

WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 17 November 2025
1.00pm

Meta4

Antti Tikkanen violin
Minna Pensola violin
Atte Kilpeläinen viola
Tomas Djupsjöbacka cello

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

String Quartet in A minor Op. 41 No. 1 (1842)

*I. Introduzione. Andante espressivo – Allegro •
II. Scherzo. Presto – Intermezzo • III. Adagio • IV. Presto*

Sally Beamish (b.1956)

Nine Fragments (2018)

*I. Choral • II. Musette • III. Unruhig •
IV. Liebeslied • V. Ängstlich • VI. Witz •
VII. Klingeln • VIII. Kanon • IX. Spiegel*



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We have to keep reminding ourselves how extraordinary it was that **Robert Schumann**, ardent Romantic, worked to such a rigorous schedule in the early 1840s. All the works he had published before this – two dozen of them – were for piano. He then devoted himself exclusively to songs in 1840, to orchestral scores in 1841, and to chamber pieces in 1842, beginning with three string quartets, which he wrote – and again this is extraordinary – over the course of 19 days (4-22 June).

Schumann's critical writings give us strong clues to his thinking when he came to produce these works. In the first place, it was important to him to bear in mind the genre's heritage and therefore the conditions of seriousness and integrity this heritage imposed. As preparation, he made a thorough study of the quartets of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, and of his friend Mendelssohn – less so Schubert, most of whose quartets were as yet unpublished. When all was done, Mendelssohn's admiration was the ultimate seal of approval, and it was to Mendelssohn that Schumann dedicated the works. Meanwhile, during the working process, his other main criterion had to do with quartet texture, how this had to be always 'by turns beautiful and even abstrusely woven conversation among four people.'

Schumann was also concerned in these works, as in the symphonies he had begun writing just before, to increase the continuity and wholeness of a four-movement composition, and even, in this case, of a set of compositions. The three quartets, written simultaneously but with the first finished last, are in A minor, F major and A major, marking out a neat harmonic pattern: a step down by a third followed by a return back up to the starting point, but now in the major mode. This pattern is reproduced in miniature within the first quartet, whose opening movement has an introduction in A minor giving way to an *Allegro* in F major, succeeded by another such change from the *Scherzo* to the slow movement, the finale coming round to A major.

The introduction is not entirely in A minor, for its very beginning – a canon initiated by the violins – is more in the Phrygian mode, with, correspondingly, the air of a folk song. As the other instruments join in, A minor is established, and the mournful music moves through increasing tension to a close, at which point the *Allegro* takes over, with its sunny melody in 6/8 time. So easily does this theme dive among the keys that the proper dominant, C major, is only one step among many. Nor is there a clearly identifiable second subject, this function being taken by a passage of rushing quavers sparked off by the viola and hurrying from one decisive triad to another. Schumann replaces contrast with a colourful homogeneity, which works just as well to instigate development and recapitulation. A more intensively pulsed 6/8 takes over for the *Scherzo*, back in A minor, which brings forward Schumann's regard for Mendelssohn, though with a

firmness all his own. The trio section, headed *Intermezzo*, is in a gorgeously chromatic and syncopated C major.

Continuing the alternation of keys, the slow movement in F major is a love song of superb harmonic richness. When the cello, in its tenor register, comes in to echo the violin, it is hard not to imagine Robert answering Clara. There is a dramatic middle section before contentment is resumed, now with Clara alone – though, of course, Robert is the one painting her portrait.

The finale duly opens back in A minor, with another sprinkle of Mendelssohnian fairy magic, coupled with folk dancing led by the viola and displays of counterpoint. There is enough energy here to carry the movement on to a finish, but everything stops for a glimpse of another world: a tune in octaves, gloriously turning the key to A major and heard in an atmosphere where the note A is sustained, also in octaves. The viola wants to start the old game, as it did before, but it is too late: the end is in sight.

This was the quartet to which **Sally Beamish** was asked to provide a companion piece, which we now hear: her Fourth Quartet (2018), still her most recent. Schumann's music affected her, of course: the quartet and also the sets of short pieces he produced in other contexts. At the same time, there was a personal connection, as she relates in her note:

'Schumann arranged the first performance of these quartets for his wife Clara's 23rd birthday, and having a 23-year-old daughter myself, I couldn't help being moved by the thought of this young couple who had fought to be allowed to marry, and of the great challenges they were to face in their married life. Clara's distress at Robert's mental illness, her struggle to support the family, and her grief throughout her widowhood – all these are elements that made their way into my own music. I was interested, too, in the idea that Schumann finished the A minor Quartet last, and also that, later in life, he was troubled by a persistent high A ringing in his ears.

'My quartet consists of nine very short, fragmentary movements, each tilting a broken mirror towards a particular passage in the Schumann work. The first is a meditation on the strange and haunting chorale near the end of Schumann's last movement. This is followed by a "musette" commenting on the bagpipe-like passage that precedes the chorale. As succeeding fragments reflect on the Schumann quartet, they work backwards through it, to arrive at "Kanon", referring to the canonic opening of the Schumann. As a coda, the ninth fragment literally reflects the chorale by playing it backwards.

'The fragments reflect widely differing moods – from melancholy to elation.'

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