WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 24 July 2024
7.30pm

Sitkovetsky Trio
Alexander Sitkovetsky violin
Isang Enders cello
Wu Qian piano

Clara Schumann (1819-1896) — Andante from Piano Trio in G minor Op. 17 (1846)

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) — Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor Op. 49 (1839)
I. Molto allegro agitato • II. Andante con moto tranquillo • III. Scherzo. Leggiero e vivace • IV. Finale. Allegro assai appassionato

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) — Piano Trio in B flat Op. 97 'Archduke' (1810-1)
I. Allegro moderato • II. Scherzo. Allegro • III. Andante cantabile ma però con moto • IV. Allegro moderato

A confluence of circumstances made 1846 the right time for **Clara Schumann** to compose her Piano Trio, often regarded as her finest work. Five years earlier she had shared in an intense enthusiasm for chamber music that had taken hold of her husband Robert; together they had explored the repertoire. Then, as 1845 drew to a close, she and Robert undertook an in-depth study of counterpoint, which bore particular fruit in the finale of her trio. Most importantly, she had a rare opportunity to compose a relatively large-scale work, since her fourth pregnancy, and the need to care for both her sickly third child and a husband experiencing mental ill-health, meant she was unable to tour as a concert pianist. Even so, it is a wonder she was able to find time to write.

Composition began in May. The choice of the piano-and-strings medium was a logical one, since she was a pianist second to none, and (unusually for a girl at the time) had learnt to play violin as a child. Work was soon interrupted when the Schumanns left Dresden for Norderney, an island just off the North Sea coast of Germany, in the hope of improving Robert's health. While there, Clara suffered a miscarriage. By September, back in Dresden, she was able to resume composing. The manuscript reveals that she took immense care over the task, as there are numerous revisions; perhaps she found solace in the task.

The *Andante* is the third of the Trio's four movements, and is the one closest in spirit to the works of the Schumanns' friends, brother and sister Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn. Fanny had been the intended dedicatee of the Trio, but she died before the work was set in print, so it carries no dedication. This movement's wistful first tune is heard first on piano, then violin, and finally – after an agitated E minor central section – on cello.

In 1840, Robert Schumann published a review of **Felix Mendelssohn**'s First Piano Trio, which had been composed the previous year. Schumann declared of Mendelssohn, 'we may confidently say: he is the Mozart of the nineteenth century, the most brilliant musician, the one who most fully understands the contradictions of the age, and who is the first to reconcile them'.

This reveals a perspective that is intriguingly different from that of hindsight. We often assume that the musical world of the mid-19th Century was looking for a successor to Beethoven, one who would break new ground just as that giant had done. Schumann suggests rather that the search was on for a composer who could bring order to chaos and, to use his expression, 'reconcile' the ambitions of the progressives and the traditionalists.

The compositional process of Mendelssohn's D minor trio further illustrates the tensions of the time. Having, as he thought, completed the score, the composer showed it to his composer friend Ferdinand Hiller. Hiller dared to suggest, politely, that Mendelssohn's arpeggiated piano writing was 'old-fashioned'. The criticism stung, and Mendelssohn revised the entire piano part to bring it more in line with the virtuosic and Romantic style that had become fashionable. The result was successful, since the Trio gained instant popularity.

Where hindsight is valuable is in enabling us to see how this work helped to restabilise the genre of the piano trio. Since the noble examples of Beethoven and Schubert, the form had degenerated somewhat into a bravura showpiece for piano, with the violin and cello in purely supporting roles. Mendelssohn may have been persuaded to beef up the keyboard part, but his Trio is still genuine chamber music. It is also built on Classical structures, and is indeed a 'reconciliation' of the old with the new.

By 1810 many of **Beethoven**'s ambitions had been realised. He was a celebrity in Vienna, a composer with an international reputation, and publishers were engaged in bidding wars for his latest works. Furthermore he now had a degree of the financial security he had been hoping for, thanks to the Archduke Rudolph (1788-1831), youngest son of Holy Roman Emperor Leopold II. Beethoven had been engaged as Rudolph's piano and composition teacher when the nobleman was a teenager. Master and pupil had become friends, and Rudolph had organised a collaboration with two Austrian princes, Kinsky and Lobkowitz, to provide Beethoven with a regular allowance so that 'the necessities of life shall not cause him embarrassment or stifle his powerful genius'.

Of course, this did not mark the end of all hardships for the composer. His deafness increased, a marriage proposal was turned down and he still felt the need to write the occasional money-spinning crowd pleaser. In fact it was soon after the sensational première of the noisy orchestral extravaganza *Wellington's Victory*, complete with mechanical musket fire, that he completed the lofty and sublime Trio Op. 97, dedicated to Rudolph and thus acquiring the sobriquet 'Archduke'.

Heard privately in 1811 but not given a public performance until 1814, the Trio invokes the adjective 'spacious' in most commentaries. The first movement maintains an unusual placidity even in its development section, although there is sufficient contrast between the gliding first subject and the more perky second theme. The composer's sense of mischief and love of surprises is therefore all the more effective in the quirky *Scherzo*, which in turn is a perfect foil for the hymn-like opening and contemplative expansiveness of the theme-and-variation slow movement. The finale breaks into this reverent mood and takes us to a convivial world of café music, with an exhilarating picking-up of pace at the finish.