

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 14 September 2024  
7.30pm

Isabelle Faust violin  
Daniela Lieb flute  
Lorenzo Coppola clarinet  
Eduardo Raimundo Beltrán clarinet  
Javier Zafra bassoon  
Bart Aerbeydt horn  
Simone von Rahden viola  
Kristin von der Goltz cello  
James Munro double bass

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Septet in E flat Op. 20 (1799)  
*I. Adagio - Allegro con brio • II. Adagio cantabile •  
III. Tempo di menuetto • IV. Tema con variazioni.  
Andante • V. Scherzo. Allegro molto e vivace •  
VI. Andante con molto alla marcia - Presto*

*Interval*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Serenade in D Op. 11 (1857-8) *reconstructed by Jorge Rotter*  
*I. Allegro molto • II. Scherzo. Allegro non troppo - Trio.  
Poco più moto • III. Adagio non troppo • IV. Menuetto I -  
Menuetto II • V. Scherzo. Allegro • VI. Rondo. Allegro*



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From its first public performance in Vienna in 1800 as part of the programme that made up the first of **Beethoven's** lengthy benefit concerts – other works included the Symphony No. 1, one of the piano concertos, and music by Mozart and Haydn – the Septet in E flat quickly became one of his most popular works. Dedicated to the Empress Maria Theresa, it was published soon after, was arranged (both by Beethoven and others) for various combinations, including piano solo and duet, for piano trio (with violin or clarinet), string quintet, and was pirated by a rival publisher. Then, some 27 years later, the manuscript of the Septet fetched more in the auction of Beethoven's effects after his death than that of the *Missa Solemnis*. Beethoven railed against it being his most successful work, but it was still a nice little earner.

It is sometimes easy to overlook Beethoven as an easy-listening composer, who could be disarmingly light-hearted and benign. The Septet combines many genres, as a six-movement suite-cum-divertimento, with a quasi-orchestral grouping of wind and string instruments that strains the chamber music remit. Listeners in the 18th Century would have instantly recognised its military and town-band flavour, which comes across strongly in the fourth movement variations based on a popular Rhineland song 'Ach Schiffer, lieber Schiffer', and in the *Andante con moto alla marcia* introduction to the *Presto* finale. As well as Haydn's charming divertimenti, Beethoven would have known Mozart's magnificent wind serenades, which elevate the style onto a transcendent plane, and he wrote it at a time when he had unequivocally found his voice, as in the 'Pathétique' Sonata and the six Op. 18 quartets.

His instrumentation for solo players was novel, with six of the players given a wider-than-usual range, with the seventh, the double bass (as part of the string quartet group), firmly consigned to the bass clef. Formally the Septet is straightforward, with no fugues and any counterpoint being the by-product of chatty discourse; the violin has a diva-like prominence (and, in the finale, a rather flashy concerto-like cadenza) and is both flattered and sent up by a nearly-as-prominent clarinet role. The horn provides textural glue as much as Romantic drift and military bombast, while the bassoon, released from slavish bottom-line drudgery, is more independent with some vivid solo moments in the fourth movement variations. And there is humour – the solemn, portentous introduction slyly parts the clouds to a sunny *Allegro con brio*, led by the first violin. The first slow movement leads off with the clarinet in a suave melody that stays this side of sublime. The minuet will be familiar to those who know or have played the Piano Sonata Op. 49 No. 2, while the fourth

movement with all its soloist opportunities to shine is followed by a glossy *Scherzo* that puts the earlier minuet in the shade. The finale reverts to the solemnity of the opening, then throws caution to the winds in a cantering *Presto*, given an extra dose of theatre by the violin's cadenza.

The Septet's attractions are irresistible, a near synaesthetic brew of danceability and good cheer. Schubert got the point in his Octet, as did Louis Spohr in his Octet and Nonet, and **Johannes Brahms** in his two *Serenades*, particularly the *Serenade in D* Op. 11. In 1857, the 24-year-old titan was already cutting an imposing, romantic dash. He had taken over from Clara Schumann the post in the small court of Detmold giving music lessons to the royal family, conducting the local choir and giving concerts with the small court orchestra. The job gave him time to compose, and even to fall in love to the point of getting engaged (to a singer, Agathe von Siebold). This was in the wake of Robert Schumann's death in 1856, and Brahms's knotty relationship with his widow Clara (14 years his senior) got knottier still when the latter witnessed Brahms and Agathe kissing. In due course the engagement was called off, an early expression of the '*frei aber froh*' ('free but happy') mantra that bachelor Brahms sustained throughout his life.

During this time – dominated by the difficulties he was having with his first piano concerto – he had written a nonet (for flute, two clarinets, bassoon, horn, violin, viola, cello and double bass), and there had been a read-through with local musicians. Clara thought it was an orchestral piece in disguise. Brahms agreed and scored it for chamber orchestra, first performed in 1858, and then rescored it for full orchestra in 1860 (the version usually performed now), at one point calling it a symphony-serenade. Here was Brahms learning the craft of orchestration, but his Symphony No. 1, considered by some as Beethoven's Tenth, would not appear until 1876.

The most substantial of the six movements are the first (*Allegro molto*), full of Dvořákian rustic tunes and hunting horns, and the third, a soulful *Adagio non troppo* rhapsody, the latter preceded by a mercurial, ghostly *Scherzo* and followed by a pair of antique-style minuets. These are followed by another, very danceable *Scherzo*, the mood of which continues into the cantering *Rondo* finale. Brahms destroyed the manuscript of the nonet original, and tonight's reconstruction is by Jorge Rotter.

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