

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 10 September 2022
1.00pm

Michael Collins clarinet
Amy Harman bassoon
Ben Goldscheider horn
Ning Feng violin
Benjamin Baker violin
Timothy Ridout viola
Maciej Kułakowski cello
Edicson Ruiz double bass

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) **Octet in F D803** (1824)
*I. Adagio – Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegro vivace • IV. Andante •
V. Menuetto. Allegretto • VI. Andante molto – Allegro*



This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25

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'I have composed 2 quartets for violins, viola & violoncello, and an octet, and intend to write another quartet', **Schubert** told his artist friend Leopold Kupelwieser in a letter of 31 March 1824. 'Altogether, in this way I intend to pave the way towards the grand symphony. The latest in Vienna is that Beethoven is giving a concert in which he is having his new symphony [No. 9], three movements from his new Mass and a new overture [*The Consecration of the House*] performed. God willing, I am also thinking of giving a similar concert in the coming year.'

It wasn't by chance that Schubert invoked Beethoven's name in connection with his own long-thwarted symphonic ambitions. His personal finances did not permit him to put on a concert of the kind for which he yearned; nor did a symphony or Mass of his appear in print during his lifetime. Schubert was by no means an unsuccessful composer, but he was known to his contemporaries above all for his songs, piano duets and shorter piano pieces, and his attempts to make a mark on the larger forms on which Beethoven had so indelibly stamped his personality – the symphony, the string quartet and the piano sonata – were largely met with indifference. Schubert was too timid ever to approach Beethoven himself, but by making contacts with prominent members of the great composer's circle he hoped to advance his own cause.

He duly dedicated the first of his 1824 string quartets – the 'Rosamunde' Quartet D804 - to Ignaz Schuppanzigh, the leader of the string quartet so closely associated with Beethoven; and the following year Schubert's first published piano sonata appeared with a dedication to Beethoven's pupil and most ardent patron, Archduke Rudolph of Austria. As for the Octet mentioned in Schubert's letter to Leopold Kupelwieser, it was closely modelled on Beethoven's immensely popular Septet Op. 20. Schubert added a second violin to Beethoven's ensemble, thereby producing greater weight of string tone, but he followed the six-movement plan of the older composer's piece faithfully. Like Beethoven's, Schubert's score is prefaced by a slow introduction, and its scheme finds room for both a minuet and a scherzo. Schubert's fourth movement, in common with Beethoven's, is a set of variations; and his slow second movement mirrors its model by beginning with a broad clarinet theme.

Just how keenly Schubert pursued his artistic goals in the spring of 1824 is shown by a letter in which another artist, Moritz von Schwind, who visited the composer almost daily, described his feverish activity to their mutual friend Franz von Schober: 'A new quartet is to be performed on Sunday at Schuppanzigh's, who is quite taken with it, and has apparently studied it with particular care. Now he [Schubert] has been working for

a long time on an octet with the greatest zeal. If you visit him during the day he says hello, how are you? "good" - and goes on writing, whereupon you go away.'

The slow introduction which begins Schubert's Octet is closely integrated with the main part of the first movement. Not only do its melodic shape and rhythm foreshadow the *Allegro's* opening theme, but the introduction also makes a return at more or less its original speed much later on in the piece. Schubert doesn't actually indicate a change in tempo at this point – he simply writes the music in note-values of twice their original duration, so that the music sounds as though it's proceeding at half-speed.

The serene second movement, with its expansive opening clarinet solo, is followed by rumbustious scherzo, and then by a set of variations. Schubert took his variation theme from a vocal duet in a *Singspiel*/he had composed nearly a decade earlier, called *Die Freunde von Salamanka* ('The Friends from Salamanca'). As the variations unfold, Schubert throws the spotlight onto various members of the ensemble by turns. Thus, the third variation with its prominent horn solo is followed by a lyrical variation featuring the cello; and variation 5 is in the minor, its broad melody for clarinet and bassoon given out against an agitated string accompaniment. The final variation is in a more flowing tempo, but Schubert nevertheless allows the music to die away in a haze of nostalgia.

The minuet fifth movement brings us down to earth again, though not for long: its trio is a yearning, gently lilting *Ländler*; and the coda, following the reprise of the minuet, recalls the preceding music as if from afar.

Following the example of Beethoven's Septet, Schubert sets the slow introduction to his finale in the minor. But Schubert's introduction, beginning with mysterious rumblings in the cello and double-bass, is much darker and more dramatic than Beethoven's, and its effect following on from the relaxed coda of the preceding minuet is so striking that players often like to link the two movements together. (Listeners may be reminded of the manner in which the distant thunder of the storm breaks in on the peasants' merrymaking in Beethoven's 'Pastoral' Symphony.) As in the opening movement, Schubert brings back his introduction towards the end of the *Allegro*, this time not only making an actual return to the original slow tempo, but also intensifying the music's atmosphere through the addition of dramatic violin arpeggios. In the closing pages the *Allegro's* jaunty main theme returns in a quicker tempo, bringing the work to a rousing close.

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