

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 24 June 2025
7.30pm

Vilde Frang violin
Maximilian Hornung cello
Denis Kozhukhin piano

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

Piano Trio No. 2 in F Op. 80 (1847)

I. Sehr lebhaft • II. Mit innigem Ausdruck - Lebhaft • III. In mässiger Bewegung • IV. Nicht zu rasch

Interval

Piano Trio No. 3 in G minor Op. 110 (1851)

I. Bewegt, doch nicht zu rasch • II. Ziemlich langsam • III. Rasch • IV. Kräftig, mit Humor



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Schumann wrote his first work for piano trio in December 1842, at the end of his nine-month chamber-music spree. However, he kept it back until 1850, when he had it published as *Fantasiestücke*, Op. 88. Meanwhile, in the winter of 1846-7 his wife Clara produced a trio, prompting him to come up in the following summer and autumn with a pair, in the related keys of D minor and F major. These were the works in which he started giving markings in German, which allowed him not only a wider but also a fully Romantic vocabulary.

All three of Schumann's numbered trios have features in common. One, of course, lies in the many ways they find to solve the problem of balance between piano and strings. Another is the frequency of contrapuntal textures, deriving from the study both Robert and Clara made of Bach in the mid-1840s. And a third is the shaping of these works as continuous narratives, with short musical motifs as characters who will reappear later in a movement, or in another one.

The first movement of the **First Trio** makes the point. At the beginning – which sounds more like an entry into the midst of things – the first subject is with the violin and cello beneath piano tracery. A transition gives the piano its cue to thrust onwards with the second subject, in F major. Both subjects, the groaning and the luminous, move in wave upon wave, and both have the same up-down-up underlying pattern. This is revealed in the development section, which includes a wonderful episode of fairy magic with high-lying piano, to be shifted down, after the recapitulation and coda, into human realms.

Memories of this imposing allegro crop up occasionally in the scherzo, with a trio effortlessly contrapuntal on a scale theme, and the extraordinary slow movement, which starts out, the cello silent, with hesitant short motifs in a kind of floating time – music that might not be out of place in a work from a century and a half ahead. The ending, on an A major chord, prepares for the D major rondo finale to burst in directly. Recollections of the up-down-up pattern from the first movement confirm that this is the end of a long story, while counterpoint again exerts its brilliance.

Schumann's **Second Piano Trio** has been overshadowed by his First, but Clara knew its worth. Following a performance early in 1849, she noted in her diary: 'It belongs among those pieces of Robert's that, from beginning to end, move and charm me in my deepest soul.'

The first movement has a compact exposition, whose second subject, intimately voiced by the piano in warm harmony, is a rhythmic variant of the buoyant first. As if claiming their own right to Romantic appeal, the violin and cello then in turn introduce the melody of the 'Intermezzo' from the composer's *Liederkreis* of 1840. The poem by Joseph von Eichendorff begins by assuring the beloved: 'Your wondrous image lies at the bottom of my heart,' a line Schumann surely imagined himself addressing to his new wife. After the development section, once more contrapuntal, the song strain reappears, to be melted into the principal material in the coda.

Lyricism and counterpoint return in the slow movement, flat, which begins with the violin playing a variation of the song over a canon in the cello and piano, and which continues as a rapt intertwining of romance and contrapuntal exercise. Moreover, since the song tune has now been identified with the first movement's initial idea, the trio is, like its companion piece, continuing to work through the same musical genes.

So it goes in what follows: nothing like a scherzo but rather a sad, slow hopping dance in B flat minor. And so it goes again in the finale, where harmonic venturing, rhythmic *élan* and contrapuntal prowess are in proud balance with resilient songfulness.

In the fall of 1851, when Schumann was beginning his unhappy second season as city music director in Düsseldorf, he consoled himself with chamber music. First he wrote a violin sonata, then his **Third Trio**, then another violin sonata, all between mid-September and early November. Clara noted in her diary on 11 October that he was 'working busily on a trio', of which she was allowed to know only the key: G minor, the key of her own. She did not have long to wait to discover more. By the end of the month she was rehearsing it, and forming a view: 'It is original and increasingly passionate, especially the scherzo, which carries one along with it into the wildest depths.'

Clara's impression notwithstanding, one might find the first movement already passionate enough. Surging melodic ideas and a fast 6/8 rhythm maintain a richly Romantic fusion of buoyancy and anxiety, backed by how the melodic agreements within the grouping of three instruments are counterbalanced by metrical shifts and tensions. Toward the end of the development section comes an intricate contrapuntal passage, with pizzicato strings, suggesting Bach as heard through the ears of the Schumanns' late friend Mendelssohn, and an echo of this music arrives to close the movement.

However, the movement is still not entirely over, as perhaps Clara Schumann recognised by using that word 'increasingly'. The slow movement begins as warm, calm dialogue for the violin and cello, sounding perhaps like a married couple, but underlying strains are soon coming through, and they bring a recurrence of the first movement's urgent main idea. Once again, Schumann was creating movements that, though independent, made a whole.

This continues. The main theme of the compact scherzo varies the turn motif of the slow movement, and the rondo finale brings back both the sunny, lifting music of the scherzo's first trio and, eventually, the gallop of its second. Moreover, syncopations and other delicate challenges to the prevailing metre are as much a feature of these movements as of the first, enabling one to understand Ligeti's admiration for the composer as a master of rhythmic complexity.

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