WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 13 February 2022 11.30am

A Celebration of Myra Hess and her National Gallery Lunchtime Concerts in WWII

Members of the Nash Ensemble
Alasdair Beatson piano
Stephanie Gonley violin
Adrian Brendel cello
Amelia Freedman CBE artistic director

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Trio in C minor Op. 1 No. 3 (1794-5)
I. Allegro con brio • II. Andante cantabile con variazioni • III. Menuetto. Quasi Allegro • IV. Finale. Prestissimo

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Piano Trio No. 1 in B Op. 8 (1853-4 rev. 1889)
I. Allegro con brio • II. Scherzo. Allegro molto • III. Adagio • IV. Finale. Allegro

Programme originally performed at the National Gallery on Wednesday 6 November 1940
by Myra Hess piano, Arnold Rosé violin and Friedrich Buxbaum cello (former members of the Rosé Quartet)

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Although the National Gallery concert series did not begin until several weeks after war was declared in 1939, the impact of Hitler's dictatorship and its brutal removal of 'non-Aryans' from public life had already been felt in Britain in the earlier 1930s. A great many musicians, writers, scientists, artists and university lecturers fled Austria and Germany to seek safety elsewhere. No one, not even the most distinguished, was exempt. Which explains the arrival of the world-renowned Austrian violinist Arnold Rosé (1863-1946) in England in 1938: 75 years old, the leader of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, and founder of the string quartet which had premièred music by Brahms, Reger, Korngold, Schoenberg and Webern. Between 1939 and 1944, Rosé and members of his quartet gave 12 performances at the National Gallery. In this concert of 6 November 1940, he was joined by Friedrich Buxbaum (1869-1948), who had been the cellist of the Rosé Quartet since 1905, and Myra Hess.

The concert consisted of two pieces by Germans who had settled in Vienna – just as Rosé's family had moved to the Austrian capital from Romania. **Beethoven**'s Op. 1, three piano trios composed around the time that he arrived in the city from Bonn, were issued as a means of establishing himself as a new voice in instrumental composition. The set was dedicated to a well-known patron of the arts, Prince Karl Lichnowsky, who was to remain a keen supporter of Beethoven throughout his career, and a private performance was given at Lichnowsky's home. Although the pieces were well-received, Beethoven's mentor Joseph Haydn tried to persuade him only to publish the first two trios, omitting the one we hear today. Yet Beethoven felt this C minor Trio to be the best of the three and was not to be dissuaded. It seems very likely that the confidence the young composer felt was prompted by the same details which caused Haydn to express reservations: bold and surprising key changes, an intricate set of variations, a rhythmically deceptive *Menuetto* and an explosive *Finale*. In the event, the opus was to be one of the most lucrative publications of Beethoven's entire career. By rigging the printing deal to maximise profits, and ensuring that Lichnowsky encouraged all of his friends to buy copies, he made around 880 gulden. (His monthly rent at the time was 14 gulden.) It was not until the publication of the *Missa Solemnis*, 30 years later, that Beethoven made so much money from a single piece in this way.

Brahms's B major Piano Trio is also an early work, but with a rather curious afterlife. It was begun in 1853, just after his 20th birthday, in a year that saw his first meetings with Franz Liszt and the violinist Joseph Joachim (who was to become a lifelong friend). Through Joachim, Brahms met Robert and Clara Schumann, and it was thanks to the Schumanns that he was introduced to the musical world at large, and saw his first works in print. Among these early opuses was the Trio, completed in early 1854 and published later that year.

Brahms was ferociously self-critical, and even at this early stage of his career, we know that compositions were frequently rejected and destroyed for being 'not good enough' for public consumption. In 1889, now an internationally renowned figure, Brahms's publisher Fritz Simrock bought up his earliest publications – including the B major Trio – and offered the composer the chance to make adjustments before they were reissued. Brahms allowed everything to appear as it always had been *except* the Trio, from which he cut substantial passages and worked fresh ideas into its newly streamlined form. The resulting work – more of an 'Op. 108' than an 'Op. 8', as the composer joked to his publisher – is a remarkable meeting of old and young Brahms. The beautifully long-breathed melody which begins the first movement is original; the skilful unwinding of that theme, jumping through different time signatures and hopping quavers that follow are his later efforts, along with those subtle shifts to unusual keys and moments in which the clouds seem to obscure the sunny countenance of the opening. The scampering *Scherzo* and dancing *Finale* similarly combine features of both versions. But it is in the slow movement where Brahms makes the fewest, and most magical alterations: tiny adjustments to the opening dialogue between piano and strings which turn it from a beautiful, youthful work to a heart-twistingly exquisite movement by a mature master. And, on 22 February 1890, the violinist at the Viennese première of this new version – with Brahms at the piano, of course – had been none other than Arnold Rosé. 50 years later, the patrons of the National Gallery Concerts were able to hear this musician, displaced from the city he had called his home, still performing the music of a composer who had once been his friend and colleague.