

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 12 June 2023
7.30pm

Danish String Quartet

Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen violin

Erika Geldsetzer violin

Asbjørn Nørgaard viola

Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin cello

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quartet in A minor D804 'Rosamunde' (1824)

I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Andante •

III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Allegro moderato

Interval

Anna Thorvaldsdottir (b.1977)

Rituals (2022)

Franz Schubert

Gretchen am Spinnrade D118 (1814) *arranged by*
Danish String Quartet

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'Do you know any cheerful music? I don't', **Schubert** once remarked to a friend. Today, of course, the trivialising, Biedermeier image of the composer that lingered on well into the 20th Century has been become much darker and more complex. Perhaps we're now even in danger of overloading Schubert with our own post-modern angst. Yet while it's dangerous to make glib parallels between life and work, the so-called 'Rosamunde' Quartet surely reflects Schubert's state of mind when he composed it in 1824, in precarious health after contracting syphilis early the previous year. On 31 March 1824 he wrote to his friend, the painter Leopold Kupelwieser, in Rome:

'Imagine a man whose health will never be right again...whose brilliant hopes have come to nothing, to whom the joy of love and friendship have nothing to offer but pain. My peace is gone, my heart is sore, I shall find it never, never more. I may well sing this every day now, for every night when I go to bed I hope I may not wake again, and every morning only recalls yesterday's grief'.

This despairing fatalism underlies both of the string quartets Schubert had completed earlier the same month: the 'Rosamunde' and the so-called 'Death and the Maiden'. Both works are rooted in the private world of song. The oscillating second violin figure that opens the 'Rosamunde' Quartet, underpinned by tremors in viola and cello, unmistakably recalls the piano accompaniment of 'Gretchen am Spinnrade', whose opening line ('My peace is gone, my heart is sore') Schubert quotes in his letter to Kupelwieser.

'Gretchen' is not the only song alluded to in the quartet. The cello's subterranean cry of pain at the start of the minuet alludes to the yearning Schiller setting 'Die Götter Griechenlands' ('The gods of Greece'), which opens with the words 'Schöne Welt, wo bist du?' – 'Fair world, where are you?' There is yet another self-quotation in the *Andante* second movement, whose charmingly *gemütlich* main theme – a short-lived vision of unsullied innocence – is lifted from an entr'acte in Schubert's incidental music to the play *Rosamunde, Queen of Cyprus* – hence the quartet's nickname.

None of Schubert's instrumental works makes more heartbreaking use of his favourite equivocation between major and minor. The first movement's forlorn opening theme slips into A major – a momentary glimpse of consolation that only intensifies the pathos – before the music slams back into the minor with a dramatised version of the opening. A second theme, a slightly wistful love duet for the two violins, provides an oasis of tranquillity. The central development is one of Schubert's tautest and most powerful. It opens with the main theme, before working a fragment of the tune over a long crescendo, with the viola shuddering in the middle of the texture. Then, as the music nears its anguished climax, Schubert transforms the second violin's gentle winding accompaniment into a fierce running counterpoint, first on viola, then on cello.

Like the first movement, the minuet and trio trade on poignant minor-major contrasts. This was the movement that drew the most applause when the Schuppanzigh Quartet performed the work weeks after it was completed. At the start of the trio Schubert slips softly from A minor to A major, and quotes another phrase from 'Die Götter Griechenlands', to the words 'Return again, sweet springtime of nature'. With its musette drones and gentle *Ländler* sway, the trio seems like a memory of a rustic idyll.

True to the tone of the whole quartet, the finale is not a feverish tarantella like that in the 'Death and the Maiden', but an easy-paced bucolic dance, with a Hungarian Romani flavour, even a suggestion of a tambourine in the main theme's flicking grace notes. Yet despite the ostensible cheerfulness, there's a wistful, even melancholy undertow, created by repeated dips to the minor key (as in the second theme) and the prevailing *piano* and *pianissimo* dynamic. The total effect is less a Beethovenian resolution than a dreamlike distraction from the suffering of the first movement and the minuet.

As an *envoi* the Danish String Quartet play their own arrangement of the teenaged Schubert's first song masterpiece. Dated 19 October 1814, 'Gretchen am Spinnrade' is a setting from Part One of Goethe's *Faust* whose searing passion was unprecedented in German song. The story of Gretchen's seduction and abandonment by Faust, and her subsequent execution for killing her child, was prompted by real-life cases of infanticide in an age when unmarried mothers were routinely treated as pariahs.

In Schubert's hands Gretchen's song, sung in the original version of *Faust* after her seduction, becomes an impassioned *scena*, rising from numb pathos to almost hysterical erotic longing. The whirling accompaniment that continues throughout the song simultaneously evokes the rotation of the spinning wheel and mirrors every shade of Gretchen's agitated emotions. The momentary suspension of the wheel's motion at the thought of Faust's kiss ('und ach sein Kuss!') is a dramatic stroke of ineffable poignancy.

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My music emerges as a stream of consciousness that flows, is felt, sensed, shaped and then crafted, it does not emerge from a verbal place – but when a piece is completed I often spend quite a bit of time finding ways to articulate some of the important elements of the musical ideas or thoughts that play certain key roles in the origin of the piece – with *Rituals* however the accompanying text needed to be left impressionistic and unfiltered.

As with my music generally, the thoughts and ideas associated with the origin or development of a piece is not something I am trying to describe through the music – it is a way to intuitively approach and work with the core energy, structure, atmosphere and material of the piece.

repetition in atmosphere — going through motions, the same motions, but it is never the same — with every repeating breath is a new feeling, new vision, new life, new being, same life — the same but always different — various perspectives of ritualistic feelings, sensations, explorations, from the hymn like Ascension to obsessive percussive materials... from parts that move like a rigorous engine to others of flowing atmospheric ether — but all

have in common the ritualistic approach to the material — rituals in lyricism — rituals in hope — rituals in repetition — rituals in song — rituals in material — rituals in prayer — rituals in obsession — rituals in life — rituals in being — rituals in harmonies — bending rituals — rituals in difference — ritual as an escape — ritual as peace — ritual as continuation — ritual as burden — ritual as hope — ritual as obsession — ritual as being — ritual in harmony — each part is its own ritual and together the eleven parts form one ritual

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