



A Triple Portrait
Chamber Music by Elena Firsova
Marsyas Trio

Elena Firsova belongs to the post-Second World War generation of Soviet composers that emerged in the 1970s. These composers were at the forefront of compositional developments as the Iron Curtain gradually fell and their music began to reach an international audience. This CD is dedicated to Firsova's 65th Birthday, celebrating her role in both British and Russian music of the 20th and 21st centuries. All works are previously unrecorded, including *A Triple Portrait*, commissioned by the Marsyas Trio in 2011. Firsova was born in Leningrad on 21 March 1950, three years before the death of Stalin, and lived in Moscow from the age of six. The daughter of physicists, her education was taken seriously. She made her first attempt at composition at age eleven and from 1970-75 attended the Moscow Conservatory, where her teachers were Alexander Pirumov and Yuri Kholopov. However, it was Firsova's contact with composers Edison Denisov and Philip Herschkowitz outside her formal studies that were a key influence over her style. Denisov and Herschkowitz were not officially approved by Soviet authorities because their work followed that of the Second Viennese School. Herschkowitz was the only composer in Moscow to have studied with Berg and Webern, so it was to him that many younger composers came for advice and knowledge about serial techniques. New Western compositional methods were not permitted on the Conservatoire's curriculum, despite the cultural thaw that had taken place after Stalin's death in 1953.

Unlike their predecessors, Firsova's generation did not fear for their life if their work strayed from the official Soviet style, but they still did not have total artistic freedom. Firsova's compositional style placed her among the 'unofficial' composers whose music was mostly performed in underground concerts. Her music was first heard outside the Soviet Union in 1979 at the Cologne Festival, which led to a public rebuke at the Sixth Congress of the Composers' Union.

Firsova's works, along with those of her colleagues Dmitri Smirnov, Alexander Knaifel, Viktor Suslin, Vyacheslav Artyomov, Sofia Gubaidulina and Edison Denisov, were described by union leader Khrennikov as "pointless [...] noisy mud instead of real musical innovation" and "not representative of the work of Soviet composers." Reminiscent of the First Congress in 1948 where Prokofiev and Shostakovich were similarly denounced, this served as an unintended complement that increased Western interest in Firsova's music. Her punishment was censorship which prevented her work being performed on radio and television, and prohibited the publication of her scores.

Firsova met her husband, the composer Dmitri Smirnov, early in her student days. They married in 1972 and moved to England in 1991 with their children, Alissa and Philip. Firsova has so far composed over 150 works, in which vocal pieces, both large and small scale, feature highly. An impressive list of commissions includes orchestral works written for the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, BBC National Orchestra of Wales and Deutsches Symphony Orchestra Berlin, chamber music for the Schubert and Nash Ensembles, and a series of ten string quartets written for the Britten, Danish, Smith and Brodsky Quartets. Firsova's music has been featured at international festivals including the BBC Proms, Freden Festival, and Expo 2000. She has always felt a special connection with the introspective and confessional poetry of Osip Mandelstam, stating that, "Had I been a poet, his is the poetry I would like to have written". Her music is distinctive and personal, at times explosive, and always imbued with expressive lyricism where individual melodic lines seep through the texture. Firsova's works are published by Boosey & Hawkes, Sikorski, Schirmer, Schott and Sovetskyy Kompozitor.



Homage to Canisy, Op.129 for Cello & Piano (2010) refers to the Château de Canisy in Normandy where Firsova is a guest of the castle owner each year. This work was first performed in April 2010 by cellist Anatole Liebermann and pianist Alissa Firsova at the Fête de la Musique, the castle's music festival. The music represents the hustle and bustle of musicians and audience members going between their festival activities.

Lost Vision, Op.137 for Piano Solo (2012) expresses Firsova's inner frustrations and anxiety in reaction to a sudden vision impairment which doctors incorrectly diagnosed as being permanent. As she cycles towards the erroneously ominous hospital appointment, the initially sparse, calm music builds to a storm of agitation and fury, with regular triplets symbolising the pedalling of the bicycle. Her turmoil reaches fever pitch before eventually recovering a sense of serenity and resignation. The work was premièred by Alissa Firsova in 2013.

A Triple Portrait, Op.132 for Flute, Cello & Piano (2011) is the work commissioned by the Marsyas Trio which began the group's association with Firsova. Funded by a PRS for Music Foundation *Women Make Music* award, the work was premièred in London in 2012. The title reflects the idea of three individuals who enter one after another and then try to communicate playing together; but this is not easy in music as well as in life, especially when not only two but three personalities are involved. A poetic inscription from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (the Flowers of Evil) resonates with Firsova's statement that in her music, and in this trio as well, there are many thoughts about death and time: *The Clock, calm evil god, that makes us shiver, / With threatening finger warns us each apart: "Remember!"*

Night Songs, Op.125 for Mezzo-Soprano, Flute & Cello (2009) are set to poems written by Mandelstam in 1930-31, a decade during which many Russians lived in constant fear of being taken away by Soviet authorities. Mandelstam refused to surrender to the regime's control over the arts and died in the Stalinist camps in 1938 as a result. This work was premièred in London in June 2010 and reflects the fearful, emotive texts.



1. Mý s taboi na kukhnye pasidim,
Sladka pahnyet belýi kerasin;
Ostrýi nozh da hleba karavai...
Hochesh', primus tuga nakachai,

A nye to veryovak saberi
Zavyazat' karzinu da zari,
Shtobý nam uyekhat' na vakzal,
Gde bý nas nikto ne atýskal.

2. Posle palunachi syerdse varuyet
Pryama iz ruk zapreshhyonnuyu tish'.
Tikha zhývyot – harasho azaruyet,
Lyubish' – ne lyubish': ni s chyem ne sravnish'...

Lyubish' – ne lyubish', paimyosh' -
ne paimayesh'.
Ne patamu l', kak padkidýsh, malchish',
Chto papalunachi syerdse priuyet,
Vzyav na prikus syeryebristuyu mýsh'?

3. Ya vyernulsa v moi gorad, znakomýi da slyoz,
Da prazhilak, da detskih pripukhlykh zhelyoz.
Tý vyernulsa syuda, tak glatai zhe skaryei
Rýbii zhýr lyeningradskikh ryechnýkh fanarpei,
Uznavai zhe skaryeye dyekabr'skii dyenyok,
Gde k zlavyeshchyemu dyogtyu padmyeshan zheltok.
Peterburg! ja yeshcho ne khachu umirat'!
U tyebya telefonav maikh nomyera.
Peterburg! U myenya eshcho yest' adryesa,
Pa katorým naidu myertvyetsov galasa.
Ya na lyestnitse chyonai zhývu, i v visok
Udaryayet mnye výrvannýi s myasam zvanok,
I fsyu noch' napralyot zhdú gastyei daragikh,
Shevelya kandalami tsepochyek dvyernýkh.

1. You and I sit in the kitchen,
With the sweet smell of white paraffin;
The sharp knife and the round loaf...
Would you like the primus stoked,

Or should we not gather some cord
And tie up the basket before dawn,
So as to leave for the station,
Where no-one will find us.

2. After midnight, the heart steals
From one's very hands the prohibited silence.
It lives quietly and it gets up to mischief.
Love it, love it not, there's nothing quite like it...

Love it, love it not, once you've grasped it,
you can't catch hold of it.
Are you trembling, like a foundling?
Is it because at night the heart feasts,
Having tasted the silvery mouse?

3. I have returned to my city, familiar to my very tears,
My veins, my childhood mumps.
You've returned here; so, quickly swallow down
The fish oil made by the riverside lights of Leningrad.
Quickly, savour once more the short December day,
Where egg yolk is mixed in with ominous tar.
Peterburg! I don't want to die yet!
The numbers from my phone book are yours.
Peterburg! I still have the addresses
Through which I'll raise the voices of the dead.
I live off the back stairway and the bell, torn from the
flesh of the wall, strikes me on the temple.
And all night long I await my dear guests, and keep
checking the fetters of the door chains.



Spring Sonata, Op.27 for Flute & Piano (1982) is one of Firsova's most light-coloured works. Serene in mood with delicately woven textural writing, this one-movement composition is in a deliberately typical sonata form and expresses feelings associated with the awakening of spring. It was completed in Ruza, a composers' resort near Moscow, during the springtime. The work was written for and dedicated to Russian flautist Irina Lozben, who premiered it in 1984 with pianist Vassili Lobanov at the Union of Composers in Moscow.

For Slava, Op.120 for Solo Cello (2007) was completed in just a few hours – an emotional response to the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich's funeral which Firsova saw by chance on television. Firsova had a long personal association with Slava, as he was affectionately known, who inspired many of her cello compositions throughout her life. Rostropovich was teaching at the Moscow Conservatory while Firsova was a student, his performances of the Britten and Lutoslawski concertos making an indelible impression on her at that time. The première of *For Slava* was performed by Rostropovich's pupil Karina Georgian at the Dartington Summer School in 2007.

Meditation in the Japanese Garden, Op.54 for Flute, Cello & Piano (1991) was commissioned by and dedicated to the flautist Aurèle Nicolet. This one-movement composition was originally scored for flute, viola and piano. It was transcribed for the Marsyas Trio by the composer in 2011 and received its first performance in this version in 2012. The music has links with Firsova's chamber opera *The Nightingale and the Rose*, where the singer is accompanied by a harp. The piano part therefore sometimes has a harp-like texture. The title refers to the small Japanese garden in Dartington where Firsova liked to be and where she completed the piece.

Three Poems of Osip Mandelstam, Op.23 for Soprano & Piano (1980) was premiered in 1981 at the Union of Composers in Moscow by soprano Lydia Davydova and pianist Rusudan Hunzaria. The British première was given in London three years later, by soprano Jane Manning. Firsova recalls it was at this time that she understood the significance of Mandelstam's poetry to her: "From his poetry I learnt that we can speak very quietly about the most important things, and that we can see the most tragic occurrences in the light of beauty." The first and third songs are set to poems from 1930, while the second poem dates from 1909, written during Mandelstam's youth.

1. Atchyevo dusha tak pyevucha,
I tak mala mil'ykh imyon,
I mgnavyennyy ritm – tol'ka sluchai,
Nyeazhidannyy Akvilon?

On pad'yemyet oblaka py'li,
Zashumit bumazhnai listvoi
I safsyem nye vyernyotsa – ili
On vyernyotsa safsyem drugoi.

Ya bluzhdal v igrushechnai chashchye
I atrkyl lazoryevyy grot...
Nyeuzheli ya nastayashchyy
I dyeistvityel'na smyert' pridyot?

1. Why is my soul so full of song,
And why are there so few names dear to me,
And instant rhythm – is it just an accident,
The unexpected winds of Aquilon?

It will stir up a cloud of dust,
Will rustle in the papery foliage
And never return, or else
Return completely changed.

I wandered in a toyland forest
And discovered an azure grotto...
Is it possible I am real
And death will indeed come?



2. Nyeznyeye nyezhnava
 Litso tvayo,
 Byelyeye byelava
 Tvaya ruka,
 At mira tselava
 Tÿ dalyeka,
 I fsyo tvayo
 At nyeizbyezhnava.

At nyeizbezhnava
 Tvaya pyechal',
 I pal'tsÿ ruk
 Nyeastÿvayushchikh,
 I tikhii zvuk
 Nyeunÿvayushchikh
 Ryechei,
 I dal'
 Tvaikh achyei.

3. Smutna-dÿshashchimi list'yami
 Chornÿi vyetyer shelyestit,
 I tryepeshchushchaya lastachka
 F tyomnam nyebye krug chyertit.

Tikha sporyat f syertse laskavam
 Umirayushchyem mayom
 Nastupayushchiye sumyerki
 S dagarayushchim lucham.

I nad lyesam vyecheriyeyushchyem
 Fstala myednaya luna;
 Atchyevo tak mala muzÿki
 I takaya tishÿna?

2. More tender than tender
 Is your face,
 Whiter than white
 Is your hand,
 From the whole world
 You are distant,
 And everything about you
 Is ordained by Fate.

From Fate
 Comes your sorrow,
 And the fingers on your hand
 Which stay warm,
 And the quiet sound
 Of your hopeful
 Words,
 And the distant look
 Of your eyes.

3. Through faintly breathing leaves
 A black wind rustles,
 And a quivering swallow
 Traces a circle in the darkened sky.

There is a quiet argument
 In my tender dying heart
 Between the approaching twilight
 And the fading ray of light.

And over the evening forest
 A bronze moon has risen;
 Why is there so little music
 And such silence?

Tender is the Sorrow, Op.130 for Flute, String Trio & Piano (2010) is dedicated to the memory of Firsova's aunt Tania who passed away in July 2010. Commissioned by the Greek ensemble Idée Fixe, it was first performed in April 2012 in Thessaloniki at the Synthermia International Festival and received its UK première later the same month by the Marsyas Trio with members of the Ligeti Quartet. The title is inspired by Scott Fitzgerald's book *Tender is the Night*.

Maacha Deubner is a soprano born in Freiburg, Germany. She has performed extensively in Europe and the USA, including appearances at Carnegie Hall, Lucerne Festival, Wien Modern, and Berlin Festwochen. Maacha has sung with leading European orchestras in collaboration with conductors Vladimir Jurowski, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Kurt Masur and Valery Gergiev. Together with the Radio Symphony Orchestra of Berlin she was awarded the Echo Classical Award in 2007 for a recording of the opera *Sardakai* by Ernst Krenek. Maacha's wide repertoire underlines her specific interest in contemporary music and chamber music, documented on various CDs for ECM New Series label, RCA Red Seal/Sony BMG Classics, Capriccio, Naxos and Edel Classics.

Hannah Pedley studied at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, supported by the Peter Moores Foundation. The British mezzo-soprano's international debut was at Wexford Festival and she has since sung principal roles with The Royal Opera House, English Touring Opera, Buxton Festival, Grange Park and Opera Holland Park. Hanna has performed in Brussels, Spain and the USA, with concert highlights that include performances with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Warsaw Symphony Orchestra and the Manchester Camerata. Hannah is a keen exponent of contemporary music, having created roles for companies including Second Movement, ROH2, Buxton Festival and Grimeborn.

Morgan Goff works extensively as a chamber and solo violist. Based in London, he is currently the violist of the Kreutzer Quartet. The Kreutzer are the dedicatees of well over two hundred works and have recorded cycles of quartets by composers including Michael Tippett, Anton Reicha and Michael Finnissy. Morgan has a busy performing schedule with numerous chamber ensembles in London, including the Locrian Ensemble, Fiorini Trio, English Piano Trio and the London Sinfonietta. He has recorded both solo and as a chamber musician for Naxos, Dutton Epoch, GB Label, Toccata Classics, Guild, ABC Classics, BMS, NMC, and Metier.



Patrick Dawkins is a violinist based in London. He studied Music at the University of Oxford and the Royal Academy of Music with violin teachers Howard Davis and Tomotada Soh. In 2010 he joined the Ligeti Quartet, a string quartet dedicated to playing recent and new music. The Quartet have performed extensively in venues around the UK and abroad, from concert halls to art galleries, theatres, nightclubs, and a fishing boat. Their first CD (Signum Classics, 2015) includes Maxwell Davies's Trumpet Quintet and four newly commissioned works for the same instrumentation, with trumpeter Simon Desbroulais.

- 1 Valerie Welbanks and Fei Ren
- 2 Fei Ren
- 3-5 Marsyas Trio
- 6-8 Hannah Pedley, Helen Vidovich, Valerie Welbanks
- 9 Helen Vidovich, Fei Ren
- 10 Valerie Welbanks
- 11 Marsyas Trio
- 12-14 Maacha Deubner, Fei Ren
- 15 Helen Vidovich, Patrick Dawkins, Morgan Geoff, Valerie Welbanks, Fei Ren

Australian flautist **Helen Vidovich**, Canadian cellist **Valerie Welbanks** and pianist **Fei Ren** from New Zealand met as postgraduate students at the Royal Academy of Music in London. Since 2009, the Marsyas Trio has performed throughout the UK, Europe and Asia. The ensemble has received generous support from Arts Council England, PRS for Music Foundation, Britten-Pears Foundation, Ambache Charitable Trust, RVW Trust and Hinrichsen Foundation. Dedicated to music for flute, cello and piano from all eras, the Trio is also proactive in the performance of new music, with an aim to inspire a generation of new works for this chamber ensemble. The group takes its name from Greek mythology – a dedication to the pipe-playing satyr, Marsyas. Having dared to compete in a musical contest with Apollo, God of the Lyre, Marsyas won the contest but lost his life to the envious wrath of Apollo, saving his dying breaths for the instrument he immortalized. This mythology encapsulates the spirit and passion of becoming a musician. The CD cover art of *A Triple Portrait* by Philip Firsov continues the long tradition of depicting Marsyas in painting and sculpture.



Elena Firsova



Marsyas Trio

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A TRIPLE PORTRAIT: CHAMBER MUSIC BY ELENA FIRSOVA
MARSYAS TRIO AND GUEST ARTISTS

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A Triple Portrait

Chamber Music by Elena Firsova

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|--|------|
| [1] Homage to Canisy, Op.129 for Cello & Piano | 4:06 |
| [2] Lost Vision, Op. 137 for Piano Solo | 7:19 |

A Triple Portrait, Op.132, commissioned by Marsyas Trio (2011)

- | | |
|--------------------|------|
| [3] Andante rubato | 2:31 |
| [4] Adagio | 1:02 |
| [5] Andante | 7:48 |

Night Songs, Op.125 for Mezzo-Soprano, Flute & Cello

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|----------------------|------|
| [6] Andante con moto | 2:09 |
| [7] Vivace | 1:47 |
| [8] Andante | 5:21 |

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| [9] Spring Sonata, Op.27 for Flute & Piano | 9:40 |
| [10] For Slava, Op.120 for Solo Cello | 4:51 |
| [11] Meditation in the Japanese Garden, Op.54 for Flute, Cello & Piano | 7:19 |

Three Poems of Osip Mandelstam, Op.23 for Soprano & Piano

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|-----------------------|------|
| [12] Andante con moto | 3:22 |
| [13] Adagio | 2:58 |
| [14] Lento | 3:29 |

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| [15] Tender is the Sorrow, Op.130 for Flute, String Trio and Piano | 8:06 |
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Marsyas Trio

Helen Vidovich - Flute, Valerie Welbanks - Cello, Fei Ren - Piano

with

Maacha Deubner - Soprano, Hannah Pedley - Mezzo-Soprano
Patrick Dawkins - Violin, Morgan Goff - Viola

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MARSYAS TRIO AND GUEST ARTISTS

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