness, building it with utter naturalness into a searing outpouring of grief. The piano takes a leading role and Mogilevsky shone appropriately, and it's almost impossible to say too many good things about violinist Keylin (whose phrasing and tone are impeccable) and, in particular, Antonov (who to these ears seems destined for cello superstardom). But more striking even than the individual virtuosity was the profound level of integration among the players, who showed a rare degree of ensemble from beginning to end.

The Rachmaninoff and the Tchaikovsky are a natural pair, linked both in structure and elegaic tone, and bookended the performance. Beethoven's Variations in G for Piano Trio, Op. 121a (known as the "Kakadu Variations") provided a lightweight buffer between the two, and the Hermitage turned in an agreeable reading. But it was clear they were reserving their real powers for the Tchaikovsky, a work huge in both size — it's a good 40 minutes long — and emotion. And it received a huge performance as well, brilliantly calibrated and perfectly understood, with a final "Allegro risoluto e con fuoco" that swept like a tornado through the room — a bravura performance that brought the audience to its feet.