

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 20 April 2023
7.30pm

Schumann Quartet

Erik Schumann violin
Ken Schumann violin
Veit Benedikt Hertenstein viola
Mark Schumann cello

Anna Vinnitskaya piano

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

Aribert Reimann (b.1936)

Adagio (In Memory of Robert Schumann) (2006)

Interval

Robert Schumann

Piano Quintet in E flat Op. 44 (1842)

I. Allegro brillante
II. In modo d'una marcia. Un poco largamente – Agitato
III. Scherzo. Molto vivace
IV. Allegro ma non troppo

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After a decade spent drawing strange and fanciful new sounds from the piano, **Robert Schumann** confessed to his fiancée Clara Wieck in 1838 that 'the piano has become too limiting for me...In the works I am now composing I can hear many things I can hardly express.' He also revealed that he was planning 'three violin quartets'. In reply Clara teasingly suggested he didn't understand string instruments, prompting the mock-indignant riposte that he understood them very well indeed.

That year Schumann composed a string quartet, now lost, which he described as 'only an essay'. In 1839 he had another attack of what he dubbed 'quartet fever'. Yet it was not until 1842, after he had successfully tackled large-scale classical form in his 'Spring' and D minor symphonies, that Schumann was confident enough to complete a series of three string quartets. He had lamented that the great quartet tradition had 'come to a serious standstill', kept alive only by the examples of his friend Mendelssohn. In the hope of making a lasting contribution to that tradition, he prepared himself by studying works by Haydn and Mozart, and the complete quartets of Beethoven. Written in six weeks during the summer of 1842, his three Op. 41 quartets were dedicated 'in deepest admiration' to Mendelssohn.

In the plaintive contrapuntal opening of the String Quartet No. 1 in A minor, Schumann pays oblique homage both to Bach and to Beethoven's late quartets which he revered. In contrast, the main *Allegro*, in the surprising key of F major, is a genial, gliding movement in six-eight metre, tautly worked (everything derives logically from the first theme), yet touched by Schumann's own quixotic fantasy.

Launched by soft drum taps, the A minor *Scherzo* is a hectic night-ride that puts a darker gloss on the Mendelssohnian 'fairy scherzo'. The *Adagio* third movement resumes the *Allegro's* key of F major, which therefore rivals A minor in the quartet's overall tonal scheme. Inspired, surely, by the *Adagio* of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, this is one of Schumann's loveliest reveries, though the mood grows more troubled and the texture more fragmentary in the middle section.

Energetically reasserting A minor, the finale opens with a Slavonic-flavoured theme that Schumann inverts and varies as a second subject. Just as we seem to be approaching a decisive A minor close, the music melts magically into A major for nostalgic, floating episode in the style of a musette.

After wading into the Rhine at Düsseldorf on 27 February 1854, Robert Schumann was voluntarily confined to a private asylum at Eendenich, near Bonn. Despite initial hopes that he would recover from his mental disturbance, Schumann would remain in Eendenich until his death in July 1856. Amid the delusions, hallucinations and acute melancholia were periods of relative lucidity during which he played the piano (on one occasion joining Brahms in duets) and fitfully composed. Among the fragments that survive from Schumann's Eendenich years are harmonisations of two

Lutheran chorales, 'Wenn mein Stündlein vorhanden ist' ('When my final hour is nigh') and 'Stärk uns, Mittler, dein sind wir'. ('Strengthen us, O mediator, we are yours').

Composer **Aribert Reimann** is a descendant of one of the doctors who treated Schumann in Eendenich, and in 1988 acquired his ancestor's medical records. On the 150th anniversary of Schumann's death in 2006, Reimann published the records, and used the two chorale fragments as the basis of an *Adagio* for string quartet 'Zum Gedenken an Robert Schumann' ('In Memory of Robert Schumann'). Veering between anguished violence and unearthly calm, Reimann's eight-minute homage distorts and refracts the chorales through a dissonant modernist prism.

After proving himself in the most exalted chamber music genre with his three string quartets, Schumann included the piano - his own and his wife Clara's instrument - in all his remaining chamber works. Composed rapidly in autumn 1842, the quintet for piano and string quartet is the first masterpiece for this instrumental combination. Schumann dedicated it to Clara, who gave the public première at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on 8 January 1843. The event was a great success. As Schumann noted in his diary: 'Through it we have made many friends. Clara was a hostess and played incomparably well.'

The quintet quickly became Schumann's best-loved chamber composition, with good reason. Each of the four movements teems with rhythmic vitality, harmonic adventure and glorious melody. In the first movement Schumann immediately transmutes the impulsive opening theme into dulcet lyricism (with a magical key change), and then lingers over the second theme, a romantic love duet for viola and cello.

The funereal tread of the C minor second movement is offset by a hymn-like second theme and a dramatic episode in faster tempo, with trenchant contrapuntal imitations. Near the end of this episode the viola intones the funeral-march theme in its dusky lowest register: a haunting sonority, and one of many moments in the quintet to refute the notion that Schumann was insensitive to string colour.

The *Scherzo* is a whirling tarantella that makes capricious play with ascending and descending scales. Of the two contrasting trios, the first obliquely recalls both the opening movement's viola-cello duet and the final song from Beethoven's song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*, a coded expression of his love for Clara that occurs in many Schumann works.

Beginning in the 'wrong' key of C minor, the finale contrasts a Hungarian-flavoured march with a more whimsical second theme. Just as we seem to be heading for a resounding close, Schumann launches into a huge coda that combines the march tune with the work's opening theme in a triumphant contrapuntal *tour de force*.

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