

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 25 October 2022  
7.30pm

This evening's concert is dedicated to Menahem Pressler, ahead of his 99th birthday in December.

## Quatuor Ebène

Pierre Colombet violin  
Gabriel Le Magadure violin  
Marie Chilleme viola  
Simon Dechambre cello

## Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

Fantasia a4 No. 4 in G minor Z735 (1680)  
Fantasia a4 No. 5 in B flat Z736 (1680)  
Fantasia a4 No. 6 in F Z737 (1680)  
Fantasia a4 No. 8 in D minor Z739 (1680)  
Fantasia a4 No. 9 in A minor Z740 (1680)  
Fantasia a4 No. 11 in G Z742 (1680)

## György Ligeti (1923-2006)

String Quartet No. 1 'Métamorphoses nocturnes' (1953-4)  
*Allegro grazioso – Vivace, capriccioso –  
Adagio, mesto – Presto – Prestissimo –  
Andante tranquillo – Tempo di valse, moderato, un  
poco capriccioso – Subito prestissimo –  
Allegretto, un poco gioviale – Prestissimo –  
Ad libitum, senza misura – Lento*

## Interval

## Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

String Quartet in A minor Op. 41 No. 1 (1842)  
*I. Introduzione. Andante espressivo - Allegro •  
II. Scherzo. Presto - Intermezzo • III. Adagio • IV. Presto*

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This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25

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**Purcell** wrote his *Fantasies in Four Parts* between June and August 1680, for reasons that remain unclear. Formally, they seem to have been a conscious glance back at a vanishing age. At the court of King Charles II, violins – such as those of Louis XIII's famous *Vingt-quatre violons du roy*, which Charles had heard while in exile in France – were rapidly supplanting the viol, and while a small instrumental consort was employed at the Stuart court alongside the ceremonial violin ensemble, it was a 'broken consort', implementing instruments of the violin family alongside their older counterparts.

And yet everything about Purcell's *Fantasies* suggests that they were conceived as domestic music for instruments of the same family. Purcell himself wrote that a serious composer should emulate old masters: 'to score much, and chuse [sic] the best authors'; and it seems that prior to the composition of his *Fantasies* he had consciously studied the works not just of the great English Tudor consort composers but also of Monteverdi. This was a composer who sought to renew his art at the same time as he rooted it in the past: the *Fantasies*' endlessly expressive emotional range, and the eloquent fluidity with which they embrace different sections and styles within a single-movement span would influence British composers through to the 20th Century. If Purcell wrote these gloriously fertile and flexible works as a private stylistic exercise, they also embody a profoundly English belief in the primacy of the private over the public, in tradition as the root of innovation, and in evolution as something infinitely more humane – and fruitful – than revolution.

**György Ligeti** was born in Transylvania, and turned to music when, as a Jew in fascist Hungary, he was banned from studying physics. After the war, Hungary's new Stalinist government banned his music too. During the Revolution of 1956 Ligeti and his wife narrowly escaped when their refugee train was surrounded by invading Russian troops; they crawled across a minefield to reach freedom in Austria. There, he drank in everything that contemporary music had to offer. Electronics, microtones and surreal music-theatre pieces provided, for Ligeti, a thrilling exploration of freedom - his hero Bartók had already shown that dissonance could be a life-affirming force.

Ligeti had learned that even before leaving Hungary, while composing what he later called his 'prehistoric' music – works in which he tried to find his own voice while negotiating the rigid aesthetic principles and repressive politics of the Hungarian socialist régime. Composed in 1953-4, his first string quartet is on one level an homage to Bartók, so much so that György Kurtág referred to it, jokingly, as 'Bartók's seventh string quartet'. Ligeti's name for the work, *Métamorphoses nocturnes*, evokes Bartók's shimmering, rustling 'nocturnal' soundscapes, and his musical language – with its violent *pizzicati*, percussive chords, buzzing swarms of high-speed counterpoint and sudden extremes of speed, pitch dynamics and emotion – makes no attempt to conceal its lineage.

But these are *Métamorphoses*, after all – a process of change (or even, if you like, evolution), away from a fixed point - and over its seventeen short, linked sections, an entirely individual voice starts to emerge: the questioning, visionary, sometimes deadpan sonic personality that we recognise, with hindsight, as György Ligeti. Unperformable in communist Hungary, the Quartet was premièred in Vienna's Musikverein on 8 May 1958 by the Ramor Quartet – another group of Hungarian exiles.

The energising force behind **Schumann's** mature music was his love for Clara Wieck. As their long and difficult courtship neared a happy end, his piano music of the 1830s blossomed into the great song cycles of 1840. 'I have been composing so much that it really seems quite uncanny at times,' he wrote to her 'I cannot help it, and should like to sing myself to death, like a nightingale'. Symphonies followed in 1841; then, in 1842, after immersing himself in Beethoven and Haydn, he turned to chamber music. On 21 June 1842 he signed off the manuscript of his String Quartet Op. 41 No. 1; on 5 July he'd finished No. 2. By the end of the month, he'd completed a third.

Clara was delighted, and Robert arranged a private première on her birthday, 13 September, at their Leipzig home. A friend proposed a toast to 'three children, scarcely born, and already perfect and beautiful', and the quartets were dedicated to Felix Mendelssohn. 'I have spared no pains to produce something good' wrote Robert to Felix 'and I think these may be my best'. Clara agreed: 'Everything here is new and at the same time, lucid, finely worked-out and always in quartet idiom.'

So if this first quartet of the three sounds fresh, romantic and almost breathlessly impulsive, it's easy to guess why. He'd worked (he confessed to his publisher) 'with much ardour'. Yet he'd also thought long and hard before launching himself into the string quartet. But there's more to any great music than mere technique, and in Op. 41 No. 1, an exultant, warm-hearted inspiration drives the music forward with quite irresistible imagination and poetry.

That's clear from the flowing, richly harmonised *Introduzione* onwards: throughout the lilting melodies and sudden shouts of joy of the first *Allegro*, the galloping, Mendelssohn-like hunting-*Scherzo* and its gently quizzical *Intermezzo* section and - supremely - the Romantic (in every sense) *Adagio*, with its broad, singing melodies (this movement is surely Schumann's single most heartfelt tribute to Beethoven) and ravishing sunset finish. By the quartet's final bars, technical quibbles have melted away: Schumann relies on sincerity rather than brute force, and with a finale of such exuberant verve (plus a couple of backward glimpses into pure poetry), that's more than enough to carry the day.

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