

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 16 December 2024  
1.00pm

This concert is dedicated to the memory of Laura Samuel, former violinist of the Nash Ensemble

## Nash Ensemble

Richard Watkins horn  
Benjamin Nabarro violin  
Alasdair Beatson piano

Kurt Schwertsik (b.1935)

Last Days in Old Europe (2023) *world première*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Albumblatt in A minor

Horn Trio in E flat Op. 40 (1865)

*I. Andante • II. Scherzo. Allegro • III. Adagio  
mesto • IV. Finale. Allegro con brio*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



### SUPPORT OUR AUDIENCE FUND: EVERY NOTE COUNTS

Ensure Wigmore Hall remains a vibrant hub of musical excellence by making a donation today.  
[wigmore-hall.org.uk/donate](http://wigmore-hall.org.uk/donate) | 020 7258 8220



Join & Support  
Donations

*Wigmore Hall is a no smoking venue. No recording or photographic equipment may be taken into the auditorium nor used in any other part of the Hall without the prior written permission of the management. In accordance with the requirements of City of Westminster persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating, or to sit in any other gangways. If standing is permitted in the gangways at the sides and rear of the seating, it shall be limited to the number indicated in the notices exhibited in those positions. Disabled Access and Facilities - full details from 020 7935 2141. Wigmore Hall is equipped with a loop to help hearing aid users receive clear sound without background noise. Patrons can use this facility by switching hearing aids to 'T'.*



*Please ensure that watch alarms, mobile phones and any other electrical devices which can become audible are switched off. Phones on a vibrate setting can still be heard, please switch off.*

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838  
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • [Wigmore-hall.org.uk](http://Wigmore-hall.org.uk) • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG  
Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Koch Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**



What does it mean to write 'new' music? For many concert goers the idea of hearing something described as 'modern' can be intimidating at best, downright off-putting at worst. And yet new music in its most basic sense – a thing never heard before – is just as likely to draw on traditions and familiar idioms that will help a first-time listener, as to prove intractable or actively confrontational. We cannot, after all, escape our own deep entanglement with the present, however much we might wish to be somewhere – or 'somewhen' – else.

This lunchtime concert brings together two works for horn trio by composers born almost exactly a century apart. They are each musicians with a deep sense of musical history; and both pieces act in some respects as memorials for the lost, as well as statements of the composer's own present.

The Austrian composer **Kurt Schwertsik** studied at the Viennese Academy of Music in the late 1940s and early 1950s. A brief stint as an orchestral horn player was followed by a determination to focus on composition, and Schwertsik spent the rest of the 1950s and early 1960s writing and performing challenging avant-garde repertoire, particularly influenced by the example of Karlheinz Stockhausen. In more recent years he turned from that aesthetic to a broader and more eclectic approach to creative work – and his sense of musical history, as well as his liberal politics and deep interest in his own family's past, all inform his new work, *Last Days in Old Europe*. The title, Schwertsik explains, is borrowed from that of a book by the writer and historian Richard Bassett, 'about his early years in Trieste, Ljubljana, Vienna and Berlin. My grandparents were from England, Belgium, Germany and Hungary but I was born in Vienna. My life began in fascist times and I fear that democracy was just a happy interlude. This probably accounts for the melancholy strain of this Trio.' The work was written at Bassett's request and is dedicated to him.

Schwertsik's work is in five movements, the first and last of which are identical. These 'Solenne' movements are vivid alternations of powerfully accented chords and whispered phrases, as if conjuring echoing fragments of chorale melodies. Between them we hear a 'Misurato' that seems to borrow from Mozartian figurations and elegant phrase shapes; a rocking 'Moderato Cantabile' with creeping chromatic phrases and narrow melodies; and an 'Allegro ma non troppo', conjuring the string and keyboard gestures of JS Bach. The harmonic world of these movements teeters on the brink of major and minor, sometimes edging into bitonality, sometimes resolving altogether into familiar chords or bare octaves.

Whilst Schwertsik mourns a time and place in *Last Days in Old Europe*, **Brahms's** Horn Trio of 1865 is often tied to the composer's recent loss of his mother, Christiane Nissen. Brahms's parents had separated the previous year – Christiane was 17 years her husband's

senior and this seemed to have caused increasing tension – but it seems that Johann Jacob Brahms had been intending to leave the family for some time and had been secretly gathering funds to do so. She revealed this to her son Johannes just a few days before Christiane's death of a stroke on 2 February 1865. Deeply shaken by the loss, although characteristically unforthcoming about it, Brahms 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 meantime, 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. 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: it is a lyrical first theme, rather than a strident opening statement, that opens the work. The Scherzo bounces along cheerfully enough to begin with but holds a mournful theme at its heart (first jotted down by Brahms 12 years prior to his writing the Trio). The familiar shapes of hunting horn arpeggios are particularly present in this movement and the finale.

Brahms's early biographer, Max Kalbeck, drew a link between the melancholy nature of the Trio and the death of Christiane Brahms. Indeed, he suggested that Brahms had quoted a popular folksong, 'Dort in den Weiden steht ein Haus', which his mother sang to him as a boy. But the 'quotation' is not exact, and we have no evidence that the version Kalbeck mentions played any part in family music making.

Where does this leave an audience in 2024? To imagine a biographical connection in a musical work to sharpen its sense of humanity and pathos seems entirely natural, and once the idea has been planted 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. Perhaps the Trio does indeed relate to the composer's grief, as he struggled to make his way in his new home city of Vienna – a long way indeed from his youth in Hamburg – and perhaps it doesn't, but simply suits our own ways of viewing history. After all, Brahms was not naturally emotionally forthcoming. Even after the première of *Ein deutsches Requiem*, and its fifth movement that speaks of being comforted 'as one whom his mother comforteth,' Clara Schumann wrote, 'we all think he wrote it in [Christiane's] memory – though he has never expressly said so'.

© Katy Hamilton 2024

Reproduction and distribution is strictly prohibited.