

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 17 October 2024  
7.30pm

## Kaleidoscope Chamber Collective

Carlos Ferreira clarinet  
Elena Urioste violin  
Melissa White violin  
Rosalind Ventris viola  
Laura van der Heijden cello  
Tom Poster piano

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Contrasts for violin, clarinet and piano BB116 (1938)  
*I. Verbunkos • II. Pihenő • III. Sebes*

Dora Pejačević (1885-1923)

Piano Quartet in D minor Op. 25 (1908)  
*I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Minuetto. Allegretto •  
IV. Rondo. Allegro*

*Interval*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Clarinet Quintet in B minor Op. 115 (1891)  
*I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Andantino • IV. Con  
moto*

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The sound of Hungarian Romani music, with its unique blend of rhythmic vitality and rhapsodic freedom, has long fired the imagination of classical composers, both within Hungary and elsewhere. By the end of the 18th Century, the sound of Roma fiddlers was inseparable from the Hungarian 'recruiting dance' genre known as *verbunkos* and later with the *csárdás* or village inn dance that grew out of this style of music. In the early decades of the 20th Century, **Béla Bartók** and his colleague Zoltán Kodály tended to look askance at what was universally regarded as *le style hongrois*, dismissing it as an inauthentic expression of the Hungarian soul compared to the songs of Hungarian peasants. But they gradually relaxed this somewhat purist stance and by the late 1930s, Bartók had assimilated several elements of the *verbunkos* style into his own musical language.

*Verbunkos* bands typically featured a solo violinist and clarinetist (sometimes with extra string parts to add weight) accompanied by a cimbalom. The solo parts were characterised by extravagant ornamentation of the melodic line and often included flights of virtuoso improvisation, while the cimbalom sketched in the harmony with rapidly repeated notes. When Bartók's old friend, the Hungarian violinist Joseph Szigeti, informed the composer in the summer of 1938 that he and the great American jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman wanted to commission him to write a trio for all three of them to play, it was perhaps inevitable that Bartók should turn to the *verbunkos* tradition for inspiration – especially in the light of Szigeti's comment that he and Goodman would like the piece to contain 'brilliant clarinet and violin cadenzas'.

The trio that Bartók produced in response to this request fulfilled all the commissioning virtuosos' requirements, and on top of that features a piano part that often evokes the sound of the cimbalom. The outer movements pay tribute to the typical slow-fast format of Hungarian recruiting dances, while the middle movement falls into the tradition of the 'night music' pieces Bartók had come to favour for his slow movements.

The Croatian composer **Dora Pejačević** was actually born in Budapest and spent much of her life in various other Central European capitals. The daughter of a Croatian count and a Hungarian countess, Pejačević had a very privileged upbringing (her education included private music tuition in Budapest, Zagreb, Dresden and Munich), but gradually became dissatisfied with the aimless lifestyle of the Central European nobility.

The First World War marked a turning point in her personal development. Her experience of volunteering as a nurse made her realise just how much senseless suffering the conflict had visited on ordinary people, and led her to reject much of what her own class stood for: 'I cannot imagine living without work – like so many do! – particularly among the so-called high aristocracy! I think I despise them for living so unnaturally.' She also

developed an interest in the work of radical philosophers such as Ludwig Feuerbach and revolutionary socialists such as Mikhail Bakunin and Rosa Luxemburg. She was well-connected in Central European cultural circles and counted progressive writers such as Karl Kraus and the poet Rainer Maria Rilke among her friends.

Pejačević began composing at the age of 12, and over the next quarter-century notched up dozens of works in many different genres, including 16 chamber works. She was 23 when she wrote her Piano Quartet, and at this stage her style still bore traces of the influence of Romantic forebears such as Brahms, Dvořák and Borodin. However, she was already beginning to forge her own musical idiom, as can be heard from some harmonically more adventurous passages. Sadly, she was deprived of the opportunity to fulfil her potential as a composer, as she died at the age of only 38, but her last work – her String Quartet No. 2 (1922) – strongly suggests that she was then on the point of making a clear break with the late Romanticism of her youth.

**Johannes Brahms's** Clarinet Quintet brings us back to the influence of Hungarian Romani music on non-Hungarian composers. Brahms first encountered such music as a teenager in Hamburg, when he made the acquaintance of the Hungarian virtuoso violinist Ede Reményi, who introduced him to the *alla zingarese* style. And after his move to Vienna in 1862, the composer would have had regular opportunities to hear Hungarian Roma bands playing in cafés and pleasure gardens.

The profound impression made on Brahms by *le style hongrois* bore fruit in a number of compositions, including two sets of *Hungarian Dances* for piano four hands (1869 and 1880), the Piano Quartet in G minor (1857-61), the Violin Concerto (1878) and several late chamber works. His engagement with this style gradually became more personal, progressing from the use of the stereotypical slow-fast *verbunkos* pattern to the inclusion of exuberant ornamentation in his most deeply-felt slow movements.

In 1890, Brahms began to consider retiring from composition, but hearing the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld play made him revise his plans, and over the next few years he produced a series of works designed to showcase the clarinet's beauty of sound and wide range of tonal colours. The Clarinet Quintet in particular highlights its ability to spin out a rhapsodic melodic line of aching beauty: nowhere is this more apparent than in the *Adagio*, in which the hushed tremolos of the string parts once again evoke the sound of the cimbalom. It's often said that Brahms's late music has an 'autumnal' atmosphere, and it's perhaps not too fanciful to wonder if the bittersweet nostalgia of the Clarinet Quintet reveals the composer giving almost his final word in a style he had first been drawn to many decades earlier.

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