WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 27 October 2024
7.30pm

Isabelle Faust violin
Anne Katharina Schreiber violin
Antoine Tamestit viola
Jean-Guihen Queyras cello
Christian Poltéra cello

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quartet in G D887 (1826)
I. Allegro molto moderato • II. Andante un poco moto • III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace - Trio. Allegretto • IV. Allegro assai

Interval

String Quintet in C D956 (1828)
I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Adagio • III. Scherzo. Presto - Trio. Andante sostenuto • IV. Allegretto

CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust www.cavatina.net

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On 31 March 1824 Schubert wrote to his friend Leo Kupelweiser: 'I have tried my hand at several instrumental things, and have composed two quartets…and want to write another quartetto, really wanting in this manner to pave the way to a big symphony'. Those two quartets appeared in due course – the Quartet in D minor known as 'Death and the Maiden' and the A minor quartet D804 – but two years passed before Schubert finally tackled the third.

The G major Quartet appears to have been written – incredibly – in just 10 days: 20-30 June 1826, at Schubert's home in the Wieden, the future Fourth District of Vienna. Its first movement might (or might not) have been the 'new quartet' played by Ignaz Schuppanzigh's string quartet in Schubert's one and only public benefit concert, on 26 March 1828. The G major Quartet surpasses in scale the biggest symphony Schubert ever wrote. But its basic forms are classical; and its melodic inspiration is vintage Schubert (did he ever write a melody more heart-melting than the one he gives to the cello in the *Scherzo*'s central *Trio*?) The opening chord, with its sudden darkening from major to minor, is crucial: the whole quartet is coloured by this tension. The jagged outbursts of the first subject loom up through the *tremolando*: this is an epic journey, but also a deeply emotional one.

There's certainly a foreshadowing of *Winterreise* in the *Andante* – this desolate walking-song, with its two violent outbursts, tells its own story and another minor/major shift falls like a blessing on the final bar. The *Scherzo* is a vortex of controlled energy, with an irresistible swing. And the model for the finale is clear enough: it's a huge, freewheeling (but not untroubled) dance of the kind that closes Mozart's *Divertimento* K563 and (more to the point) Mozart's G minor string quintet. Schubert could have given us a more conventional finale, though after what has gone before, it's hard to see how. Instead – in Donald Tovey's words – 'we have the momentum of a planet in its orbit'.

On 25 September 1828, Schubert moved lodgings, on doctor's orders, to the fresh air of his brother's house in the Viennese suburb of Neue Wieden. A week later, on 2 October, he wrote to the publisher Probst that 'I have composed, among other things, three Sonatas for pianoforte solo…and finally turned out a Quintet for 2 violins, 1 viola and 2 violoncellos…If perchance any of these compositions would suit you, let me know'.

Somewhere around this time, it's known that Schubert played the viola in a performance of Beethoven's Quartet in C sharp minor Op. 131 – and that it sent him 'into such transports of delight and enthusiasm that all feared for him'. He took a walking tour with three friends to Haydn's grave at Eisenstadt; but on 31 October his health took a turn for the worse. On 4 November he booked a course of counterpoint lessons with the composer Simon Sechter; a fortnight later, he was dead. His unpublished manuscripts were sold, ten days later, to the publisher Diabelli & Co – who did nothing with the Quintet until it was premièred on 17 November 1850 by Georg Hellmesberger's string quartet. It was finally published in 1853, with the designation Op. 163.

So we're unlikely to find any first-hand explanation of why Schubert chose to write for the unusual combination of string quartet plus a second cello. C major is traditionally the brightest and sunniest of keys – but the brighter the sunlight, the darker and more pronounced the shadows. Within the quintet's very first chord we feel the chill as a minor-key cloud obscures that sun. The instrumental shadings in this huge arching first movement are infinite. The two cellos, in octaves, form a sonorous bass as the *Allegro* finally takes hold; bars later, they unfold the glorious, singing melody of the second subject as the sweetest imaginable tenor duet. When in the recapitulation the duet returns, the viola, duskier and cooler, has taken the place of the second cello. Barely perceptibly, the shadows are lengthening.

In the E major *Adagio*, violin, viola and cello sustain their rapt, endless song as if hovering in mid-air; barely tethered to earth by the second cello's pizzicato below and the birdlike fragments of melody far above. It's almost too fragile to withstand the drama and pain that Schubert throws at it in the movement's F minor central section. A pounding, symphonic hunting-*Scherzo* suddenly halts for a *Trio* section of a near-static solemnity. And a jaunty dance-tune finale slows to complete immobility, as the matched pairs of instruments languish sensuously in descending phrases. Schubert ends with one final ambiguity. His very last expression mark, written over the final note, was scrawled in such a way that it could be either an accent, or a diminuendo. Defiant shout or dying fall – it's forever open to the interpreters.

What's unambiguous is that few chamber works have touched more people, more deeply, than Schubert's String Quintet. 'From the lyrical and dramatic point of view', wrote Walter Willson Cobbett, 'nothing so ideally perfect has ever been written for strings than this inexpressibly lovely work'. Arthur Rubinstein, the cellist Alfredo Piatti and Benjamin Britten all requested that its *Adagio* be played at their memorial services. And the violinist John Saunders (1867-1919) went one better – he had six bars of the first movement's cello duet inscribed on his gravestone in Norwood Cemetery, along with two lines from Shakespeare: 'So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee'.