WIGMORE HALL

Friday 14 June 2024
7.30pm

Wigmore Soloists

Michael Collins clarinet
Alberto Menéndez Escribano horn
Michael McHale piano
Benjamin Marquise Gilmore violin
Sini Simonen violin
Isabelle van Keulen violin, viola
Rachel Roberts viola
Steffan Morris cello
Tim Posner cello

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Horn Trio in E flat Op. 40 (1865)
I. Andante • II. Scherzo. Allegro • III. Adagio mesto • IV. Finale. Allegro con brio

Clarinet Trio in A minor Op. 114 (1891)
I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Andantino grazioso • IV. Allegro

Interval

Sextet No. 1 in B flat Op. 18 (1859-60)
I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Andante ma moderato • III. Scherzo. Allegro molto • IV. Rondo. Poco allegretto e grazioso

CLASSIC fM Wigmore Hall £5 tickets for Under 35s supported by Media Partner Classic FM

CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust www.cavatina.net

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

This evening's programme dips into the chamber output of Johannes Brahms at three very different points in his career: as a young man finding his way in the business, as a grieving son, and as an internationally-renowned composer on the brink of retirement. They are pieces which reveal three distinct creative approaches – and yet are each unmissably and unmistakeably by Brahms.

We begin in the middle, in the difficult year of 1865. Recently settled in Vienna, Brahms had been working hard on a succession of chamber pieces and songs, trying to establish himself professionally in the city. Then in February came the news that his mother had died. Deeply shaken by the loss, although characteristically unforthcoming about it in his correspondence with friends and family, he began work soon afterwards on what was to become *Ein deutsches Requiem*. It was this work which, by the end of the decade, had brought him both national and indeed international acclaim.

In the summer of 1865, Brahms composed a new trio for piano, violin and Waldhorn – a 'natural' horn, without keys, which required hand-stopping to pitch certain notes. Although it was already becoming obsolete in favour of the more flexible valved instrument, the sound of the Waldhorn was particularly prized by Brahms, who also gave it distinct prominence in his early orchestral pieces.

The limitations of this older instrument explains why all four movements of the Trio are in the home key of E flat – and it also affected the formal construction of the work. Unusually, the first movement is not an extroverted sonata form as is customary but intimate, reflective, and built from contrasting sections. The *Scherzo* bounces along cheerfully enough to begin with but holds a mournful theme at its heart (a little over a decade ago, an *Albumblatt* containing this theme was discovered: Brahms composed it 12 years prior to the rest of the Trio). The familiar shapes of hunting horn arpeggios are particularly present in this movement and the *Finale*. But it is difficult not to associate the extraordinary beauty and pathos of the *Adagio* with the grief Brahms felt at the loss of his mother.

Twenty-six years separates the Horn Trio from our next work, Brahms's Clarinet Trio in A minor. In 1890, at the age of 57, the composer was seriously considering retirement. But his determination to lay down his pen was overcome when he attended a performance that same year by the celebrated clarinettist Richard Mühlfeld. The two men had met several years earlier, and Mühlfeld had served as first clarinettist both at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus and the brilliant court orchestra in Meiningen, which had premiered Brahms's Fourth Symphony. Inspired by Mühlfeld's stellar playing, Brahms decided to put off retirement after all, and the two men became firm friends as well as collaborators on a string of new pieces: a quintet for clarinet and strings, two sonatas for clarinet and piano and this Trio. The Quintet and Trio received their premières in the same concert in December 1891, with Brahms taking the piano part in the Trio.

Brahms's late works are often described as 'autumnal' – but there is a tremendous amount of energy in this music, as well as much lyrical writing for all three players. The tempestuous opening movement unfurls from a tiny set of ideas in the first page of the score, including an urgent piano figuration which also features in Brahms's final published piano piece, the *Rhapsody* Op. 119 No. 4. This is followed by a gloriously singing *Adagio* which was surely intended to show off the fine skills of 'Fräulein von Mühlfeld, my Prima donna', as Brahms teasingly called his brilliant colleague. A gracefully dancing *Andantino* and a bouncing, quasi-Hungarian finale complete the piece.

We conclude with Brahms's first published string chamber work. This was not a string quartet – that most intimidatingly Beethovenian of genres was to take several decades to sit comfortably with the younger composer, and at least 20 quartets were consigned to the bin in the meantime. Instead, Brahms turned to the model of Louis Spohr, the celebrated violinist and prolific composer whose music he much admired, and completed his First String Sextet in the summer of 1860. It is not a coincidence that Spohr had recently died when Brahms began work on this piece. 'Spohr is dead!', he wrote with a certain amount of youthful melodrama to his friends. 'He may well be the last one who still belonged to a more beautiful era of art than the one we are suffering through.'

The Sextet was published in 1861 in both original form and piano duet reduction – which is to say that Brahms was nowhere near well-known enough at this stage of his career to guarantee the work being a sure-fire success, and the duet reduction was an important financial back-up. The laid-back nature of the Sextet points to Brahms's intended audience: not the well-to-do auditors of a concert hall, but amateur musicians keen to play together. This is music to *do*, above all, and the composer is careful to ensure that each player has a chance in the spotlight to play the principal themes. It is this desire for musical democracy that explains the length of the first and last movements. To counterbalance the outer parts of the piece, we are given a jaunty, syncopated *Scherzo* full of plucking and twirling, and a highly unusual *Andante*. It is a set of variations, the melody based in part on the old Portuguese theme of *La Folia* (on which such Baroque luminaries as Corelli and Vivaldi had written their own variations), here treated with all the stormy passion of a youthful German Romantic.