

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 28 January 2025
7.30pm

Martin Fröst clarinet
Roland Pöntinen piano

Alban Berg (1885-1935)

4 Stücke Op. 5 (1913)
*I. Mäßig • II. Sehr Langsam • III. Sehr Rasch •
IV. Langsam*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Clarinet Sonata in F minor Op. 120 No. 1 (1894)
*I. Allegro appassionato • II. Andante un poco
adagio • III. Allegretto grazioso • IV. Vivace*

Interval

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Sonata for clarinet and piano (1962)
*I. Allegro tristamente • II. Romanza • III. Allegro
con fuoco*

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Clarinet Sonata in E flat Op. 167 (1921)
*I. Allegretto • II. Allegro animato • III. Lento •
IV. Molto allegro - Allegretto*

Ernest Chausson (1855-1899)

Andante and Allegro (1881)



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Alban Berg's 4 Stücke (Four Pieces for clarinet and piano) Op. 5, most likely written in the spring of 1913, are unusual in the output of a composer best known for large-scale works. 'My music must be brief,' Berg wrote at the time to Ferruccio Busoni. 'Succinct!! In two notes: not construction but 'expression'!! [...] [Music] must be the expression of a sensation, just as the sensation that brings us into contact with our subconscious is real, and not a changeling of sensation and "conscious logic".' Much of the melodic and harmonic material for each of his Four Pieces derives from the notes of the clarinet's opening solo.

Berg mixes an alchemical blend of tonal and non-tonal elements, heightened in its expressive power by such nuances of texture and timbre as the flutter-tongued passage and mantra-like close of the first piece, the otherworldly echo-tones in the slow second piece, and the hushed dynamics of the third piece. The last and longest of his miniatures explores the psychological tension between periods of prolonged stasis and sudden, agitated movement. Conservative Vienna was not well-disposed to the composer's aesthetic: the first performance of the Four Pieces had to wait until 1919, when it was given by Franz Prem, clarinetist of the Volksoper, and Eduard Steuermann in a concert presented by Arnold Schoenberg's 'Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen' (Society for Private Musical Performances).

Richard Mühlfeld, among the greatest clarinetists of the late 1800s, was an early adopter of the improved system of clarinet keywork developed in Munich by Carl Baermann and Georg Ottensteiner. Mühlfeld's career began at an early age when he joined the spa orchestra in his hometown of Salzingen. He became a member of the illustrious Meiningen Court Orchestra during his late teens and, in 1879, was appointed as its principal clarinetist. In March 1891, **Johannes Brahms** made a week-long visit to the Meiningen court and was enchanted by Mühlfeld's playing; he later described the clarinetist as 'simply the best master of his instrument'. Later that year, he presented Mühlfeld with the scores of the Clarinet Trio in A minor and the Clarinet Quintet in B minor.

Brahms's two Clarinet Sonatas were composed in the summer of 1894, inspired by Mühlfeld's recent visit to Vienna to perform in a chamber music festival. The Clarinet Sonata No.1 in F minor Op.120, which Mühlfeld and Brahms first performed in September 1894, outwardly conforms to the conventional pattern of a sonata-allegro first movement, a slow movement in ternary form, a minuet and trio and a spirited rondo finale. Yet the work is anything but conventional in its complex development of themes and the way in which Brahms plays with the expressive light and shade created by contrasts between the minor and major modes.

According to his friend and collaborator, the baritone Pierre Bernac, Poulenc 'used to say that he liked painting as much as music, and his memory, not at all good musically, was infallible visually, especially for painting'. The composer's feeling for tonal colour and shading, so richly present in one of his last works, the Clarinet Sonata,

was surely rooted in his receptivity to the visual arts; likewise, his determination to strip his music of superfluous gestures, to express an idea with the greatest clarity, was greatly influenced by his study of the creative process of Henri Matisse, in which excess lines and hatchings were jettisoned to reveal the essential character of a figure.

Poulenc's Sonata for clarinet and piano, dedicated to the memory of his erstwhile colleague in Les Six, Arthur Honegger, was commissioned by Benny Goodman, the legendary 'King of Swing'. Poulenc died before the work had reached the final editing stage; his place as pianist at its scheduled première at Carnegie Hall was taken by Leonard Bernstein, with Goodman as the clarinet soloist. It opens with a flourish reminiscent of the cabaret world of 1920s Paris, before launching a theme that sounds like a wrong-note chanson. The movement's slow central section reiterates a distinctive motif from the 'Domine Deus' of Poulenc's *Gloria*, before the *chanson* tune returns for a brief reprise. Traces of the *Gloria* rise again in the surging scales and brief piano interludes of the Romanza, which stand in contrast to the austere beauty of the clarinet's principal melody. Poulenc concludes with a youthful Allegro con fuoco, a nod to the second part of his reputation as 'half monk, half rascal'.

Saint-Saëns composed his Clarinet Sonata in E flat for Auguste Périer, solo clarinet of the Opéra-Comique and a professor at the Paris Conservatoire. It was second of three sonatas for instruments which he composed in 1921. The opening movement's tuneful elegance contains echoes of the melancholy that permeated all levels of French society in the wake of the Great War, while its Allegro animato recalls the 'joie de vivre' of Belle Époque Paris. Saint-Saëns dons the sombre guise of undertaker in the Lento, a sarabande-like piece in which the upward transposition of the clarinet's opening melody intensifies the sentiment of the movement's second half. Gently rippling piano *arpeggios* prepare the ground for the neo-classical finale, the conclusion of which contains a surprising return of the first movement's principal theme.

Ernest Chausson was not dependent upon composition or performing for his livelihood, being of independent means and able to devote months to the creation of even the briefest of songs. He had already qualified as a barrister by the time he enrolled to study with Franck and Massenet at the Paris Conservatoire. His gift as a melodist for rhythmic invention flows freely in the Andante and Allegro, composed around the time he quit full-time study in 1881. Chausson's choice of instrument was surely influenced by the clarinet's rising status at the Conservatoire and consequent acceptance as a 'serious' instrument for chamber music. Chausson carries the yearning lyricism of the Andante into the work's dramatic Allegro assai, raising its intensity with artful modulations and a lively mix of clarinet pyrotechnics and sonorous piano chords.

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