

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 18 March 2024
7.30pm

Kaleidoscope Chamber Collective

Elena Urioste violin
Savitri Grier violin
Rosalind Ventris viola
Laura van der Heijden cello
Tom Poster piano

Johanna Müller-Hermann (1868-1941)

String Quartet Op. 6 (c.1910)

*I. Moderato • II. Allegro vivace • III. Adagio con
espressione • IV. Allegro con spirito*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Quartet No. 3 in C minor Op. 60 (1855-75)

*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Scherzo. Allegro • III.
Andante • IV. Finale. Allegro comodo*

Interval

Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957)

Suite for 2 violins, cello and piano Op. 23 (1928-30)

*I. Präludium und Fuge • II. Walzer • III. Grotteske •
IV. Lied • V. Rondo-Finale*

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This evening we hear the music of three generations of composers closely associated with Vienna: Johannes Brahms, born in the 1830s; Johanna Müller-Hermann, born in the 1860s; and Erich Wolfgang Korngold, a child of the 1890s. You might suppose that this generation jumping would present a series of pieces that in some ineffable way ‘progress’ through musical and stylistic time. Yet what’s most interesting here is not any faux-Darwinian sense of musical evolution – if there’s even any such thing – but the wholly individual and skilful ways in which these three composers fashion their works, distinctively individual in each case.

Müller-Hermann, a distinguished composer with a serious professional reputation in the first half of the 20th Century, was in her early 40s when she composed her String Quartet Op. 6. It was dedicated to Alexander Zemlinsky, with whom she had studied as a young woman (she was later to become a teacher herself – Professor of Music Theory at the New Vienna Conservatory, working alongside Egon Wellesz and Karl Weigl). It was published in 1912 by Universal Edition, in whose catalogue Müller-Hermann stood alongside Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg and indeed the young Korngold.

The Quartet begins with the instruction ‘gently flowing’, its broad meter and rippling inner voices providing the perfect support for a soaring duet between first violin and cello. These musical components – melody and murmuring lilt – are then passed around the rest of the ensemble. There is a wonderful sense of fluidity in this music, with changes of tempo and bar length to accommodate shifts in pace and moments of repose or intensification without disrupting the flow that Müller-Hermann has set in motion. A spiky *Allegro vivace* follows, its pointy construction bringing into sharper focus this composer’s skilful walking of the tightrope between fully-grounded, traditional tonal harmonies and a looser, chromatically-enriched palette of notes. This is also clear in from the second movement’s softer, ‘dreamy’ trio; and the dreaming continues in a heart-twisting *Adagio*. An urgently energetic finale turns on a dime between deeply unsettled and wryly witty just in time for its final page.

Brahms completed his third and final Piano Quartet in C minor Op. 60 when Müller-Hermann was just 6 years old – but he had first begun to construct the piece several decades earlier, in the mid-1850s. Then in his early 20s, Brahms wrote a piano quartet in C sharp minor, trying it out in several versions but apparently reaching a creative impasse. He finally went back to it in 1873 and worked at it over the next year or so, lowering the key by a semitone to C minor, radically reworking two movements of his original and composing two new ones to go with them. The newly-completed Piano Quartet was premièred in November 1875 and published that same autumn, with Brahms’s dextrous revisions rendering almost entirely invisible the joins between old and new material.

It is clear from the first bars of the piece that this is a work of symphonic ambition, the proportions grand and sonorous, the themes by turn turbulent and sweetly lyrical. A tautly-wound, almost desperate *Scherzo* follows the opening movement, before the tension melts away in an *Andante* of exquisite beauty. Even the *Finale* eventually gives way from its initial restlessness to yield a major-key resolution at the last moment.

Brahms evidently had a particular literary model in mind in relation to this Quartet, most pithily expressed in the note he sent to his publisher on finishing the work: ‘On the cover you must have a picture, namely a head with a pistol to it. Now you can form some conception of the music! I’ll send you my photograph for the purpose. You can use blue coat, yellow breeches and top-boots, since you like colour-printing.’ The figure Brahms depicts here is the hero of Goethe’s novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a passionate young man who ultimately kills himself on realising that he can never be with the woman he loves.

Korngold (who was born in the year of Brahms’s death) had been just 13 when he had made a musical splash in Vienna with his ballet *Der Schneemann*, premièred in 1910. A decade later, by the premièred of his opera *Die tote Stadt*, he was briefly the most performed Austro-German composer of the day, even beating Richard Strauss. No surprise, perhaps, that by his later 20s he wished to turn his attention elsewhere to arranging, conducting and teaching (as well as escaping his overbearing parents and starting a family of his own after marrying his childhood sweetheart, Luzi, in 1924).

In 1923, Korngold had been approached by Paul Wittgenstein – the brilliant pianist who had lost his right arm in the First World War – to compose a piano concerto for left hand alone. This Korngold did, and Wittgenstein followed it up several years later with a chamber commission. The result was the Suite for 2 violins, cello and left-hand piano, completed in 1930 and premièred to great acclaim by Wittgenstein and members of the distinguished Rosé Quartet. The Suite calls for considerable pianistic skill and begins with a substantial keyboard cadenza. There is a lean, sparse quality to this work which is rather different from Korngold’s lushly Romantic early chamber pieces – and yet floating harmonies abound too, here recast in a pattern of passing fragments and chords that ring on in the belly of the piano as the strings glide past. The jaunty (if occasionally derailed) second-movement *Walzer* is particularly sparkling, falling between a grandiose *Präludium und Fuge* and the wonderfully anarchic *Grosteske*. The deeply tender fourth movement *Lied* is based upon a recently composed song, ‘Was du mir bist?’ Op. 22 No. 1. ‘What are you to me?’, the poet repeats to his beloved. ‘Need you still ask? My faith in happiness.’

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