

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 27 September 2021 1.00pm

Camerata RCO

Julie Moulin flute

Hein Wiedijk clarinet

Annemiek de Bruin clarinet

Simon Van Holen bassoon

Katy Woolley horn

Marc Daniel van Biemen violin

Santa Vižine viola

Johan van Iersel cello

Felix Lashmar double bass



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3

Carl Nielsen (1865-1931)

Serenata in vano (1914)

I. Allegro non troppo ma brioso • II. Un poco adagio • III. Tempo di marcia

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Serenade in D Op. 11 (1857-8)

I. Allegro molto • II. Scherzo. Allegro non troppo - Trio. Poco più moto • III. Adagio non troppo • IV. Menuetto I—Menuetto II • V. Scherzo. Allegro • VI. Rondo. Allegro

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Carl Nielsen composed his delectable *Serenata in vano* at the behest of Ludvig Hegner, double bass player of the Royal Danish Orchestra. Each summer members of the orchestra toured Danish provinces with programmes that mixed wind and strings. The headline work in summer 1914 was Beethoven's Septet. Hegner asked Nielsen to provide a short piece using some or all of the same instruments. The composer set to, and within a week produced this single-movement 'Serenade in vain' for five of Beethoven's instruments: clarinet, bassoon, horn, cello and double bass. The Serenade was premièred, sandwiched between a Mozart Divertimento and Beethoven's Septet, in Nykøbing Falster on 3 June 1914. A review of the concert found the unusual (unique?), predominantly dark-coloured instrumentation 'slightly heavy and strained', though it did concede that the work was 'an amusing effort'.

Lasting around seven minutes, the Serenade comprises three sections played without a break. It opens as a doleful, faintly gauche waltz (*Allegro ma non troppo ma brioso*), initiated by clarinet over pizzicato cello-as-mandolin. The cello offers a suaver waltz melody, then the horn, true to character, proposes a rustic tune over drone fifths in the cello. Nielsen, who dubbed the Serenade a joke, left his own wry description of this opening section: 'The gentlemen first play rather chivalrically and showily to lure the beauty out on to the balcony, but she doesn't show herself.'

The music gradually ebbs, via lulling triplets, into the lyrical central episode, ushered in by a caressing melody for bassoon and horn. In Nielsen's words: 'Then [the serenaders] play slightly languorously (*poco adagio*), but that doesn't have any effect, either.' A miniature clarinet cadenza leads into the last section, a jaunty, mock-military *Tempo di marcia*. 'When they've played in vain... they give up caring about the whole business and "shuffle off" home during the little final march that they play for their own amusement.'

Forget the familiar image of the grizzled, middle-aged **Brahms** with the venerable Old Testament beard. When he composed his D major Serenade he was in his mid-twenties, the passionate, handsome 'young eagle' whose genius had so overwhelmed Robert and Clara Schumann. After Robert was confined to an asylum in 1854, Brahms - always mature beyond his years - devoted himself to the welfare of Clara and her children. By 1857, the year after Robert's death, he needed a measure of calming routine. He spent the the next three autumn seasons at the Detmold court, composing, teaching and performing; and it was for the Detmold musicians, towards the end of 1857, that he began a Serenade in D for an ensemble of mixed strings and wind, in the tradition of Beethoven's Septet and Schubert's Octet..

Brahms originally conceived the Serenade as a four-movement Octet. The following year he expanded it into a six-movement Nonet (whose score has not survived), then recast it for chamber orchestra and finally full orchestra. Tonight's concert gives a rare chance to hear a reconstruction of the Nonet version, for flute, two clarinets, horn, bassoon, violin, viola, cello and double bass.

Launched by a pastoral horn tune over bagpipe drones, the first movement combines a symphonic breadth and ambition with an alfresco blitheness. Solos for horn, flute and clarinet abound in a kaleidoscope of ever-changing colours, not least in the free-soaring second theme - quintessential Brahms, this. The bucolic horn theme undergoes ingenious transformations in the central development, then acquires a touch of nostalgic harmony at the start of the recapitulation. In the coda the flute chirps in delightfully with the horn theme, before the whimsical end for wind alone.

Next comes a furtive, scurrying D minor *Scherzo* replete with syncopations and canonic imitation - a type of movement Brahms made his own. He remembered the very opening when writing the *Scherzo* of his B flat Piano Concerto nearly a quarter of a century later. The *Trio*, in faster tempo, is a lusty syncopated tune over a rustic-style bass.

Sharing the ample scale of the first movement, the *Adagio* begins with cooing paired clarinets, then adds two glorious cantabile melodies, the first for cello, the second reminding us that the horn is the German Romantic instrument *par excellence*. The movement ends with one of the earliest of Brahms's famous 'sunset' codas.

Brahms follows this with a pair of minuets, one in G major, one in G minor. The first, opening with clarinets over a quacking bassoon, is at once delicate and delightfully rustic. Its closing phrase then provides the cue for the wistful second minuet, beginning on strings alone. The horn runs riot in the fleeting second *Scherzo*, with its blatant crib from the *Trio* of Beethoven's Second Symphony - doubtless meant as a joke.

Like the first movement the sonata-rondo finale combines bucolic merriment with sophisticated symphonic development. The opening theme is a sturdy march, while the second counterpoints a lyrical violin line with a running counterpoint for viola. The themes return in reverse order in the recapitulation. Then, after a hint of another 'sunset' coda, the Serenade ends in frank alfresco style with a rousing tutti sendoff.

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