

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 21 December 2023
7.30pm

Janine Jansen violin
Timothy Ridout viola
Daniel Blendulf cello
Denis Kozhukhin piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Violin Sonata No. 2 in A Op. 100 (1886)

*I. Allegro amabile • II. Andante tranquillo - Vivace •
III. Allegretto grazioso, quasi andante*

Viola Sonata in E flat Op. 120 No. 2 (1894)

*I. Allegro amabile • II. Allegro appassionato •
III. Andante con moto - Allegro*

Interval

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

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



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The programme has been changed since this note was written.

Brahms developed a strong working relationship with the Meiningen Court Orchestra during the 1880s. His primary purpose was to try out works before their official premières elsewhere. But the composer also reciprocated the orchestra's kindness by mounting his Fourth Symphony in Meiningen in 1885, as well as touring with the ensemble. A particular point of attraction was the musicianship of the principal clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld. Having been told of his excellent playing by Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, Brahms and he formed a happy partnership, which saw the production of several new works and the end of the composer's self-imposed retirement.

Among the pieces were the two **Op. 120** sonatas of 1894 – Brahms's last chamber works before his death three years later. Both were issued in alternative arrangements for viola and piano, as here, with the second of the two offering a more restrained soundworld. In many ways, the Sonata's first movement recalls the lilting, Lied-like style of the Violin Sonata that opened tonight's programme – a link made even clearer when Op. 120 No. 2 is performed on the viola. But like that 1878-9 composition, this later work contains argumentative passages, with the piano even suggesting an orchestral palette.

The middle movement is a waltz, with subverting hemiolas and a broad harmonic range. Together, these test the certainty of the tonic (E flat minor). The intervening trio, introduced by the piano and marked to be played sweetly and sung out, is more unified, before the scudding clouds return. The finale introduces a folk-like theme, rich in modality, which provides the basis for five variations. The first three are graceful, if progressively florid, while the fourth is calmer. Finally, a rambunctious variation caps the whole work.

The second part of tonight's concert proves graver than the first, with Brahms's **Piano Quartet No. 3 in C minor Op. 60** (derived from an earlier abortive composition in C sharp). It is sometimes nicknamed the

'Werther', after Goethe's famous tragic novel, and was first performed in Vienna in 1875, with Wagner in the audience. The following year, Brahms's First Symphony, also in C minor, would be revealed to the public, the Quartet's initial octaves having, perhaps, prefigured the stark opening of that audacious work.

After the tolling piano, the strings enter no less mournfully – many have heard hints of the name 'Clara' in their motif. A bravura outburst then leads into the body of the work proper, yet the mood only really lifts with the second subject, its earnest melody in the relative major, played by the piano and then by the viola. Passing chromaticisms and a stuttering accompaniment suggest continuing anxieties. As if to quell those doubts, Brahms repeats the theme in more impassioned terms, only to reveal a third thematic area in E flat minor, followed by the development. A spirit of variation is nonetheless present throughout, as confirmed by the recapitulation, where key centres are but fleeting milestones. Finally, the return of the tonic heralds a piano cascade and a conclusion as severe as the opening.

The *Scherzo* is equally turbulent, though its rhythmic and metrical ambiguities will pave the way to a more introspective second theme. This becomes the basis of the development in an abbreviated yet impulsive sonata structure. The slow movement offers a welcome if belated reprieve, with a yearning cello melody embellished by the other players. In response, the second theme sounds more skeletal than in the preceding movements, even if its fragile nature only serves to remind us of the unsettled nature of the work as a whole.

That mood returns in the fretful, often fractious *Finale*. There are heart-on-sleeve confessions here, but previous anxieties will not be mollified. Likewise, there are grand chorales and acts of heroism, as at the conclusion to the First Symphony, yet they fail to provide the requisite binding agent. Instead, a sense of apprehension, even fatalism, persists, which the final major chords fail to soothe.

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