

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 29 January 2023  
7.30pm

Elisabeth Leonskaja piano  
Staatskapelle Streichquartett  
Wolfram Brandl violin  
Krzysztof Specjal violin  
Yulia Deyneka viola  
Claudius Popp cello

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Quartet No. 3 in C minor Op. 60 (1855-75)  
*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Scherzo. Allegro •  
III. Andante • IV. Finale. Allegro comodo*

Interval

Piano Quintet in F minor Op. 34 (1862 rev. 1864)  
*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Andante, un poco adagio •  
III. Scherzo. Allegro • IV. Finale. Poco sostenuto -  
Allegro non troppo*



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**Johannes Brahms** put a lot of effort into cultivating the image of a brusque, unapproachable man. He had no tolerance of pomposity, or of people who were unwanted distractions. He was as unwilling to be interrupted during the hours he set aside for playing cards as he was protective of his time for composing. But beneath it all he was an acutely sensitive man, a considerate and generous person to have as a friend – if he liked and respected you.

Those granted access to his inner circle had the privilege of hearing early versions of his works tried out in a domestic setting, with comments and suggestions invited. Thus it was that in the mid-1850s Brahms and his friend the composer and violinist Joseph Joachim played through a three-movement piano quartet in C sharp minor. A few months later it was heard again, but with the *adagio* slow movement replaced by an *andante*, the substitution greatly impressing Clara Schumann. But the work went back into Brahms's drawer. A dozen-or-so years later the composer showed the manuscript to Hermann Dieters, his biographer, describing its character thus: 'Think of a man about to shoot himself, for that's his only option.'

The remark was typically bluff humour, but perhaps the piece did reflect inner turmoil. The mid-1850s were the time when Brahms, barely out of his teens, found himself having to run the Schumann household. Robert had been confined to an asylum while Clara, his wife and mother to his seven children, had become the subject of infatuation for Brahms. The first movement of the Quartet, the one that most completely survived subsequent revisions, obsesses over a two-note phrase that could well cry 'Clara', while her name is further spelt out in one of the musical motifs that Robert Schumann used to address her in his own works.

For whatever reason the work remained a private matter until 1873, when it was extensively reworked. The home key was dropped a semitone to C minor; a *Scherzo* appeared, possibly crafted from the original finale. The last two movements are an *Andante* (the one Clara had admired, or a different one?) and an entirely new *Finale*. The black humour resurfaced when Brahms sent the completed Quartet to his publisher, Fritz Simrock, this time with the suggestion that the cover should depict a man holding a pistol to his head. He quipped that he could supply a photo of himself in the pose, dressed up as Werther, Goethe's tortured hero who kills himself over unrequited love.

So, with a gestation time of more than 20 years, the C minor Piano Quartet has claims to be both the first and last of Brahms's three essays in the genre. The first movement accords with the violent mood swings that the young Brahms must have had to endure in the 1850s. Its fatalistic ending is alleviated to some extent by the sheer dynamism of the *Scherzo*, though this is by no means light-hearted music. A note of consolation is sounded in the *Andante*: but is this

fulfilment, or do the duetting cello and violin represent an unachievable dream of lovers united? The violin's opening tune in the *Finale* recalls Brahms's song 'Regenlied' whose opus number, 59, immediately precedes the Quartet's. Its text laments that youth's openness to emotion can no longer be embraced.

Brahms's F minor Piano Quintet is a work of such surging emotion that one might think it was composed rapidly in the white heat of inspiration. Nothing could be further from the truth. Its first three movements were completed by August 1862, in a version for string quintet – the standard quartet plus a second cello, as found in Schubert's great Quintet – and sent to none other than Joseph Joachim and Clara Schumann for comment. As well as being pre-eminent performers on their respective instruments, Joachim and Schumann were accomplished composers, and Brahms valued their opinions. He also had the strength of conviction to disregard their suggestions when necessary.

Whatever counsel he received from his friends and colleagues, by February of the following year the work had become a four-movement Sonata for two pianos, in which form it was played in Vienna by the composer in tandem with the Liszt pupil Karl Tausig. It met with little enthusiasm, and Clara begged Brahms to recast the piece yet again. This, Brahms considered, was advice worth taking. He also took on board a recommendation from the conductor Hermann Levi, who suggested that the ideal instrumentation would be piano and string quartet. By the end of the summer of 1864 the F minor Piano Quintet had arrived at its final, magnificent form.

It begins in a mood of melancholy contemplation, but soon a headlong rush breaks in. During this first movement we encounter bittersweet, lilting nostalgia in passages resembling remembered café music; rumblings in the piano bass like those of a distant storm; moments of gentle playfulness, of questioning doubt and of blazing anger. The mood at the end could be a cry of pain or of defiance – or both.

After such turbulence, consolation is needed, and it comes in the form of a Schubertian *Andante*. A tender, rocking motion pervades even when the music becomes rhythmically complex. The pulse quickens for the magnificent *Scherzo*, which combines a hint of slightly fearful anticipation with ecstatic outbursts – there is even a sense of panic in the climax before the more lyrical trio. Then, following a sombre introduction, the *Finale's Allegro* begins in (perhaps inevitably) the minor key. There is, however, plenty of positive vigour about this movement. Contrasting episodes provide diversion without weakening the absolute determination to confront fate head on.

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