

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 16 April 2023
7.30pm

Martin Fröst clarinet

Leonkoro Quartet

Jonathan Schwarz violin

Amelie Wallner violin

Mayu Konoë viola

Lukas Schwarz cello

John Adams (b.1947)

Dolce pianissimo (2021) UK première

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Clarinet Quintet in A K581 (1789)

*I. Allegro • II. Larghetto • III. Menuetto •
IV. Allegretto con variazioni*

Interval

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Clarinet Quintet in B minor Op. 115 (1891)

*I. Allegro • II. Adagio •
III. Andantino • IV. Con moto*



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With its flexibility, its huge range and its lyrical, almost human tone, the clarinet has exercised a special fascination over composers from Mozart's time onwards. Brahms was effectively persuaded to come out of retirement by the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld. But it was Igor Stravinsky, in his *3 Pieces* of 1918, who first realised its potential for unaccompanied expression: creating miniatures that took a single musical line for a walk with the fluency and distinctiveness of a Picasso doodle.

Now **John Adams** has followed suit: with a 50th birthday gift, created in 2021 for Chad Smith, CEO of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and premièred by Martin Fröst at the 2022 Verbier Festival. The key, really, is in the title – the clarinet can deliver a formidable volume, when asked, but in this subtly-tinted two-page study, Adams takes the instrument from the top to the bottom of its register without ever rising above a hushed piano. The tempo is *commodo* ('comfortable'); 'floating' and *scorrevole* ('flowing') are two of the instructions along the way. And the clarinet's final vanishing act is described as *elegante*. But by then, the point has been made and the work's name, *Dolce pianissimo*, vindicated. You can say an awful lot, sweetly and quietly.

Mozart's Clarinet Quintet is the second of the three major works he wrote for his friend and fellow-freemason, the clarinetist Anton Stadler - at that point, probably the greatest player in the instrument's brief history. 'My thanks to thee, brave virtuoso!' wrote the critic Johann Friedrich Schink after hearing him play in 1784. 'Never should I have thought that a clarinet could sound so like a human voice'. Mozart, typically, took a rather more down-to-earth approach. His nickname for Stadler was *Ribisel-gesicht*: 'Redcurrant-face'.

Mozart completed the Quintet in September 1789 as a contribution to the annual Christmas benefit concert for widows of Viennese musicians on 22 December that year. Certain features of the Quintet reveal its origin as a 'crowd pleaser' meant for a wide audience; the jaunty, comic-opera melody of the finale's variation-theme, for example, and the yodelling clarinet part in the rustic second trio of the *Menuetto*. But as with all the material in the Quintet, even these simple ideas are used with the highest artistry.

The sonata-form opening *Allegro* is the most formally complex movement, a comprehensive study in sonorities built on three lyrical, gently curving melodies. The clarinet makes its first entry only in the sixth bar; but, when the opening theme returns at the start of the recapitulation, it has achieved a union with the strings and plays with them from the beginning. The strings use mutes to accompany the clarinet's song in the serene *Larghetto*.

Mozart relaxes in the second half of the Quintet, but the quality of his inspiration never flags, and shines through in the first trio of the *Menuetto* - a bittersweet

A minor solo for the first violinist Joseph Zistler. The string of high-spirited, deceptively simple variations that makes up the Quintet's finale is broken by the intense minor-key melancholy of the third variation - a searching chromatic viola solo that would have been played by Mozart himself. But it is merely an episode. Mozart is always mindful of his audience, and two further variations - one fast and one reflective - precede the cheerful *Allegro* that brings the Quintet to an end.

In March 1891, on a visit to Meiningen, **Brahms** heard the principal clarinet of the Court Orchestra, Richard Mühlfeld (1856-1907). He was fascinated. Mühlfeld, whose clarinet playing was so soft and expressive that Brahms dubbed him "*Fräulein Klarinette*", became the inspiration behind the final phase of Brahms's creative career. The composer returned to Bad Ischl, and by the second week of August, was dropping hints to his publisher Simrock: 'I hope to be able to stalk you with two really decent works'.

The Quintet was first played in Meiningen on 24 November 1891, and given its public première in Berlin on 12 December by Joseph Joachim's famous string quartet, with Mühlfeld on clarinet. Like Mozart before him, Brahms shapes his melodies to his instruments, and the opening of the Quintet – the quiet rustle of violins and the upward curve and sweet, languishing downward sigh of the clarinet – defines the mood of the whole piece. The translucent string writing, coupled to the way Brahms uses the clarinet's dark, chocolatey lower register, creates an atmosphere that's reflective, autumnal - even nostalgic.

But no composer was less self indulgent than Brahms, and although the *Adagio* begins in whispered intimacy, something very different rises up out of the darkness in the central section. The strings fill the air with sparks and the clarinet swirls and surges in an impassioned reinvention of the Hungarian 'Gypsy'-style music with which Brahms had launched his career four decades earlier, and which he always associated with Joachim and their long (and sometimes troubled) friendship. Listen, too, to the restless urgency of the music that grows out of the genial amble of the *Andantino*, and comes to dominate the movement.

And enjoy, by all means, the serenity of the finale's graceful theme and its five variations. But note that we're still in a melancholy minor key, and that passions are starting to rise closer to the surface. Shadows fall over the final reminiscences of the Quintet's tender opening theme, and a dark chord of B minor rears up and then fades to silence. If the Quintet really is the music of a golden autumn, it's one in which the storm-clouds of winter are already gathering in the western sky. Not that Brahms would ever have said as much.

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