

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 20 April 2024  
3.00pm

Brett Dean viola  
Jennifer France soprano

## Doric String Quartet

Alex Redington violin  
Ying Xue violin  
Hélène Clément viola  
John Myerscough cello

Brett Dean (b.1961)

String Quartet No. 3 'Hidden Agendas' (2019)  
*I. Hubris – II. Response – III. Retreat –  
IV. Self-censorship – V. 'On-message'*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

String Quintet in G Op. 111 (1890)  
*I. Allegro non troppo, ma con brio II. Adagio  
III. Un poco allegretto IV. Vivace ma non troppo presto*

Brett Dean

String Quartet No. 2 'And once I played Ophelia' (2013)  
*I. Fast, breathless – II. Hushed, distant – Flowing –  
Serene, intimate Broad, exalted –  
III. Fast, agitated – Suddenly slow, vacant  
IV. Extremely still – Sparse, distant –  
V. Slow, austere*

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I've always found it interesting to come in on radio broadcasts without knowing who's playing and quite possibly not even knowing what piece of music is being played. It's perhaps the most objective listening experience still available to us in a world of multiple instant-access listening platforms boasting 'every recording ever made', and the constant and often overbearing (self-) promotion of social media. I'll never forget, back in 2007, tuning in by chance to a broadcast on ABC in Australia, live from the Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition, of my first string quartet, *Eclipse*. I'd heard a rumour that one or two groups had taken on this piece as part of their repertoire that year. I'd missed the beginning of the performance, but as I listened, I became increasingly aware that this was one of the finest and most insightful interpretations of a piece of mine that I'd ever heard, and from players I'd never even met. I simply had to listen till the end to find out which group was playing: the Doric String Quartet from the UK. Since then the Dorics and I have become close friends and regular chamber music partners, having performed and recorded together numerous times over the past fifteen years. I'm especially thrilled that they can take part in today's concerts as interpreters of my second and third quartets, as well as the further opportunity to partner them in Brahms's glorious String Quintet in G.

Despite such a long association, my **String Quartet No. 3** from 2019, subtitled 'Hidden Agendas', was my first opportunity to write a work specifically for them. As its title implies, it isn't wanting to paint too explicit or illustrative a picture. However with individual movement titles such as *Hubris*, *Self-censorship* and 'On-message', it's fair to say that this piece – with its 5 partially connected movements exhibiting strong extremes of energy, dynamics and expression – is a somewhat oblique, abstract look at certain aspects of the strangely fascinating and invariably unsettling political climate of extreme personalities, online outrage, group-think and other challenges to the democratic process in which we seem to find ourselves currently. The music ranges from highly combustible and physical, through vividly virtuosic, to plaintively searching and intimate: even at times barely audible, including the whispery use of bows without rosin in the fourth movement. In the process, the quartet moves from unified huddle to one of increasingly splintered loyalties and go-it-alone statements. However the quartet ultimately finds itself herded back into some form of agreement by the end of the work, willingly or otherwise.

Librettist Matthew Jocelyn's text for my **String Quartet No. 2** ('And once I played Ophelia') utilises not only Ophelia's own words from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* but also words directed towards or said about her, from the confronting invective of Hamlet's 'Get thee to a nunnery' or his exalted love poem 'Doubt thou the stars are fire', through to the condescending life

directives handed out by her father, Polonius and her brother, Laertes ('Best safety lies in fear'; 'Do not believe his vows') and Gertrude's lyrical description of her suicide ('There is a willow...'). Through a suite of five short movements performed without a break, a concise portrait of Shakespeare's troubled and elusive young character emerges. As we discussed the shape of the work, Matthew Jocelyn and I saw it increasingly as an examination of what remains in our memory and understanding of this secondary, yet utterly pivotal role 'after all the Ophelias have played Ophelia'. Though traditionally portrayed as a meek, even weak character, often dressed in flowing white robes and unable to defend herself before the pressures of Elsinore cause her to snap, I've often felt that much of what Ophelia has to say betrays a far feistier personality than the one we often are presented. ('And I that sucked the honey of his musicked vows...') As Jocelyn himself put it, 'perhaps, just perhaps, Ophelia drowns not from a romantically-fed whim or madness, but simply because of the pure weight of the words others say about her caught irrevocably in her pockets'. Hence I sensed that the drama of a string quartet complemented by a high soprano voice, at times in combat with the forces around her, at times lulled, accompanied, even defeated by them, formed a suitable musical metaphor for this 'ministering angel' and the strange, beguiling spell she casts over us.

Between my two quartets this afternoon comes one of Johannes Brahms's late and truly great chamber music works, the **String Quintet in G Op. 111** from 1890. At the time, Brahms intended it to be his compositional swan-song, having announced that he was ready to retire. Although he soon came out of that intended retirement to compose glorious subsequent works for clarinet, solo piano etc, this quintet remained his final work for strings alone and, in a sense, the closest he came in his final decade to re-entering the symphonic realm. As legend has it, the work's initial sketches were conceived as material for a possible Fifth Symphony and certainly the opening *Allegro non troppo* movement displays a monumental, bold and almost orchestral character from the outset, with its sweeping opening cello theme. Featuring a fascinating 9/8 pulse of intricate rhythmic nuances within a large-scale sonata form, the first movement is of complex design and textural invention, as well as being significantly longer than the other three movements. Nevertheless, the D minor second movement *Adagio* achieves levels of profundity that belie its relative conciseness while the following minuet and trio (*Un poco allegretto*) and final movement *Vivace ma non troppo presto* provide such moments of restrained beauty followed by unbridled, Hungarian-style energy and boisterousness that it is no wonder why this remains one of Brahms's most loved and enduring chamber works.

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