

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 28 November 2023
7.30pm

Benjamin Grosvenor piano
Hyeyoon Park violin
Timothy Ridout viola
Kian Soltani cello

Frank Bridge (1879-1941) Phantasie Piano Quartet in F sharp minor (1910)
Andante con moto - Allegro vivace - Andante con moto

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor Op. 15 (1876-9, rev. 1883)
*I. Allegro molto moderato • II. Scherzo. Allegro vivo •
III. Adagio • IV. Allegro molto*

Interval

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Piano Quartet No. 1 in G minor Op. 25 (1861)
*I. Allegro • II. Intermezzo. Allegro ma non troppo - Trio. Animato •
III. Andante con moto • IV. Rondo alla Zingarese. Presto*



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Simmering national rivalries supplied the background to the publication in 1904 of Oscar Adolf Hermann Schmitz's polemical essay *Das Land ohne Musik*. The German critic's contention that England somehow deserved to be known as 'the land without music' raised hackles in a land famously awash with concerts and choral festivals galore. Walter Willson Cobbett, an amateur violinist, arts patron and future editor of the invaluable *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, clearly disagreed with Schmitz. In collaboration with the Worshipful Company of Musicians, he redistributed some of his considerable fortune to create a competition for young British composers. Cobbett aspired to see a new golden age of English chamber music to emulate that of Tudor and Jacobean times; he also looked to the past for the title of his 'Phantasie' competition, evoking an old English spelling of the Italianate 'fantasia', essentially a musical flight of fancy or imagination.

The first of Cobbett's competitions, held in 1905, called for a Phantasie for string quartet: William Hursltone was named as winner while **Frank Bridge** emerged as runner-up from a field of almost 70 entrants; Bridge took first prize when the competition, this time for a Phantasie for piano trio, was repeated two years later. The Phantasie Piano Quartet in F sharp minor of 1910, one of a dozen 'phantasie' works for piano and strings commissioned by Cobbett, rises as a single movement built from three contrasting sections. After a dramatic opening, the initial *Andante con moto* turns towards rhapsodic contemplation with help from a lilting theme announced by the piano, soon echoed by each of the three string instruments and embroidered with cascading arpeggio figures. Shades of Brahms, courtesy of harmonies absorbed by Bridge from his teacher Charles Villiers Stanford, run through the central *Allegro vivace*, which also projects its composer's gentle wit and sense of fantasy. The opening theme surfaces again in the work's closing section and supplies the material for a radiant conclusion in the major key, hailed by the composer and critic Edwin Evans as '28 bars of really fine music, with a serene largeness and dignity about them'.

Financial difficulties were built in to **Fauré's** job as choirmaster at the Paris church of the Madeleine. The young organist and composer received meagre additional income from selling the rights to his works; his First Piano Quartet, meanwhile, earned him a rude rejection from his publisher and a polite one from another. The C minor Piano Quartet was finally taken up by the small company run by Julien Hamelle from a shop near the Madeleine. It seems likely that Fauré had at least seen the scores of Brahms's first two piano quartets, which Hamelle distributed in France; however, as Jean-Michel Nectoux notes in his landmark biography of Fauré, 'he would probably not have paid very much attention to them, as Brahms's music was so much looked down on in Paris'.

Fauré's First Piano Quartet hits the ground running, immediately unpacking the first theme of its opening movement and treating it as a song without words shared and later developed, in conjunction with an equally strong second theme, by each of the four players. The *Scherzo's* lightness and charm, maintained by muted strings in its elegant trio section, are offset and elevated by momentary flashes of melancholy and fleeting shifts of mood, as if a brood of imps had gate-crashed a musical soirée at one of the most fashionable Paris salons. Impishness falls away in the *Adagio*, replaced by music of sombre dignity, chant-like in the intensity of its opening yet strikingly complex in the subsequent dialogue that unfolds among the strings over a distinctive rhythmic piano accompaniment. 'Were this not very long movement ... to be lost to us,' observed the composer Florent Schmitt in his survey of Fauré's chamber works for Cobbett's *Cyclopedic Survey*, 'an immeasurable void would be created in the music of the 19th Century'. Fauré's inventive ingenuity soars again in the work's finale where a scampering first theme is developed in tandem with a contrastingly elegant second theme and a more assertive third theme. The three ideas are recalled at the movement's breathtaking conclusion.

In writing about Schubert's late piano sonatas, Alfred Brendel suggests that their scale demands 'that they should be played orchestrally, dramatically and cohesively'. The observation could readily be applied to **Brahms's** Piano Quartet in G minor Op. 25, among the young composer's first fully mature chamber works and one of his most 'symphonic', clearly reflected in the expressive gravity of its tragic opening *Allegro* but also in its elegiac *Andante con moto*, music evocative of the Classical tradition yet wholly contemporary in its Romanticism. The work's 'Gypsy-style' *Rondo-finale*, with its *alla Zingarese* imitations of cimbalom and fiddle, proved an instant hit when Brahms presented it in company with members of the Hellmesberger Quartet soon after his move to Vienna in the autumn of 1862. Traces of Schubert, especially in the lyrical *Andante*, also endeared the G minor Piano Quartet to the Viennese public.

Clara Schumann, pianist at the composition's première in Hamburg in November 1861, was unconvinced by its overall conception: 'The Quartet only partially satisfies me,' she confided to her diary; 'there is too little unity in the first movement, and the emotion of the Adagio is too forced, without really carrying me away. But I love the Allegretto in C minor and the last movement.' It appears that Brahms followed Clara's advice and reframed the second movement, which he originally intended as a scherzo, as an *Intermezzo*, a strategy which he later recalled in three of his four symphonies.

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