

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 24 September 2021 7.30pm

Jerusalem Quartet

Alexander Pavlovsky violin

Sergei Bresler violin

Ori Kam viola

Kyril Zlotnikov cello

Sharon Kam clarinet

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet No. 21 in D K575 'Prussian' (1789)

I. Allegretto • II. Andante • III. Menuetto. Allegretto - Trio • IV. Allegretto

Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957)

String Quartet No. 2 in E flat Op. 26 (1933)

I. Allegro • II. Intermezzo. Allegretto con moto • III. Larghetto. Lento • IV. Waltz. Tempo di valse

Interval

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Clarinet Quintet in B minor Op. 115 (1891)

I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Andantino • IV. Con moto

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Mozart's lengthy trips to Italy and Vienna in the early 1770s each resulted in a set of six quartets; but it wasn't until Mozart moved to Vienna, met Haydn, and heard his Op. 33 quartets that he really grappled with the problems and possibilities of the medium. In 1785 he published six quartets, with a fulsome dedication to his 'dearest friend', describing them as the fruit of a long and laborious endeavour. In 1789, Mozart played in Berlin for the King of Prussia, a keen amateur cellist. Back in Vienna, he set to work on new quartets, perhaps a commission from the King, since the cello is favoured in many ways. In K575, for example – the first of the three that Mozart completed before his death – it's the other three instruments who begin, laying out the red carpet, as it were, for the regal bass line. When the King makes his entrance, he has a few easy bars to get going, and is then straight into a tune high in the treble clef. And in the finale, it's the cello that first announces the melody.

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 opening of the Second String Quartet immediately demonstrates Korngold's harmonic virtuosity. Many of the chords contain five different notes, and within a few seconds we've heard all 12 of the different notes available. Yet the music is never discordant, and we are never in doubt that we're in the key of E flat – though we don't hear an actual E flat chord until bar 15, and even then only fleetingly, and upside-down, as it were. The result is a limpid stream of music with a sparkling surface. The first movement, which is in the customary sonata form, where two themes explore two keys, also shows Korngold to be a master of those chromatic semitone shifts beloved of Richard Strauss, where the music pretends to be in the wrong key just for a

moment. The second movement chooses C major as its key, and the extraordinary, icy, slow movement moves up a semitone to C sharp, with the cello at the end hesitating over whether that should be major or minor. The irrepressible waltz-finale even indulges in a cheeky concluding riff based on the chromatic theme made from Bach's name, B-A-C-H. The entire work is unified by a family resemblance in all the themes, which dwell upon pairs of adjacent notes.

In 1890, at the age of 57, **Johannes Brahms** made his will and retired, leaving the G minor String Quintet as his final piece: 'say goodbye to any further compositions of mine', he wrote to his publisher. But the following year, he visited the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, and heard the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld playing in the Duke's orchestra. Mühlfeld's beautiful playing inspired four pieces – the two sonatas for clarinet and piano Op. 120, the Clarinet Trio Op. 114, and tonight's quintet, which was premièred in Meiningen by Mühlfeld and a quartet led by Brahms's friend, Joseph Joachim, in November 1891. The peculiarly mellifluous quality of Mühlfeld's playing – Brahms called him 'Miss Clarinet' – means that these late works present aspects of the clarinet rather different from those showcased by Weber, who, writing for the virtuoso Heinrich Baermann, had hitherto dominated the clarinet world.

The quintet shows the motivic unity characteristic of all late Brahms. It's intriguing to think that while Sigmund Freud, in the same city at the same time, was analysing motives, Brahms was synthesising them – working in opposite directions, maybe, but in related fields: memorising late Brahms can be profound therapy. Brahms's hard-won inner unity can be most clearly perceived in the way that the theme of the third movement develops, via its own *Presto* variation, into the theme of the finale, which is then subject to further variation. These variations recall earlier aspects of the piece, most notably the Bohemian flavour from the middle of the slow movement. The first and last movements more or less share an ending, which brings the piece to a fulfilling close. The quintet's most widely noticed formal feature is that the opening pretends to be not so much in B minor as in D, a characteristic it shares with Haydn's quartet Op. 33 No. 1 – which takes us back to Mozart's inspiration at the beginning of tonight's programme.

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