

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 25 October 2023
7.30pm

Sir Andrés Schiff fortepiano
Erich Höbarth violin
Christophe Coin cello

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) Piano Trio No. 1 in B flat D898 (?1827)
I. Allegro moderato
II. Andante un poco mosso
III. Scherzo. Allegro
IV. Rondo. Allegro vivace - Presto

Interval

Piano Trio No. 2 in E flat D929 (1827)
I. Allegro
II. Andante con moto
III. Scherzo. Allegro moderato
IV. Allegro moderato



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On 28 January 1828, four days before his 31st birthday, Franz Schubert heard his B flat Piano Trio performed at a party. The performers were the finest of the day: the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, the cellist Josef Linke and the pianist Carl Maria von Bocklet. When the music finished, Bocklet embraced the composer and commended him to the assembled guests, telling them that the Viennese public failed to appreciate the true stature of this genius who lived and worked among them.

Despite the success of the evening, Schubert showed no great eagerness to find a publisher for the trio. Instead he diligently strove to locate a firm willing to bring out its companion trio, the darker-hued E flat, D929. The B flat Trio did not arrive in print until 1836; Schubert had died eight years earlier on 19 November 1828.

Both trios were probably composed in the latter half of 1827. The last 18 months of Schubert's life were especially productive, despite his failing health. Working mainly in the mornings, he produced the three last Piano Sonatas, the String Quintet, the song cycle *Winterreise*, and the songs posthumously collected as *Schwanengesang*. If *Winterreise* expresses deep despair, the B flat Trio is representative of his most optimistic moments. He must have had strong suspicions that he would soon die of syphilis, contracted years earlier. But that gave even greater importance to the times of remission and hope.

The B flat Trio might not have been so blithe a work if Schubert had not changed his mind about the slow movement. It would appear that the eerily still, watchful *Notturmo* D897 was originally composed to fill that role (it now exists as a solitary and enigmatic entity). Although there has to be shade as well as light in work on this scale, anxious or angry questions are swiftly deflected by calm answers. This is particularly true of the opening *Allegro moderato*. Perhaps the most striking moments are brief silences, as if holding breath – but these are not yet the disconcerting premonitions of oblivion that they will become in the A major Piano Sonata D959.

The *Andante* has an almost religious quality at times, and a darker intensity in its middle section. The *Scherzo* begins as if politely poking its head round the door to see if we are ready for something more playful. The final *Rondo* alludes to several of the dance forms popular in Vienna at the time, and Schubert even switches metre from 2/4 to 3/2 to fit in yet another one. The trio therefore ends as Schubert liked to end each day – in convivial café surroundings.

In 1827, the Swedish singer Isak Albert Berg (1803-86) visited Vienna. He struck up an immediate rapport with Schubert, who asked for a copy of the Swedish folksongs he had heard Berg perform. One of

them – 'Se solen sjunker' ('The sun has set') – became absorbed into the fabric of Schubert's E Flat Piano Trio. Whether the text was as significant to him as the music is a matter of speculation. Even when using his own songs in instrumental works, Schubert did not always preserve their emotional import. But a distinctive falling octave, heard in the song on the word *farväl* ('farewell'), keeps recurring in the trio's slow movement.

Schubert did not quote the tune intact. Instead he fashioned his own variation on it from its melodic elements and the trudging accompaniment. Nor did he confine its presence to the *Andante*; the tune comes back as an obsessive presence in the finale, and Schubert appears to have added an allusion to it in the opening *Allegro* after that movement had been completed.

Much of the first movement is tenebrous and tentative. Even the emphasis and re-emphasis of the declamatory opening evokes doubt rather than belief. The *Andante* begins with cello and then piano intoning the bleak Swedish theme. The violin introduces an attempt at consolation; but that second theme, too, becomes hooked on the 'farewell' motif. The canonic *Scherzo* that follows is rather plaintive, but has a stamping-dance trio. Schubert asks that the movement be taken at minuet tempo.

The finale begins with a pleasant, skipping theme, but again a neurotic note is stuck by the repeated drumming at the cadences. From this nervous figure a new, skittish theme begins, the thrumming suggesting a dulcimer or cimbalom, and thus Viennese café music. It lingers unnaturally, as if it is leading nowhere – or is afraid of where it might lead. The reason becomes apparent when the 'farewell' song emerges from the shadows and dominates the music as none of the other themes have managed to do. On its final appearance it turns unexpectedly to the major; perhaps this is the only way music of such unsettled elusiveness could be brought to a convincing conclusion.

After hearing the trio performed, Schubert made extensive cuts to the finale, insisting to his publisher that they must be observed. The excisions rob us of some remarkable music, especially a moment when the 'farewell' song takes complete possession of the second subject – perhaps the climactic proof that thoughts of departure have consumed Schubert's psyche? Restoring these cuts can therefore be justified. While Schubert's Classical mind might have persuaded him to restore proportion and order by trimming down the movement, his Romantic soul had already written music that profoundly disturbed the quest for perfect balance.

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