WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 28 May 2024
7.30pm

This concert is supported by the Rubinstein Circle

Belcea Quartet
Corina Belcea violin
Suyeon Kang violin
Krzysztof Chorzelski viola
Antoine Lederlin cello

Quatuor Ébène
Jonathan Schwarz violin
Gabriel Le Magadure violin
Marie Chilemme viola
Yuya Okamoto cello

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Octet in E flat Op. 20 (1825)
I. Allegro moderato ma con fuoco • II. Andante • III. Scherzo. Allegro leggierissimo • IV. Presto

Interval

George Enescu (1881-1955)

String Octet in C Op. 7 (1900)
Très modéré - Très fougueux - Lentement - Mouvement de valse bien rythmée

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The string octets of Felix Mendelssohn and George Enescu head the relatively short list of works in this genre. There are others using the same instrumentation by composers including Gade, Glière, Airat Ichmouratov, Milhaud, Raff and Shostakovich; however, the pair of works played tonight stand out for their youthful brilliance and melodic inventiveness.

Felix Mendelssohn's Octet was written in 1825 at the age of 16. Written soon after the Mendelssohns had moved into an imposing house in the edge of Berlin, it was here that Felix performed either as pianist, violinist or viola player in family concerts that often featured his own early string symphonies and other compositions. It is believed that the Octet was written for one of these concerts; the work is dedicated to Mendelssohn's violin teacher Eduard Rietz, as a birthday present to him.

At the time of composition, there was hardly any precedent for a string octet. There were double quartets by Spohr, but they were scored for two string quartets playing in contrast with each other. Mendelssohn was clear in his direction to performers and how his work differed from others: 'This Octet must be played by all the instruments in symphonic orchestral style. *Pianos* and *fortes* must be strictly observed and more strongly emphasised than is usual in pieces of this kind'.

The first movement lives up to its marking, *Allegro moderato ma con fuoco*, from the start. The first violin rises and falls through a range of three octaves and the scoring develops near-orchestral textures with a rich and varied palette of instrumental colours. The longest by far of all the movements, the energy and sweep is maintained to a great extent by the easy exchange between all eight instruments. A much-needed moment of sedate reflection is provided by secondary thematic material. Ultimately, the movement's primary theme is developed and inevitably leads to a climactic unison passage played *fortissimo*. The recapitulation begins quietly, rather unexpectedly, before a concluding fiery coda.

By contrast, the second movement *Andante* is based on a simple melody announced by the lower strings and quickly taken up by the four violins. This gentle melodic line becomes more animated as it develops, with accompanying instrumental parts that grow particularly restless.

Mendelssohn said that the third movement *Scherzo* was inspired by the closing lines of the *Walpurgisnacht* section from Part I of Goethe's *Faust*, depicting the marriage of Oberon and Titania. Marked 'as light as possible', Mendelssohn's sister Fanny asserted that it should be played '*staccato* and *pianissimo*' for 'everything is new and strange, yet at the same time utterly persuasive and enchanting – one feels so close to the spirits, lightly carried up into the air. At the end the first violin soars feather-light aloft and all is blown away.'

Featuring an eight-part fugue, the energetic finale *Presto* demonstrates the composer's contrapuntal skill. At one point sharp-eared listeners may detect a quotation, perhaps unconscious, of 'And he shall reign' from the 'Hallelujah chorus' of Handel's *Messiah*. Near the end Mendelssohn skilfully brings back the main theme of the *Scherzo* as a forceful countermelody to the finale's polyphonic complexity.

Enescu entered the Paris Conservatoire in 1895 at the age of 14 to study violin and composition, after five years at the Vienna Conservatoire. His Octet was written in 1900, one year after he finished his Parisian studies. The writing oozes an amazing degree of confidence, which is partially attributable to the influence of its dedicatee André Gedalge, Enescu's Parisian fugue tutor. Gedalge claimed Enescu was his only student 'who truly had ideas and spirit'.

'With the Octet I was rapidly improving, becoming my own person as a composer', Enescu admitted. Regarding the challenges experienced in writing it, he remarked, 'I was gripped by the problem of construction. I wrote it in four connected movements in such a way that, although each movement has its own independence, the whole piece would form a large-scale single movement in sonata form. I crushed myself with the effort of keeping aloft a piece of music in four sections, of such length that each one seemed about to fall apart at any moment. No engineer putting his first suspension bridge in place can have agonized more than I did, as I gradually filled my manuscript paper with notes.'

The challenges are many for performers. An inescapable one must be establishing the minute shifts of tempo that Enescu specifically demands whilst maintaining the overall structure. To help reinforce the sense of instrumental balance, one part is often paired with another against the backdrop of the other ensemble members.

Listening to the work in performance, it is easy to be swept along by the intricately woven profusion of ideas that it contains. The first section, which forms the exposition of the extended sonata form, is based upon seven distinct musical subjects. They offer a range of moods, from the dramatic or dynamic to those that are lyrical or nostalgic in nature, with echoes of Romanian folk music being made apparent.

The second and third sections together form the development of the sonata. They principally enhance the thematic material already presented, but also contain several new ideas. The second movement most clearly displays Gedalge's influence by being a daringly tempestuous fugue. The third movement provides some required contrast through its largely nocturnally tinged atmosphere.

The final section summarises all the of the work's major ideas; by recalling the first movement's opening theme it underlines the cyclical nature of the score. Initially, it seems improbable that the movement is written as a waltz, but the form serves the purpose of allowing themes to be combined, superimposed and intervals of seconds, thirds, sixths or sevenths to be inventively explored.