

WIGMORE HALL 125

Sunday 26 July 2026
7.30pm

Wigmore Soloists

Adam Barnett-Hart violin
So-Ock Kim violin
Benjamin Marquise Gilmore viola
Steffan Morris cello
Tim Gibbs double bass
Michael Collins clarinet
Ben Goldscheider horn
Guylaine Eckersley bassoon

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Septet in E flat Op. 20 (1799)

I. Adagio – Allegro con brio
II. Adagio cantabile
III. Tempo di menuetto
IV. Tema con variazioni. Andante
V. Scherzo. Allegro molto e vivace
VI. Andante con moto alla marcia – Presto

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Octet in F D803 (1824)

I. Adagio – Allegro
II. Adagio
III. Allegro vivace
IV. Andante
V. Menuetto. Allegretto
VI. Andante molto – Allegro



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Beethoven sensed that his Septet Op. 20 was something special. On 15 December 1800 he described it to the publisher Hofmeister of Leipzig as ‘A septet for violin, viola, cello, contrabasso, clarinet, corno, fagotto – all obbligato (I cannot write anything non-obbligato, for I came into the world with an obbligato accompaniment)’. ‘This Septet’ – he added – ‘has greatly pleased.’

It had been completed the previous year and premièred in the same concert as his First Symphony at the Burgtheater, Vienna, on 2 April 1800. Its success had been such that even though only two copies existed (Beethoven’s own and the copy given to the Septet’s dedicatee, the Empress Maria Theresia), piracy was already a concern. ‘Send my Septet into the world at a more rapid rate’ he urged Hofmeister, ‘– because the public is waiting for it, and you know the Empress has it – and there are rascals in the Imperial city as well as at the Imperial court. So look sharp.’

He was right to be impatient. Outdoor music of the late 18th Century was generally the preserve of all-wind groups (*harmonie*); string ensembles dominated in aristocratic courts and – increasingly – bourgeois drawing rooms. This was the first chamber work of any lasting significance to combine, on equal terms, a group of string instruments and a group of winds. Street music had entered the drawing room, and at the same time become something more elevated. Written three years before the ‘Eroica’ symphony, the Septet is music for a more democratic age, written for anyone capable of enjoying it.

Beethoven came to resent the Septet’s success, reportedly muttering, later in life, that he’d like to ‘burn it’. But the reasons why the Septet was so successful, and why it remains so popular, aren’t hard to hear. Its breezy, exuberant character makes an instant appeal, and the Septet also gives gloriously enjoyable opportunities to all seven of its performers (including an extrovert violin part, originally written for the Viennese virtuoso Ignaz Schuppanzigh). It has the six movements of a classical serenade, and as belt-and-braces for the work’s success Beethoven made the fourth of these a set of variations on a popular tune – the Rhenish folksong *Ach schiffer, lieber Schiffer*. Along the way there’s a romantic slow movement, a hunting-horn *Scherzo* and opening and closing movements as brilliant (and as dramatic) as any of Beethoven’s symphonies.

And in its own way, the Septet is as revolutionary a masterpiece as Beethoven ever wrote. It can even be seen as the ancestor of today’s mixed contemporary music ensembles, and it launched a genre in its own right. Imitations followed from Spohr, Berwald, Brahms (the first version of his Serenade No. 1), Stanford and Coleridge-Taylor. More recent homages to the Septet have come from composers as varied as Kurt Schwertsik, Howard Ferguson and Robin Holloway. Richard Wagner described an performance of the Septet in his 1840 short story *A Pilgrimage to Beethoven* – though since the players he listed included a harpist, it seems (not for the last time) that his own imagination took precedence.

But the finest tribute came in 1824 from Beethoven’s 27-year-old Viennese colleague **Franz Schubert**. In February 1824, when Count Ferdinand von Troyer, a nobleman in the service of Beethoven’s patron Archduke Rudolf, and a keen amateur clarinettist, commissioned from Schubert a work ‘exactly like Beethoven’s Septet’, Schubert made no protest. He simply wrote, in barely four weeks, the single longest instrumental work he ever completed – ‘with the greatest enthusiasm’ noted his friend Moritz von Schwind.

To be fair, it was hardly a commission that an ambitious (and poor) composer could afford to spurn. Beethoven’s Septet was, by then, a well-established money-spinner. Troyer’s connections, meanwhile, were impressive, and the performers he engaged to play the piece were equally influential, including Schuppanzigh’s string quartet and the bassist Josef Melzer. Troyer himself intended to play the clarinet part.

So the work that Troyer’s guests heard on that evening in March 1824 was indeed a piece almost ‘exactly like Beethoven’s Septet’. Schubert followed Beethoven’s six movement layout almost to the note, adding only a second violin to Beethoven’s line-up of string trio, bass, clarinet, horn and bassoon. Where Beethoven used a Rhenish popular song as the theme for his variation movement, Schubert borrows a melody from his own unperformed 1815 singspiel *Die Freunde von Salamanka* (though it’s unlikely that anyone would have recognised it).

And yet Beethoven’s work feels like the product of a powerful but firmly classical sensibility, barely a generation removed from the *divertimenti* of Mozart. Schubert’s, by contrast, is a Romantic landscape, with an unmistakably open-air sensibility – usually sunny but not without distant rumbles of thunder. The eight players cease to be virtuosi in an elegant drawing room, and become friends – conversing, joking, sharing confidences.

The brilliant violin writing and leaping, yodelling clarinet and horn parts are the spontaneous outpourings of a composer being wholly himself, as is the sheer freewheeling freshness of so much of this music. The jaunty *Andante* and its eight variations; the galloping *Scherzo*, and the bustling *moto perpetuo* of the finale are as irresistibly Schubertian as the moments of high Romantic poetry, like the opening melody of the *Adagio* (a gift to Troyer) and the atmospheric slow introductions to the outer moments.

Equally Schubertian, sadly, was the Octet’s fate. It wasn’t heard in public until 16 April 1827, when Schuppanzigh organised a performance at the Rote Igel (Red Hedgehog) in Vienna. The review in the Vienna *Theaterzeitung* was positive, but came too late for Schubert, who’d already had the piece rejected by two publishers. When the Octet was finally published, in 1853, two movements were omitted, and Schubert had been dead for nearly 25 years.

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