

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 20 September 2022
7.30pm

Elisabeth Leonskaja piano

Staatskapelle Streichquartett

Wolfram Brandl violin

Krzysztof Specjal violin

Yulia Deyneka viola

Claudius Popp cello

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Quartet No. 2 in A Op. 26 (1861)

I. Allegro non troppo • II. Poco adagio •

III. Scherzo. Poco allegro - Trio • IV. Finale. Allegro

Interval

Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor Op. 25 (1861)

I. Allegro • II. Intermezzo. Allegro ma non troppo - Trio.

*Animato • III. Andante con moto • IV. Rondo alla
Zingarese. Presto*

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'My love for Schubert is a serious one, precisely because it is not a passing fancy,' **Brahms** is reported to have said. Once this is acknowledged, Schubert's influence can be traced in many of Brahms's works. But perhaps nowhere is it such a foreground presence as in the Second Piano Quartet. Most obviously the Quartet emulates the 'heavenly length' that Brahms's mentor, Robert Schumann, discerned in Schubert's long-breathed passages and spacious structures.

The Quartet was written in 1861 while Brahms was lodging in Hamm, a suburb of his native Hamburg - the dedication is to his landlady, Frau Dr Elisabeth Rössing. It was first performed in Vienna in November 1863, with Brahms himself at the piano and the string parts taken by members of Joseph Hellmesberger's quartet. As a professional string quartet, Hellmesberger's ensemble was a rarity at the time and, appropriately, was known for playing Schubert's hitherto neglected chamber music.

The Second Quartet begins as if it is going to be a far more gentle work than the First, also completed in 1861 (Brahms had a fondness for composing works in pairs). A discursive idea spends time musing over an alternation between two adjacent notes: this will prove to be a significant motif. A louder, more assertive and cohesive version of this material eventually subsides to let the piano introduce a new subject which starts to develop its component parts before it has even set out its basic form. The third thematic section is the most settled, with the strings taking the lead in the first but not last appearance of café music in this work. The musical ambience of Vienna's bars and coffee houses was an enthusiasm shared by both Brahms and Schubert.

The development works up this last of the exposition's ideas until it can compete in force with the other material. A storm of emotion is unleashed before the clouds part to allow the recapitulation to begin - but this time round there is even less room for lyricism, and the café music never regains its original genial presence.

The slow movement is both very beautiful and artfully constructed. It begins with a rich polyphony that leads to an eerie passage in which the cello solemnly sounds its own version of the motif from the first movement based on adjacent notes; piano arpeggios imitate a ruffling wind. The third movement is marked '*Scherzo*', though it is no real diversion. It begins innocently enough with a folksy tune played by the strings in octave unison. But the movement then proceeds in a surprisingly forceful manner. Nor does the trio offer any respite.

The finale sets out with a muscular idea that has clear Romani influences. The counter-subject of this sonata-form structure is broader but still intense. In fact there are few moments of delicacy in this

movement, although the ones that do appear are telling. As in the finale of the Second Symphony, the recapitulation of the second subject registers as the moment when the movement is crowned and sealed. There is then a brief passage of playful relaxation before the rush to the finish.

On 29 July 1856, aged 46, Brahms's mentor Robert Schumann died in an asylum for the insane. Brahms probably began work on his G minor Piano Quartet at some time in the 12 months following that tragedy. It was not completed until 1861. In the intervening years, Brahms's style underwent a profound change, with an intellectual discipline being applied to the ardent Romanticism of his early compositions.

He was 28 when the Piano Quartet was first performed in public. That concert took place in his birth city of Hamburg, with Robert's widow Clara Schumann at the piano. In November of the following year the composer himself was at the keyboard for its Vienna première, again joining members of the Hellmesberger Quartet. Thereafter it seems to have undergone a period of comparative neglect, but it is now firmly established in the repertoire.

The work is big-boned and emotionally wide-ranging, yet tautly constructed throughout. It begins cautiously, as if the instrumental voices are encountering each other for the first time. They then introduce themselves more formally, each player with new subject matter, before combining in more confident material with a definite Hungarian tinge. The development section begins as if it is to be a repeat of the exposition. The recapitulation re-orders, recasts and redistributes the themes: the 'Hungarian' theme is transformed from something affirmative into a sombre and plaintive reminiscence.

After a wistful and subdued scherzo/*Intermezzo* with a twinkling coda derived from its *Trio*, the slow movement offers open-hearted tenderness. The three string voices sing together in parallel harmony. The lack of comparable warmth in the preceding movements adds to this *Andante's* consoling effect, although it is not without its shadows and tensions. A stirring march takes over the central section, before the more lyrical music re-emerges quietly and gathers strength.

The finale is a fiery, romping, full-out celebration in the style of the so-called Hungarian 'Gypsy' music that Brahms knew well from Viennese café bands. He had already been introduced to it as a teenager in Hamburg, thanks to his friend and recital partner, the Hungarian fiddler Ede Reményi. Uninhibited rejoicing of this kind would become increasingly rare in the finales of European art music as the 19th Century progressed. Enjoy it for what it is.

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