

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 24 October 2021 7.30pm

Trio Isimsiz

Pablo Hernán Benedí violin

Edvard Pogossian cello

Erdem Misirlioğlu piano



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Trio in D Op. 70 No. 1 'Ghost' (1808)

*I. Allegro vivace e con brio • II. Largo assai ed espressivo •
III. Presto*

Wolfgang Rihm (b.1952)

Fremde Szene III (1983-4)

Interval

Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957)

Piano Trio in D Op. 1 (1909)

*I. Allegro non troppo, con espressione • II. Scherzo. Allegro •
III. Larghetto • IV. Finale. Allegro molto ed energico*

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Beethoven's Opus One was a set of three piano trios, published in 1795 when the composer was 25. Op. 70, which followed in 1809, was a pair of trios, of which the first has acquired a nickname. Various improbable reasons for the name, usually Shakespearean (*Hamlet* or *Macbeth*), have been given. It serves to emphasize the fact that people often like to think in images, rather than simply listen to the music: Liszt was one such, of course, which was why he invented the Symphonic Poem. Whether the music is 'about' a ghost, or an uncertain quest for some uncertain end, it's certainly mysterious, with its naked string octaves answered by ambiguous harmonies in the piano. It forms a wonderful contrast with the jovial first movement, with its twin opening topics, skittering octaves and suave melody, and with the phony cadences and teasing pauses of the witty finale. The slow movement's quest, by the way, ends up at the major key of the flattened leading-note, something so odd that Beethoven only did it once again, in the Ninth Symphony.

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.

Korngold was the son of a music critic, and could play duet arrangements of Beethoven symphonies with his father from the

age of 5. Mahler and Richard Strauss both said there was no point in him going to music college, since he knew everything already. When he was 11, Korngold's ballet *Der Schneemann* ('The Snowman') had a special Imperial Command performance at the Vienna Opera. His opera *Die tote Stadt*, premièred when he was 23, played all over Austria and Germany, and at the Met in New York. He recomposed several forgotten operas by Johann Strauss II, which brought him the friendship of the director, Max Reinhardt, who ran a film company, and who in 1935 invited Korngold to work on his Hollywood directing debut. Korngold was back and forth between Hollywood and Vienna, winning two Academy Awards, until the 1938 Anschluss, when Hitler took over in Austria. Korngold stayed in Hollywood. As he put it: 'We thought of ourselves as Viennese; Hitler made us Jewish'.

The score of Korngold's first publication proudly bears its composer's birth date, and the date of the piece – 13 years apart. As evidence of prodigy the piece is right up there with Mendelssohn's Op. 1, composed at the same age, a piano quartet. Even to read through the work silently is an exhilarating experience. The teenager was obviously very familiar with the work of Richard Strauss, with *Till Eulenspiegel* a particular favourite, I should say; and, interestingly enough, that Viennese vein which Strauss was about to mine in *Der Rosenkavalier* the following year makes its appearance here. Beyond the snatches of thematic resemblance, there's a complete command of deceptive Straussian harmony. Korngold avoids committing himself to a definite key like a musical, and particularly shrewd, eel avoiding a clutching hand. The *Trio* of the *Scherzo*, for instance, doesn't actually define a key until it's all over. It's definitely in *some* key or other, of course, but the trick is not to be sure. In the first movement, the second theme pretends it will be in the normal key of the dominant, before twisting away at the last moment into a key a semitone higher – though neither key is ever confirmed by a cadence.

The melodic interval that opens the piece – an augmented fourth, an interval whose duplicity so horrified the Middle Ages that they dubbed it 'the devil in music' – betokens a general melodic interest in odd intervals. Intoxicated sevenths sway up and down in the second movement, turning into diminished octaves in the slow movement – that's the same sound, but written in such a way as to make it look even odder. And the opening Devil returns at the end to round off one of music's most remarkable debuts.

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