

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 25 November 2024
1.00pm

ATOS Trio

Annette von Hehn violin
Stefan Heinemeyer cello
Thomas Hoppe piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

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

*I. Allegro con moto • II. Scherzo. Allegro molto •
III. Adagio non troppo • IV. Finale. Allegro molto
agitato*

Mel Bonis (1858-1937)

Soir, Matin Op. 76 (1907)

Soir • Matin



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Today's concert draws together piano trios by two composers only a few years apart in age – but one has remained incredibly familiar to concert audiences in the years since his death, whilst the other has been largely forgotten until recent scholars and musicians fought to bring her back to wider attention.

We begin with **Johannes Brahms**, a mere 20 years old when he completed his First Piano Trio. Brahms had begun work on the piece in the fateful summer of 1853, when he was asked to accompany the Hungarian violinist Ede Reményi on a tour of North Germany. This brought him into contact with the young violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim. Joachim and Brahms quickly became firm friends, and through Joachim's urging, Brahms found himself on the doorstep of Robert and Clara Schumann that same October. Indeed, it was partly on Clara Schumann's recommendation that the distinguished company Breitkopf & Härtel published the Trio in late 1854.

But Brahms, it seems, was not entirely happy. In June 1854, a few weeks after he'd sent the score to the printer, he mentioned to Joachim that he wished he'd kept it, because he would have ideally made further changes. When the Trio was published, several reviewers remarked on aspects of the first movement in which Brahms had included a contrapuntal section – a *fugato*. This was considered by critics 'unsettling' at best, and mere padding at worst. Furthermore, the piece is awash with clear hat-tips to the Schumanns (particularly Robert) which could be read as 'unoriginal'. This is hardly surprising given Brahms's extreme youth and relative lack of experience at the time, but it evidently niggled at him. In the late 1890s, now world-famous, his long-standing publisher Fritz Simrock bought up the original edition from Breitkopf & Härtel and the composer finally had the opportunity to revise his work. It is this later reissue – more of an 'Op. 108' than an 'Op. 8', as Brahms joked to Simrock – which we most frequently hear in concert performances today.

And yet there is so much to discover in the 1854 original, as we will hear. The first movement is much more expansive – over 150 bars longer than the later version. The lyrical opening melody is heard several times, propelled by rocking piano figurations as the musicians take it in turns to sing. When this section ends, the momentum falls away altogether into a stark, melancholy chromatic second theme: the *fugato*. Musical lines unfurl and wind between players, rays of light often extinguished after a few bars with a return to silence or a single player. When energy returns it does so with a vengeance, pressing and unsettled as the pianist and strings chase each other; and after the sunny reappearance of the first theme, we are treated to further contrapuntal machinations before an impassioned and triumphant coda.

The *Scherzo* is by turns muted and rollicking, making highly effective use of insistently repeated knocking rhythms and brief silences. We are allowed a moment of gentle balm at the movement's close, as the music slows

and softens into the major and leads us almost seamlessly into the magical *Adagio*. After the long, floating phrases of its opening, this movement broadens into a piano-led melody over plucked strings, and the rich romantic harmonies and song-like instrumental writing here seems particularly redolent of the Schumanns. The *Finale* begins briskly enough but is interrupted, in a direct homage to Robert Schumann, with a quotation from Beethoven's song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* – the very same quotation that Robert had used in his own solo-piano *Fantasie* Op. 17 several decades earlier.

Mélanie 'Mel' Bonis was born in Paris in 1858. A prodigiously gifted, self-taught keyboard player, her family – resistant to the idea of supporting her musical development – were persuaded to send her to the Paris Conservatoire after she caught the attention of César Franck. He was her organ professor during her student years, which overlapped with those of Claude Debussy and Gabriel Pierné; but her family cut her composition studies short and arranged for her to marry a businessman, a widower, in 1883. There followed a decade-long hiatus in which Bonis raised her children and composed very little, discouraged by her husband and family. But from the mid-1890s onwards, thanks to renewed contact with a fellow Conservatoire student who encouraged and supported her (indeed, he was the man she almost certainly would have married if she had been given the choice, and with whom she later had a child), she composed more than 300 works – over half of them for solo piano. In these later years she developed a considerable reputation and was fêted by notable figures of the French music establishment including Camille Saint-Saëns. A relatively high percentage of her music was published during her lifetime and she used the pseudonym 'Mel' to disguise her gender from would-be buyers of her scores.

Bonis scored her greatest public success in 1905 with her First Piano Quartet, admired by public and critics alike. The trio pieces we hear this evening, *Soir* and *Matin*, followed in 1907. The 'evening' is lilting and radiant, cello and violin taking it in turns to sing to each other over gently unfurling arpeggios from the piano. By contrast, *Matin* begins in a mysterious, muted haze of floating harmonies – these are the very earliest moments of daybreak, sparkling and unworldly.

Soir and *Matin* were premièred by the Trio Chaigneau, an ensemble of three sisters led by violinist Suzanne Chaigneau, with Marguerite playing the cello and Thérèse at the piano. (*Matin* is also dedicated to this ensemble.) By uncanny coincidence, three years after Bonis's piece was published, Suzanne Chaigneau married the army officer Hermann Joachim, son of Brahms's dear friend Joseph Joachim.

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