

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 20 June 2024
7.30pm

Royal Academy of Music Soloists Ensemble

Anthony Marwood violin I, director
Megan Yang violin II
Xin He viola
Andrea Fages viola
Gerard Flotats cello
Danushka Edirisinghe cello
William Puhr double bass
Dmytro Fonariuk clarinet
Verity Burcombe bassoon
Chloe Harrison horn

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Metamorphosen (1945) *arranged by Rudolf Leopold for string septet*

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Octet in F D803 (1824)

*I. Adagio – Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegro vivace •
IV. Andante • V. Menuetto. Allegretto • VI. Andante
molto – Allegro*

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Richard Strauss's relationship with the Third Reich was complex and ambivalent. Castigated by many for his brief tenure as President of the *Reichsmusikkammer* and for the compromises that enabled him to stay in Germany, Strauss worked with Jewish artists long after it was considered acceptable and privately expressed his contempt for Nazi ideology. *Metamorphosen*, the extraordinary half-hour movement for strings that Strauss composed in the war's final months, is often interpreted as a lament for civilised German values destroyed by Hitler. Evidence for this view has been drawn from the words 'In Memoriam', inscribed in the score next to a quotation from the funeral march of Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony that Strauss implausibly claimed not to have noticed; and more recently from the discovery among the sketches of an unpublished setting of Goethe's *Niemand wird sich selber kennen* ('No one will know themselves'). *Metamorphosen's* echoes of German composers whom Strauss loved, and as whose natural successor he regarded himself – Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner – reinforce the notion that it pays homage to a threatened tradition. But despite the temptation to interpret *Metamorphosen* autobiographically, as an act of atonement, little in Strauss's correspondence supports this view. He had begun a work for strings in spring 1944, but it was only when the Swiss musician and philanthropist Paul Sacher requested a work for his Collegium Musicum Zürich that it took shape. Strauss originally described it as an 'Adagio for eleven strings', but when he returned to it in early 1945, adding the title, he reworked it for just seven players.

Strauss completed this version on 31 March 1945, but he had already (on 13 March, the day after Allied bombing destroyed the Vienna Opera House) begun to expand it for an unprecedented ensemble of 23 solo string players. This version was completed on 12 April; the septet score was long thought lost, but was discovered in Switzerland in 1990. Four years later, the première took place of tonight's performing version by the cellist Rudolf Leopold, who worked from both Strauss's septet score and the final version. The two scores are melodically and harmonically mostly identical, with just a few contrapuntal lines omitted from the septet; the elimination of the larger version's rests and doublings means that far more of its textural complexity is preserved than might have been thought possible. However, the evidence that Leopold assembled from the septet score also generates a few differences, the most conspicuous occurring in the final seconds. The unrelieved sequence of C minor chords that ends the 23-player version is interrupted here by a striking move into E minor; and the double bass's low C is employed by the septet not just for the last chord, but for a concluding series of three. For listeners familiar with Strauss's final thoughts, these discrepancies, insignificant as they sound when described, are at once disconcerting and revelatory, as if we have been granted a privileged glimpse of the composer at work.

The traumas that overshadowed **Schubert's** final years were medical rather than political. From February 1823 onwards, he complained of an illness so debilitating that it often prevented him leaving the house. Though his letters seldom specified symptoms, Schubert scholars concur that he contracted syphilis late in 1822, leading to his death six years later. For most of this period, Schubert's condition hardly affected his extraordinary productivity: in March 1824 alone, a month in which he described himself as 'the most unhappy and wretched creature in the world', he completed his final five Mayrhofer songs, two string quartets – 'Rosamunde' and 'Death and the Maiden' – and the Octet. However, it undoubtedly affected *how* he composed; from 1823, even apparently optimistic works feature moments of intense anguish. In the Octet, for example – a work whose generally cheerful and leisurely character reflects its origins in the Viennese serenade form – passages such as the anxious coda to the otherwise serene *Adagio* and the finale's sinister introduction seem to hint at terror lying beneath the surface.

The Octet was commissioned by the amateur clarinettist Count Ferdinand Troyer, steward at the court of Beethoven's friend and pupil, Archduke Rudolf. Its structure and instrumentation were closely modelled on Beethoven's Septet, which had become one of his most popular pieces, rather to its composer's irritation. Adding only a second violin to Beethoven's forces, Schubert followed his example by composing a work in six movements, of which both first and last had slow introductions; by including both a minuet and a scherzo, rather than choosing between them; and by separating those movements with a set of variations. The theme for Schubert's variation movement is an aria from his unperformed opera *Die Freunde von Salamanka*: as the nicknames of the two quartets composed in the same month as the Octet testify, taking one of his own songs or theatre pieces as the basis for an instrumental movement was a common practice for Schubert at this time. Troyer performed the work at a private social event soon after its composition, with several of the same players who had premièred Beethoven's Septet in 1800.

The first public performance of Schubert's work was given in April 1827 at a subscription concert in Vienna organised by the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, leader of the quartet who had premièred most of Beethoven's later works; the programme also contained Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* and a chamber arrangement of the 'Emperor' Piano Concerto. The juxtaposition of the two composers reflects Schubert's increasingly acknowledged status as the natural successor to Beethoven, who had died the previous month; so too does the *Allgemeine Theaterzeitung's* description of the Octet as 'worthy of the composer's well-known talents', hinting at the career Schubert might have enjoyed had his illness not so tragically intervened.

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