

WIGMORE HALL 125

Saturday 17 January 2026
7.30pm

Nash Ensemble

Simon Crawford-Phillips piano
Philippa Davies flute
Gareth Hulse oboe
Richard Hosford clarinet
Ursula Leveaux bassoon
Richard Watkins horn

Stephanie Gonley violin
Jonathan Stone violin
Lawrence Power viola
Adrian Brendel cello
Gemma Rosefield cello
Graham Mitchell double bass

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Quartet No. 2 in E flat K493 (1786)
I. Allegro • II. Larghetto • III. Allegretto

Frank Bridge (1879-1941)

Pensiero (c.1906)
Allegro appassionato (1908)

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Sinfonietta Op. 1 (1932)
*I. Poco presto ed agitato • II. Variations •
III. Tarantella*

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quintet in C D956 (1828)
*I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Adagio •
III. Scherzo. Presto – Trio. Andante sostenuto •
IV. Allegretto*



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Is a piano quartet private or public? Writing at a time when the piano trio was a very popular genre for amateur performers, **Mozart's** decision in the 1780s to compose two pieces for the rather more unusual format of piano quartet is striking. Commissioned by Franz Anton Hoffmeister to write three quartets in 1785, Mozart only completed one before being informed that his efforts were simply too difficult for the Viennese public! And yet he wrote a second the very next year – the Piano Quartet with which we begin this evening – evidently intrigued by the possibilities of the ensemble. As a result, this is a work that walks the tightrope between concerto-like outbursts and the quiet intimacy of chamber music. And even if Hoffmeister was no longer interested, his rival Artaria was perfectly content to publish the new piece in 1787.

The E flat Quartet is a piece of tremendous warmth and good cheer, which is evident from the very first bar of the opening *Allegro* – not to mention the gorgeously dreamy, singing second theme that appears a little later in the movement. The piano plays a relatively central role in the ravishing *Larghetto*, a miniature concerto movement of the most personal kind; but it's in the rondo *Finale* that the keyboard is truly front and centre, all virtuoso scales and cheeky delays and derailings of the principal theme.

Interestingly, we are told by a Viennese journalist of 1788 that having been repeatedly irritated by bad performances of the Quartet at fashionable city parties, he finally had the pleasure of attending a very different rendition: 'What a difference, when this much talked about art-work is performed with the greatest precision by four capable musicians who have studied it well, in a quiet room, in which as well the suspension of every note does not escape the listening ear, in the presence of only two or three attentive people.'

Between 1905 and 1908 **Frank Bridge** was building an increasingly promising career as a young composer and performer. He received prizes in the first two Cobbett Chamber Competitions in 1905 and 1907, began to receive commissions for new works, and was playing the viola with eminent international musicians and ensemble (including the string quartets led respectively by Jessie Grimson and Marie Motto, both of which played here at Wigmore Hall).

However, Bridge wrote very little for his own instrument, and it is thanks to another violist – the eminent solo Lionel Tertis – that we have these two short pieces for viola and piano. Tertis edited a series called 'Viola Library' to which Bridge contributed his *Pensiero* (of 1905) and the stormy *Allegro Appassionato*; and they were premièred at the Royal College of Music in November 1909 by Audrey ffolkes and Harold Smith. Together, they present a fascinating glimpse at a young composer seeking to balance a passionate late-Romantic German virtuosity with luminous French harmonies; and an unerring instinct for soaring, singing melody.

Bridge famously went on to act as tutor and advisor to the young **Benjamin Britten** in the 1920s – though it was Audrey ffolkes, his RCM contemporary, who gave Britten his first viola lessons. Bridge remained an important mentor even after Britten began his studies with John Ireland at the College, and it is to Bridge – not Ireland – that Britten's opus one is dedicated. He composed his Sinfonietta in just three weeks over the summer of 1932, and it was premièred the following January at the Mercury Theatre, conducted by Iris Lemare, earning him warm plaudits from reviewers and audience alike. The brooding, spiky and often rhythmically urgent outer movements (particularly the driving *Tarantella*) contrast strikingly with moments of tender, heartsore lyricism; and Britten plays dramatically and vividly with his instrumental palette, handing prominent melodies as often to a high bassoon as the more predictable flute or violins. The seeds of those sonically experimental scores for the General Post Office films of the mid-1930s are all contained within this first foray into print.

We close with a work by one of Britten's most beloved composers: **Franz Schubert**. The Quintet in C D956 was completed just a month or two before Schubert's death in November 1828. Ever the consummate songwriter, Schubert's instrumental themes are long-breathed and highly lyrical, and he enjoys giving players and listeners the opportunity to hear those themes rendered complete every time. The result is that this piece unfolds in substantial, slow, singing sections across its four movements, and it is this – as well as the important inclusion of a second cellist – which gives it such a sense of length and breadth.

Of course, if all Schubert did was to offer extended melodies for a larger-than-average chamber group, we would very rapidly lose patience. Instead, he combines the gradual unfolding of these long musical lines with ferocious attention to detail. Tiny chord shifts tip the opening bars of the piece between major and minor, and into ricocheting falling patterns through the ensemble a few minutes later. Players are deployed with the utmost care, with Schubert forever varying the texture and asking one or more member of the ensemble to sit quietly whilst others step forwards. The magical opening of the *Adagio* is a case in point – limpid ensemble 'singing' from the three middle instruments with the delicate ticking pizzicato of the second cello beneath – whilst the broad, ringing chords of the *Scherzo* span the range of all five instruments. And although this is a major-key piece, Schubert's finale keeps us guessing to the last few seconds as to whether it will land in the key it began, or give into the many tugging, dramatic minor inflections that permeate the earlier stages of the movement.

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