

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 11 November 2024  
7.30pm

Nikolaj Szeps-Znaider violin  
Gautier Capuçon cello  
Rudolf Buchbinder piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Trio No. 1 in B flat D898 (?1827)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante un poco mosso •  
III. Scherzo. Allegro • IV. Rondo. Allegro vivace - Presto*

*Interval*

Piano Trio No. 2 in E flat D929 (1827)

*I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto • III. Scherzo. Allegro  
moderato • IV. Allegro moderato*



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The piano trio came into being during the latter part of the 18th Century. Earlier examples in the genre – including those by Joseph Haydn – were essentially keyboard works with string accompaniment. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart gave greater prominence to the strings in his five piano trios of 1786-8, where he released the cello from merely doubling the piano's bass line. However, the three instruments only truly became equal partners in the piano trios of Ludwig van Beethoven, which were often conceived on a larger scale than those of his predecessors, with four rather than three movements.

Other than the one-movement 'Sonatensatz' D28 of 1812, Franz Schubert completed no piano trios until 1827, the year of Beethoven's death. He had long been in awe of the older composer, whose achievements may have partly precipitated his creative crisis of 1818-23. During 1824-6, however, his confidence grew, and he produced large-scale instrumental works including three substantial string quartets ('Rosamunde' D804, 'Death and the Maiden' D810 and the G major Quartet D887) and the 'Great' C major Symphony D944. By 1827 he was ready to tackle another Beethovenian genre. Although the precise dates of Schubert's two full-length piano trios continue to be debated, it is thought that he wrote them in quick succession that autumn.

The B flat major Trio is believed to have received its première on 23 December 1827 in a concert series organised by Beethoven's friend Ignaz Schuppanzigh. Schuppanzigh himself was the violinist, the cellist was Joseph Linke and the pianist was Carl Maria von Bocklet. The work was not published until 1836, eight years after Schubert's death. The E flat major Trio was first performed – probably by the same line-up of musicians – in January 1828 at the engagement party of Schubert's friend Joseph von Spaun. Schubert clearly held the work in great affection, as he made it the centrepiece of his only public concert, held on the anniversary of Beethoven's death on 26 March 1828. The trio was published later that year, dedicated by the composer to 'those who find pleasure in it'.

In contrast to the troubled and introspective mood of several of Schubert's 'late' works – *Winterreise*, the String Quintet D956 – these two piano trios are predominantly buoyant, graceful and witty. However, each has its own distinctive character. Robert Schumann went so far as to call the B flat major Trio 'passive, lyrical and feminine', and the E flat major Trio 'spirited, masculine and dramatic'. This may be simplistic (and even sexist), but there's no doubting the melodiousness of the former trio, nor the wide scope and energy of the latter.

The Piano Trio in B flat's opening *Allegro moderato* contains many spirited melodic exchanges between piano and strings. Its two main themes are respectively ebullient and soulful. Notable features include a Haydn-like joke at the start of the recapitulation: the reprise of the Trio's opening melody begins in a remote key, and it

takes several bars for the music to return to B flat major. Robert Schumann described the second movement as evoking a 'blissful dream-state'. Its lullaby-like outer sections contrast with an impassioned central episode. Throughout, violin and cello often play in thirds and sixths in the manner of an operatic love duet. A genial *Scherzo* follows, with outer sections that contain much lively conversation between piano and strings, and a demure, waltz-like central trio.

The sparkling finale's principal theme is introduced as a flowing violin melody with delicate piano accompaniment. Subsidiary themes include a short, decisive motif that undergoes various transformations, most delightfully in the central (development) section where it becomes the basis for a rustic polonaise – a Polish folk dance that became popular throughout Europe. The movement's good humour recalls Schumann's comment on the entire Trio: 'one glance at it and the troubles of our human existence disappear, and the whole world is fresh and bright again'.

The lively opening *Allegro* of the Piano Trio in E flat major is notable for its thematic variety. Its four main themes are an assertive motif which begins with all three instruments in unison; a vigorous percussive tune first heard in the piano; and two lyrical melodies introduced respectively by the cello and the violin. The last of these forms the basis for the movement's harmonically adventurous development section. Dramatic dynamic contrasts feature throughout, not least in the coda, with its surprisingly hushed closing bars. The ensuing *Andante con moto* opens with a trudging piano figure that recalls the opening song from *Winterreise*, 'Gute Nacht'. The movement's broad-breathed main theme, introduced by the cello, is allegedly based on a Swedish folksong, 'Se solen sjunker' ('The sun is setting'), which Schubert heard the Swedish tenor Isak Albert Berg sing at his friend Anna Fröhlich's home. Variants on this theme alternate with an increasingly intense violin and cello dialogue.

Schubert told his publisher Heinrich Probst that the third movement should be played 'at a moderate pace'. Its elegant outer sections are marked *piano/pianissimo* throughout and include melodic imitation (canon) between piano and strings; the rustic central trio features mock-imperious piano flourishes, a 'buzzing' violin figure and a tuneful cello melody. The expansive finale shifts between 6/8 and 2/2 time. Its cheerful first theme is followed by a more restless second one whose rapid repeated notes evoke a ghostly cimbalom – an elaborate stringed instrument associated with Central European folk music. Schubert offers an early example of cyclic form by bringing back the second movement's main theme in his development section and coda. In the work's final bars, it shifts triumphantly from brooding minor to sunny major, ending one of the composer's finest chamber pieces in a mood of unbounded optimism.

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