

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 15 September 2023  
7.30pm

Jeremy Denk piano  
Danish String Quartet  
Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen violin  
Frederik Øland Olsen violin  
Asbjørn Nørgaard viola  
Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin cello

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Quartet No. 2 in E flat K493 (1786)  
*I. Allegro • II. Larghetto • III. Allegretto*

György Ligeti (1923-2006)

Etudes Book 1 (1985)  
*Désordre • Cordes à vide • Touches bloquées •  
Fanfares • Arc-en-ciel • Automne à Varsovie*

Interval

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

3 Divertimenti for string quartet (1936)  
*March. Allegro maestoso • Waltz. Allegretto •  
Burlesque. Presto*

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Piano Quintet in E flat Op. 44 (1842)  
*I. Allegro brillante  
II. In modo d'una marcia. Un poco largamente -  
Agitato  
III. Scherzo. Molto vivace  
IV. Allegro ma non troppo*

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The Emperor Joseph II's famous verdict on *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* ('Too many notes, my dear Mozart, and too beautiful for our ears') is probably apocryphal. Yet it does point to a recurrent problem in **Mozart's** music for his contemporaries. One reviewer of the six 'Haydn' quartets complained that they were 'too highly seasoned', while Joseph II wrote of *Don Giovanni* that 'Mozart's [sic] music is certainly too difficult to be sung'.

If the opera was 'too difficult to be sung', Mozart's Piano Quartet in G minor K478 of autumn 1785 was evidently too difficult for the amateur domestic market. It was commissioned by the publisher Franz Anton Hoffmeister as the first of a set of three, but after poor sales, Hoffmeister cancelled the contract. Mozart was undeterred. Evidently fascinated by the challenges of a novel medium, he produced a second piano quartet in May 1786, which was subsequently issued by another publisher, Artaria.

Typically of Mozart's music in E flat major, the Piano Quartet K493 is a mellow, genial work, with something of the relaxed grandeur of the E flat Piano Concerto K482. As in the concerto, the first movement has an almost reckless profusion of lyrical themes, which expand and proliferate at leisure. The *Larghetto* shares the warmth and chromatic richness of the G minor Quartet's slow movement; but it is more intense, less decorative, with an impassioned development that opens with a dramatic re-interpretation of the opening phrase.

Composed against the background of a gavotte, the finale is as rich in melody as the first movement. Its most fertile idea, though, is less a tune than a dramatic confrontation between brusque unison strings and pleading piano. Once heard, this idea can never be kept out of the picture for long. It also reminds us that so much of Mozart's instrumental music is opera by other means.

'Bite-size bits of infinity' is Jeremy Denk's crisp summary of the *Études* of the Hungarian **György Ligeti**, who after fleeing to the west following the 1956 uprising made his career mainly in Germany and Austria. The title *Étude* suggests both virtuoso display and an exploration of specific keyboard techniques; and Ligeti himself acknowledged Scarlatti, Schumann, Chopin and Debussy as the 'godfathers' of his three books of *Études*, composed between 1985 (the six studies that make up Book 1) and 2001. Another avowed influence is the polyrhythmic intricacy of the American-Mexican composer Conlon Nancarrow, especially his studies for player-piano.

The first étude of Book 1, *Désordre*, is a riotous study in controlled chaos, with different rhythmic patterns careering up and down the keyboard. The left hand plays black keys only, the right white keys. Moving from dreamy simplicity to complexity, *Cordes à vide* ('Open strings') explores textures that expand and contract in turn, while in No. 3, *Touche bloquées* ('Blocked keys'), the hands in alternation play a rapid quaver pattern ('as fast as possible') which periodically stutters when required keys are 'blocked'.

In *Fanfares*, melody and accompaniment capriciously swap roles against a persistent, pulsing ostinato. Marked *Andante con eleganza*, the shimmering *Arc-en-ciel* evokes a rainbow in fluid, swinging rhythms, to be played 'as in jazz'. The final *Automne à Varsovie* (a reference to Warsaw's

autumn contemporary music festival, and to the political struggles in 1980s Poland) combines African-influenced polyrhythms with transformations of a funeral chromatic figure called by Ligeti 'the lamento motif'.

In 1933, while a student at the Royal College of Music, **Benjamin Britten** composed three movements for string quartet jokily titled *Alla quartetto serioso: "Go play, boy, play"* - an allusion both to Beethoven's *Quartetto serioso*, Op. 95, and to Leontes's words from *A Winter's Tale*. The three piquant miniatures, musical portraits of schoolfriends, were intended for a suite which he never completed. Britten did, though, return to the work early in 1936, replacing the opening *Alla Marcia* with another march movement that mischievously undermines its strutting rhythms with pizzicati and glassy harmonics. At the same time he revised the second movement, a wistful waltz-serenade, and the manically humorous *Burlesque* finale.

The Wigmore Hall première of the *3 Divertimenti* was an unhappy experience for the young composer. 'Received with sniggers and pretty cold silence', he recorded. 'Why, I don't know.' 'Depressing rather than diverting' opined *The Daily Telegraph*. Britten took this withering criticism to heart, and withheld the *Divertimenti* from publication.

After proving himself in the most exalted chamber music genre with three string quartets in the summer of 1842, **Schumann** included the piano - his own and his wife Clara's instrument - in all his remaining chamber works. Composed rapidly in autumn 1842, the quintet for piano and string quartet is the first masterpiece for this combination. Schumann dedicated it to Clara, who gave the acclaimed public première at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on 8 January 1843.

The quintet quickly became Schumann's best-loved chamber composition, with good reason. Each of the four movements teems with rhythmic vitality, harmonic adventure and glorious melody. In the first movement Schumann immediately transmutes the impulsive opening theme into dulcet lyricism (with a magical key change), then lingers over the second theme, a romantic love duet for viola and cello.

The funereal tread of the second movement is offset by a hymn-like second theme and a dramatic episode in faster tempo, with trenchant contrapuntal imitations. Near the end of this episode the viola intones the funeral-march theme in its dusky lowest register: a haunting sonority, and one of many moments in the quintet to refute the notion that Schumann was insensitive to string colour.

The *Scherzo* is a whirling tarantella that makes capricious play with ascending and descending scales. Of the two contrasting trios, the first obliquely recalls both the opening movement's viola-cello duet and the final song from Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* - a coded avowal of love to Clara. Beginning in the 'wrong' key of C minor, the finale contrasts a Hungarian-flavoured march with a whimsical second theme. Just as we seem to be on the home straight, Schumann launches into a huge coda that combines the march tune with the work's opening theme: a contrapuntal *tour de force* carried off with triumphant élan.

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