

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 26 March 2022 7.30pm

Wihan Quartet

Leoš Čepický violin

Jan Schulmeister violin

Jakub Čepický viola

Michal Kaňka cello

In Memory of Pamela Majoro

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)

Crisantemi (1890)

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

String Quartet in E minor (1873)

*I. Allegro • II. Andantino • III. Prestissimo •
IV. Scherzo fuga. Allegro assai mosso*

Interval

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

String Quartet in A minor Op. 51 No. 2 (?1865-73)

*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Andante moderato •
III. Quasi menuetto, moderato - Allegro vivace •
IV. Finale. Allegro non assai*



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Puccini wrote only a handful of purely instrumental works, and on the evidence of recording catalogues and concert programmes, only one has survived as anything more than a curiosity; the short movement for string quartet that Puccini called *Crisantemi* ('Chrysanthemums'). Prince Amedeo of Savoy - Duke of Aosta, patron of the arts and (for three years in the 1870s) King of Spain - died on 18 January 1890. *Crisantemi* is an elegy for the Duke: a lyrical and affectingly melancholy 'flower of mourning' lasting barely more than five minutes, and written (or so Puccini told his brother Michele) in just one night. It's frequently heard in a later version for string orchestra, but opera buffs may also recognise it from Act 3 of *Manon Lescaut* (1892) - where, resourceful as ever, Puccini recycled it to accompany the scene of Manon's imprisonment.

Verdi was adamant: purely instrumental music was 'something for the Germans', and the string quartet was 'a plant that was not suited to the Italian climate'. Which accounts for his absolute silence on the evening of April Fools' Day 1873 when - in the foyer of the Hotel delle Crocelle, Naples, in front of a specially invited (and mystified) audience - four string players entered, and without a word, began to play Verdi's E minor String Quartet. Rehearsals for the Italian première of *Aida* had been dragging; but holed up in his hotel room, unknown to anyone, Verdi had kept boredom at bay with the very last thing anyone expected from the reigning master of Italian opera.

'I wrote it for mere amusement', he told listeners, sidestepping the whole Italian-German critical debate with the comment that 'I don't know whether it is good or bad - only that it is a quartet'. Only after three years of continual requests from music societies and his publisher Ricordi did he allow it to be published. And yet it's exactly what one would hope for in a full-scale string quartet from Verdi at the peak of his maturity. The sense of character, the dramatic sweep, the rich but effective instrumental writing (such a master of the operatic ensemble surely had something of a head start when it came to writing an instrumental quartet) and that unmistakable flow of warm-blooded, singing melody - it's all there.

What's more, it's also a highly successful and very personal take on the quartet form. There's an impassioned sonata-form first movement with a melting second theme (after an echo of Amneris's music from *Aida* in the first), and a lilting humoresque in place of a slow movement. Then Verdi proves that he can match Beethoven in a furious, rhythmically-driven scherzo - though he's careful not to call it one - before throwing the cello a *bel canto* serenade by way of a trio. And to finish, just where a German Romantic quartet would get ready to storm the heavens, he gives us a featherweight *Scherzo*. To really rub it in, this dancing, sparkling *tour de force* is written in that most erudite of classical forms - a fugue. But as

Verdi would prove nearly 20 years later in the final bars of *Falstaff*, a fugue doesn't have to be solemn, and you don't have to be serious to be sublime.

Brahms was the first to admit his inhibitions: 'You don't know what it means to the likes of us when we hear his footsteps behind us'. He was referring to Beethoven's reputation as a symphonist, but the string quartet was another form in which Beethoven had set impossibly high standards. Brahms's first attempt dated from 1853, and by his own account he wrote and destroyed no fewer than 19 further quartets before presenting 'two scruffy quartets' - his Op. 51 - to his publisher Fritz Simrock in August 1873.

A profound awareness of tradition surrounds both of these quartets, and the fingerprints of Brahms's lifelong friendship with the violinist Joseph Joachim, in particular, are all over the second. Allusions to their shared delight in canons, to the personal mottos of their youth (Brahms's *Frei aber Froh* ('Free but happy'), and Joachim's *Frei aber Einsam* ('Free but lonely') rendered in the notes FAF and FAE) and, in the *Finale*, to Joachim's Hungarian nationality, all reflect Joachim's profound influence on Brahms's musical thought. Which makes it all the more surprising that the pair quarrelled. Brahms dedicated the Op. 51 quartets instead to the amateur viola player Dr Theodor Billroth, professor of surgery at the University of Vienna.

The quarrel was short-lived. Joachim's quartet premièred the A minor quartet in Berlin on 18 October 1873 and the absent Brahms wrote apologetically to his friend, admitting that 'the Quartet will never have pleased me so well as when I think of you on Saturday and listen in my thoughts'. (Billroth later blotted his copy-book: Brahms discovered that he'd snipped an excerpt from the manuscript score and had it framed for display on his surgery wall). There's another presence in this quartet, though. The choice of key, the songful first movement, the haunted *menuetto* and Hungarian *Finale* all evoke the A minor quartet D804 by Franz Schubert.

But it's Schubert filtered through Brahms: witness the first movement's forceful, rugged *coda*, and the tender little canon that closes its exposition. In the *Andante* the storms that interrupt Brahms's take on a Schubertian walking-song never return, as the movement heads for ever warmer and sweeter climes; and the measured, sepia-toned *Quasi menuetto* is interrupted, like so many of Brahms's *intermezzi*, by a darting major-key interlude. And then come the impetuous cross-rhythms of the *Finale*: only Brahms, perhaps, could have given a Hungarian-style *Finale* such an exuberant swing - and then, true to his classical ideals, driven it to so powerful a conclusion.

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