

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 17 April 2023
1.00pm

Nash Ensemble

Alasdair Beatson piano
Corey Cerovsek violin
Michael Gurevich violin
Rachel Roberts viola
Adrian Brendel cello

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Concerto No. 14 in E flat K449 (1784)

I. Allegro vivace
II. Andantino
III. Allegro ma non troppo

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor Op. 15 (1876-9 rev. 1883)

I. Allegro molto moderato
II. Scherzo. Allegro vivo
III. Adagio
IV. Allegro molto

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Between 1784 and 1786 (which is to say, between the ages of 28 and 30), **Mozart** composed 12 piano concertos – more than he wrote in any other period of his life. This impressive rate of production – and let's not forget that during the same few years he also composed three string quartets, several chamber pieces for piano and strings, concert arias, songs and solo piano works – tells us much about Mozart's career trajectory during this time. He had worked hard, after leaving the service of the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg in 1781, to establish himself as the leading keyboard player in the imperial capital. This had paid off handsomely, and by the spring of 1784 he was able to send his father an impressively long list of subscribers to several public concerts that year: Baron van Swieten, Prince Galitzin (uncle of the man who commissioned Beethoven's late quartets), Count Waldstein and several members of the Esterházy family among them.

Among these many names, one holds particular importance for the piece with which we begin. Gottfried Ignaz von Ployer was a Court Councillor in Vienna, and had also been the Viennese agent of the Salzburg Court since 1780. He would therefore have known Mozart before his move to the city; and by 1784, he was employing the young man to instruct his daughter Barbara in both composition and clavier playing. It was for Barbara Ployer (evidently no mean keyboardist) that Mozart composed the Piano Concerto in E flat K449, one of two such pieces written with her in mind.

The E flat Concerto begins, rather unusually, in 3/4: almost all of Mozart's concertos have four beats in a bar in their first movements, and to choose this alternative time signature imbues the *Allegro vivace* with a dancing lilt and twinkle in its eye. The cheery back and forth of this movement is followed by a melting *Andantino*, almost operatic in its long-breathed melodies; and this in turn gives way to a chirpy finale, the keyboard writing seeming to hint at Baroque models. Mozart reported to his father after its first public performance that it 'won extraordinary applause'.

The Concerto is the first item in Mozart's hand-written catalogue of his own compositions, and his description of the piece provides important practical information about its performance. While we tend to imagine concerti as large-scale orchestral affairs requiring a large venue (expensive) and many players (even more expensive), this Concerto is described by its composer as being for two violins, viola and bass, with *ad libitum* parts for oboes and horns. In other words, it was perfectly possible to perform the work with a pianist and a string quartet – what Mozart himself referred to as '*a quattrò*' – and this was not the first time that he had taken such a pragmatic approach to scoring. It seems likely that the Concerto was given in this more compact version at the

Ployers' home on 23 March 1784, with Barbara Ployer at the keyboard, but performed in its full orchestral form by Mozart at his Akademie six days earlier, when it received such a rapturous reception. Nevertheless, despite Mozart's performance taking place before that of his pupil, the score still belonged to her: she had, as he reminded his father when he requested a copy, 'paid me handsomely.'

Gabriel Fauré's First Piano Quartet was first performed in 1880 at a concert of the French Société Nationale, with the composer himself (then aged 35 years old) at the piano. The piece was composed at a difficult moment in his life: he had regular work as an organist, choirmaster and teacher but found it grinding and 'mercenary', and Marianne Viardot (daughter of the famous composer and singer Pauline Viardot-García) had broken off her engagement to Fauré as she came to realise that he loved her far more than she loved him.

Nevertheless, he managed to continue composing and performing, as the existence of this Quartet attests. The first movement in particular seems to be much influenced by the music of Johannes Brahms (who was, after all, only a little over a decade his elder). Its strident rhetorical opening and the ensemble textures of the first few pages clearly recall Brahms's own works in this medium and other piano chamber ensembles. Fauré had decided to avoid writing string quartets because of the long shadows cast by Beethoven; but here too the composer had his musical ghosts to exorcise.

As the first movement unfolds and we reach the lyrical second theme, Fauré's own voice seems to come into sharper focus; and this is also true of the delicately perky *Scherzo* which follows. But it is in the gorgeous *Adagio* that we find the strongest indication of the harmonic world that Fauré was to make his own, across chamber works, solo piano pieces and countless songs, over the next few decades. The wildly popular *Après un rêve* had been given its first performance two years earlier, and there is a strong sense of a song without words in the long-breathed string parts in the Quartet as the piano rocks and pulses gently beneath them.

At its première in 1880, the first three movements of the Quartet were warmly received – but some of the composer's closest friends expressed reservations about the finale, and he withheld it from publication in order to revise it. It took several years; he finally premièred the replacement in 1884. This revamped finale, which we hear this afternoon, suggests a new confidence that seems to effortlessly combine the rich Romanticism of Fauré's models with a recognisably personal turn of phrase.

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