

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 24 February 2022 7.30pm

Benedetti Elschenbroich Grynyuk Trio

Nicola Benedetti violin

Leonard Elschenbroich cello

Alexei Grynyuk piano

CLASSIC *f*M

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Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor Op. 63 (1847)

*I. Mit Energie und Leidenschaft • II. Lebhaft, doch nicht zu rasch •
III. Langsam, mit inniger Empfindung • IV. Mit Feuer*

Wolfgang Rihm (b.1952)

Fremde Szene III (1983-4)

Interval

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Trio No. 1 in B Op. 8 (1853-4 rev. 1889)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Scherzo. Allegro molto •
III. Adagio • IV. Finale. Allegro*

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1847 was a busy year for **Schumann**. For the first part of the year he and Clara, his pianist wife, played and conducted in Berlin. Returning to Dresden, he finally settled on a subject for an opera, wrote the overture, and began to squabble with librettists, meanwhile working on his mammoth choral version of *Faust*. In the summer, he bashfully attended a series of concerts of his works in his home town, Zwickau, conducting his C major Symphony, which he then immediately started to revise. In the middle of all this he composed his first piano trio, in June, following it with a second in August: both were published the following year.

The movement titles tell their own story: 'with energy and passion'; 'lively, but not too fast'; 'slow, with intimate feeling'; 'fiery!' But Schumann is not swept away like a tyro. He and Clara (also an excellent composer) used to show each other their fugues, for fun, and it was only a couple of years since Schumann had written his 6 pieces in canon and 6 fugues on the name of Bach. The D minor trio, for all its passion, is full of ingenious counterpoint. The piano and violin swap their motives from the very first bar to make the second bar, for instance, and the second theme soon turns into a canon, the cello following the piano and the violin after a half-bar gap. But after all this rigour, Schumann pulls a surprise of veiled passion in the middle of the movement. The instruments have been discussing the various themes, as is traditional, when suddenly everything stops, and a completely new melody appears. The pianist puts on the soft pedal, the strings play near the bridge – utterly unexpected. In the scherzo, the spiky main theme and the smooth melody of the middle section are more or less the same notes – the middle section makes them into a round (or canon), of course. The soft pedal makes another appearance in the slow movement, which leads directly into the joyful finale.

Wolfgang Rihm is a cultural polymath. He draws, he writes poetry and articles; his reading is wide; he is the confidant of artists and collects their canvasses. He teaches composition in his home-town of Karlsruhe, and spends time in nearby Basel and Strasbourg. He sits on a number of influential committees, and has won many prizes. He studied with Stockhausen in Darmstadt.

Many of his compositions group themselves into series. The *Chiffre-Zyklus* has reached double figures, and there are seven chamber works entitled *Über die Linie* and four orchestral compositions entitled *Verwandlung* ('Transformation'). There are five *Abgesangszene*. That title bears a typically complex double-meaning – it could be 'Swan Songs', but it's also a reference to the mediaeval song-forms of the German Mastersingers. If that song-form be represented by A-A-B, B is the *Abgesang* – the sing-out, as it were. The 'Swan Song' part of the meaning,

however, is reinforced by the fact that the texts are the last works that Friedrich Nietzsche wrote before his final breakdown: he described them as 'the songs of Zarathustra which he sang to himself so as to endure his last solitude'. This complex web of allusion reminds us to look below the surface of everything Rihm writes.

There are three *Fremde Szenen* ('Strange Scenes') for piano trio. The first dates from 1982, the second (which Rihm calls a 'character piece') from 1983, and this last, from 1984. There seems to lurk behind the cycle an idea of the history of chamber music, especially as exemplified in the music of Schumann, whose mind somewhat resembles Rihm's, with its eventual choice – out of several options – of music as a means of creative expression, its critical engagement with the music of the past and the present and its taste for literary complication.

The B major Trio was **Brahms's** first chamber work, composed when he was 20 years old, shortly before he found himself looking after the Schumann family after Robert put himself into an asylum. What transpired between Brahms and Clara in this difficult situation is the stuff of heated debate, to which the story of this trio may bring a little light. 37 years later, Brahms took advantage of his publisher's enquiry whether, a re-engraving being necessary, he wished to make any changes. He kept the main themes of each movement, but changed the subsidiary material, in particular removing two quotations. In the original slow movement, the piano played Schubert's song 'Am Meer' – about a sad young man sitting in silent, hopeless longing, with a fisherman's wife whose husband is at sea. And in the original *Finale*, the cello had a huge solo based on Beethoven's song-cycle 'To the distant beloved'. Brahms swept both away.

He also omitted other material, so that the revised first movement, for instance, is reduced from 494 bars to 289 bars. Most prefer the punchier revision, which incorporates a lifetime's experience, but Brahms was content for both to be available. Perhaps the message of the removed quotations was just for Clara, who was probably the only person who'd ever understood them anyway. His comment upon the work was simply 'I did not provide it with a wig, but just combed and arranged its hair a little'.

Brahms's protégé, the pianist Fanny Davies, revealingly annotated her score when she heard Brahms's great friend, Joachim, lead the London première. '*Sostenuto* by Brahms actually means "slower tempo as though one could not get enough richness out of the sentence – " ' she wrote, and, of the arpeggios at the end of the *Scherzo*, 'not priddle diddle (Joachim's words)'.

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