

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 17 February 2022 7.30pm

**Andreas Haefliger** piano

**Escher String Quartet**

**Adam Barnett-Hart** violin

**Brendan Speltz** violin

**Pierre Lapointe** viola

**Brook Speltz** cello

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**Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 16 in F Op. 135 (1826)

*I. Allegretto • II. Vivace • III. Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo •  
IV. Grave, ma non troppo tratto – Allegro*

**Benjamin Britten** (1913-1976)

String Quartet No. 3 Op. 94 (1975)

*I. Duets. With moderate movement • II. Ostinato. Very fast •  
III. Solo. Very calm • IV. Burlesque. Fast, con fuoco •  
V. Recitative and Passacaglia (La Serenissima). Slow*

Interval

**Johannes Brahms** (1833-1897)

Piano Quintet in F minor Op. 34 (1862)

*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Andante, un poco adagio • III. Scherzo. Allegro •  
IV. Finale. Poco sostenuto - Allegro non troppo - Presto non troppo*

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The first half of this evening's concert features two chamber music swansongs. **Beethoven** wrote his String Quartet No. 16 in F Op. 135 during the autumn of 1826. He had but six months to live. At the time, the composer was based in Gneixendorf in Lower Austria, surrounded by vineyards and the hard work of the wine harvest. Fittingly, there is a comparable sense of struggle in the music that Beethoven created, as well as autumnal resignation.

The first movement of four begins in inquisitive terms. But even after its initial uncertainty is answered by diatonic confidence, the following unison passage denies easy solutions. Throughout this sonata-form *Allegretto*, Beethoven nods towards Classical style, yet nothing adheres to expectation, including a structure that refuses to be broken down into easily digestible sections.

The second movement, a daring *Vivace*, continues to evade the listener's grasp, ducking here and there, while charting a large tonal range. And further surprises are in store in the *Lento*, the opening notes of which suggest the tonic minor, before Beethoven lands in a balmy D flat major. This is truly music of 'mellow fruitfulness', though it is not without stuttering and winded variations on that initial theme.

The prevailing sense of enquiry finds its apotheosis in the Finale. The composer subtitled this music *Der schwer gefasste Entschluss* ('the difficult decision'), and, according to his own annotations in the introduction, asks *Muss es sein?* ('Must it be?'). Under the main theme, he provides the answer: *Es muss sein!* ('It must be!'). There is perhaps an element of self-parody here, though the question nonetheless remains, indicating just how personal this work was, as well as pointing to Beethoven's perennial exploration of musical and philosophical dialectics – the two are, of course, never mutually exclusive.

**Britten** was also at the end of his life when he wrote his operatic adaptation of Thomas Mann's 1912 novella *Death in Venice*. The project had been a long time in coming and would, similarly, take a while to leave Britten's imagination. Two years after its successful première at the Aldeburgh Festival on 16 June 1973, Britten began a further reflection on the theme, albeit in chamber-music form. The Amadeus Quartet managed to play the resulting Third String Quartet to the ailing composer at The Red House on 28 September 1976, but Britten died shortly before the public première, given at Snape, that December.

The work, composed first in Aldeburgh and then on Britten's final trip to Venice, is cast in five movements. The opening *Duets* is a study in two-part textures and offers a vivid distillation of the opposing forces within Mann's story (and Britten's opera). The second movement, *Ostinato*, is more abrupt, with a central cell featuring a jarring seventh. While this figure is present throughout the movement, Britten then turns down a more reflective path, as the two moods jostle for our attention.

*Solo* is the keystone of the entire quartet, with the outer movements acting as mirrors around it. Revolving around a sparse

cantilena, this music has great poignancy, though the underlying tonality of C major and an unruffled dynamic suggest resignation. A sudden burst of energy provides a ray of sunshine in the middle section, before it comes to rest on the tonic, decorated with fluting harmonics. The fourth movement follows a minuet-and-trio construction, offering another tripartite structure within the work's overarching form.

Finally, the waters of the Venetian lagoon saturate the last movement, *La Serenissima*. It was composed at the Hotel Danieli in November 1975 and cites various passages from the opera, before the bells of the Church of Santa Maria della Salute, visible from Britten's hotel room, provide the basis for a final *Passacaglia*. Slowly, it moves from C major to E major – the key associated with Mann's 'master writer' – as Britten's swansong slips into silence.

From the end of two composers' careers, we move to near the beginning of another. **Brahms** originally wrote his Piano Quintet in F minor Op. 34 as a string quintet. He was clearly following in the footsteps of Schubert, whose choice of instruments, including one viola and two cellos, he likewise replicated. It was in this form that Brahms showed the score to his friend and colleague Joseph Joachim, though the violinist was not exactly impressed. Undiscouraged, Brahms went on to revise the work as a sonata for two pianos – in which form it also met with criticism from Clara Schumann – before he effectively combined the two iterations and completed the Piano Quintet in the summer of 1864.

All the hallmarks of Brahms's mature style are present here, including the stormy daemon often summoned by the key of F minor. And the first movement also features one of the composer's most rewarding tripartite sonata forms, in which the melodic material, often tending to a secondary tonal centre of D flat major, is constantly transformed. Here, in essence, is what Schoenberg later termed the 'developing variation technique'.

The slow movement has something of the uneven gait of equivalent passages in the symphonies. At times, its lilting, rocking music attempts to pour balm on the fevered tempers of the first movement, while at others, it returns us to the fray. The *Scherzo* then begins on a much eerier note, though this is soon countered by strident *tuttis*.

Bruised by everything that has gone before, the *Finale* begins in hushed terms, though the introduction only makes the subsequent display even more audacious. Another multifaceted sonata-form structure, it touches on Brahms's enduring interest in Hungarian folk music. Late in the day, the mood of the introduction returns, before the home key of F minor reappears to thunder through at the close.

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