

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 16 April 2024
7.30pm

Sir Neville Marriner Centenary Celebration

Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble

Joshua Bell director, violin

Tomo Keller violin

Harvey de Souza violin

Martin Burgess violin

Jennifer Godson violin

Robert Smissen viola

Fiona Bonds viola

Richard Harwood cello

William Schofield cello

Murray Perahia piano

Sally Beamish (b.1956)

Partita (2019)

I. Prelude • II. Fugue • III. Chaconne

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*

Interval

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Octet in E flat Op. 20 (1825)

*I. Allegro moderato ma con fuoco • II. Andante •
III. Scherzo. Allegro leggierissimo • IV. Presto*



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We start with a work written for the Academy of St Martin in the Fields: **Sally Beamish's** *Partita* for string octet of 2019. Beamish explains in her note: 'In March 2019 I was a juror at the Carl Nielsen Violin Competition. I heard many superb performances of the Bach solo sonatas and partitas, and for ten days, my head was filled with Bach.

Felix Mendelssohn was strongly influenced by Bach and Handel, and this is evident in his brilliant octet. I have taken the idea of a partita, which is traditionally a suite for a solo instrument. A string octet could be seen as a single entity – almost like a bowed keyboard – as well as being an ensemble of soloists.

The *Prelude* takes a fragment from the opening to Bach's D minor Sonata for solo violin, and weaves it into an *ostinato*, initially on first viola. This begins to fragment and break apart, reaching a climax which converges onto a single note. The *Fugue* is based on the Handel quote ('And He shall reign' from *Messiah*) that forms a *fugato* in the last movement of Mendelssohn's Octet. I have used it as a slow theme. The *Fugue* is in eight parts. The *Chaconne* takes a Mendelssohn theme that is heavily disguised. After a fanfare-like opening, stated on lower strings, there are eight chaconne variations, each featuring a different member of the octet. The solos range from wistful to playful, the last soloist being the first viola, with an attempt to reveal the identity of the hidden theme'.

Schumann wrote his Piano Quintet in September-October 1842, in the midst of a blaze of chamber music. The work is not a miniaturised concerto: piano and strings are fellow crew on the voyage, which begins with a boundingly optimistic signal of two rising fifths, from which the entire work takes its basic motivic shape. Soon this idea is melting toward the melody that provides the second subject, on the cello, but it is the signal, not the melody, that is reconsidered in the development section and again in the coda. The melody is something for quieter consideration, in the exposition and recapitulation.

Still remembering the signal, the piano leads the way into the slow movement, whose principal material is a funeral march in C minor. Repetitions of this are interleaved with other music in an ABACABA pattern, where the B sections feature further glorious melody, while the C centrepiece, in F minor, unleashes a turmoil, from which the march has some difficulty in bringing the music back to order.

The memory of disruption is perhaps never lost here – not until the gambolling *Scherzo* restores E flat major and ebullience. There are two trio sections, the first gentle and wistful, the second a humorous rushing on the spot.

The finale is a sonata rondo whose main material, with a kind of cantering rhythm, not only frames but also underlies much that intervenes in the episodes. Just as the movement seems about to wrap itself up, there is a magical shift of scene so that the germinal signal from the first movement may return, in contrapuntal apotheosis. Then the work can end indeed.

Schumann's wife Clara was of course the pianist he had in mind. She took part in a run-through at their home in November, but when the work was tried out more formally the next month at a patron's house, Mendelssohn substituted for her (and afterwards suggested the addition of the second trio), apparently because she was feeling ill. She was however well enough again for the public première, in January 1843.

Even in an age propitious to springtime talents, **Mendelssohn's** achievements as a boy are astonishing: six symphonies for strings composed at the age of 12, his Op. 1 (the C minor piano quartet) appearing in print when he was 14, and this Octet created when he was 16, in 1825, to be followed the next year by his *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture.

Octet and overture share atmospheres of exuberance and fantasy, besides being alike in mastery and precision. Here was a composer fully formed in the bosom of an intellectually gifted and caring family, for whose Sunday concerts two of the young members, Felix and his sister Fanny, were encouraged to provide material.

The Mendelssohn musicales presupposed sociable music, which this Octet decidedly is. Mendelssohn at 16 (in no way the typical teenager) wanted to be likeable, and he achieved this in his music by bringing a smiling Classical grace to the songful instrumental style of the time. Moreover, his eight players are the image of a fond family. The work, he directs, 'must be played by all the instruments in symphonic orchestral style', with more dynamic variety than usual in chamber music.

Surge and song are combined in the sonata-form first movement. With an eagerness generated by the principal subject's throbbing rhythm and arpeggio-driven energy, this theme is repeated with development before the second subject arrives in middle voices. In the midst of the development section proper, the music slows down for new melodic material from solo violins, after which the movement gathers back its forces towards the recapitulation. A coda, with solo violin over lower strings for a while, concludes by alluding to the main topic one last time.

In the *Andante*, song is given the gentle lilt of *siciliano* rhythm, in C minor. A motif picked up from the first movement takes over, and though the opening duly returns, this afterthought cannot be forgotten.

Next comes an already fully characteristic will-o'-the-wisp duple-time *Scherzo* in sonata form, a movement the composer told his sister was based on a quatrain from Goethe's *Faust*:

'Trails of mist and flowers of cloud
Bring brightness up on high;
Wind lifts the leaves, the reeds are bowed
– And everything takes to the sky.'

As noted above, the finale has the players engaged fugally, referring back to what they have accomplished together and still always taking pleasure in one another's company.

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