

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 2 February 2022 7.30pm
Michael Collins 60th Birthday Concert

Michael Collins clarinet

Michael McHale piano

Isabelle van Keulen violin

Laura Samuel violin

Philip Dukes viola

Kristina Blaumane cello



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

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*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Clarinet Quintet in A K581 (1789)

I. Allegro • II. Larghetto • III. Menuetto • IV. Allegretto con variazioni

Interval

Robin Holloway (b.1943)

Romanza and Scherzo (in the style of Brahms) (2022) (world première)
Co-commissioned by Wigmore Hall

Johannes Brahms

Clarinet Quintet in B minor Op. 115 (1891)

I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Andantino • IV. Con moto

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Each of the works in tonight's concert was written in tribute to a particular clarinettist. Mozart penned his Clarinet Quintet in A K581 for a Viennese collaborator and fellow Mason, Anton Stadler. **Brahms**, on the other hand, might well have thought he was done with composing until he heard the nightingale-like playing of the Meiningen-based Richard Mühlfeld. The encounter inspired a new Clarinet Trio Op. 114 and the Quintet Op. 115 that we hear at the end of this evening's concert, as well as the Sonata that opens the programme (and its companion). And, fittingly, for this 60th birthday concert there is also a new commission to pay tribute to tonight's clarinettist – as well as to the music of Brahms.

Mozart settled in Vienna in 1781, where he worked as a freelance musician. As such, he had to secure relationships with various patrons and peers, including the court clarinettists Anton and Johann Stadler. Anton formed a particularly close attachment and performed Mozart's Trio in E flat 'Kegelstatt' K498 in 1786, as well as playing with his brother in Mozart's operas. While Anton was not always reliable in matters monetary – much to the composer's annoyance – he could not be faulted as an instrumentalist and was hugely interested in enhancing the clarinet's range, aided by Lodz, the court instrument maker. It was doubtless for the resulting 'basset clarinet', with a chromatic extension of a major third, that Mozart composed the Quintet in 1789 and, certainly, the Clarinet Concerto K622 during his final months.

Finely wrought lyricism characterises both, though the initial, hymn-like reserve of the Quintet, with strings moving in contrary motion, is soon answered by clarinet exuberance. Likewise, the second subject, led by the first violin, may seem introverted, though an underlying cheerfulness again bursts through. As in the languid *Adagio* of the later Concerto, the *Larghetto* is the heart of the Quintet and features a particularly ravishing melody. The thematic honours are then shared more equally in the *Menuetto* and its two intervening Trios, before the forces come together for the Finale, with a pert theme and five flowing variations.

A hundred years later, during the 1880s, Brahms developed a fruitful working relationship with the Meiningen Court Orchestra. His purpose was to try out new works, before official premières elsewhere. In thanks, the composer mounted the first performance of his Fourth Symphony in Meiningen in 1885, as well as touring with the musicians. It was on an 1891 trip to the Thuringian town that Brahms was properly introduced to principal clarinettist Richard Mühlfeld, who had begun his career as a violinist, even playing for Wagner at Bayreuth. In 1877, he made his debut in Meiningen, giving a performance of Weber's Clarinet Concerto, which led to a permanent contract. Brahms was utterly beguiled by Mühlfeld's playing and a rewarding partnership quickly developed.

Unlike Stadler, Mühlfeld did not have the same penchant for innovations, though he certainly had detailed discussions with Brahms about the various different types of clarinet. Significantly, all the works written for Mühlfeld were conceived with the richer, more honeyed tone of the A clarinet in mind, including the Trio and Quintet of 1891, followed three years later by the two Op. 120 sonatas. We hear the first from that pair.

F minor often denotes storminess in Brahms's work, as told here by a bold unison introduction from the piano and a leaping clarinet theme. Syncopation then destabilises the metre, before the piano returns to the tonic for another intense exchange. Eventually, the music moves to D flat major for a more subdued theme, though the sense of calm is brief and even more challenging dialogues arise, not least during the recapitulation.

The *Andante*, in A flat major, is more reserved, though it too has an unpredictable streak, as does the waltzing third movement, with its renewed hints of F minor. The rapid, major-key Rondo-Finale tries to shrug off these insecurities, with the piano taking the lead. And after passing through various keys, one last thematic statement duly quells the storm.

If the Sonata often evokes the scudding clouds of autumn, the Quintet is more a 'close bosom-friend of the maturing sun'. There is also a sense of kinship with Mozart's earlier example, with Brahms's beguiling thirds drawing on the music of his spirited *Allegro*. Here, however, the ululating thirds presage a more restive tone, with syncopations, a highly variegated harmonic palette and accented exchanges. Lament this Quintet may be, though it is never languid.

Even the poised *Adagio* is filled with rhythmic discrepancies and dissonances, before turning more Hungarian, with hints of the *csárdás*, as well as evocative string tremolandos. Spryer by far is the *Andantino*, where, despite agitated undercurrents, a sense of cheer proves more tenacious. Finally, the *Con moto* comprises another sequence of variations, again following Mozart's example, albeit with a rather self-effacing theme. And unlike Mozart's perky Allegretto, Brahms continues in a more melancholy vein, framed by the pensive thirds with which the work began.

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Before this comes Robin Holloway's commission 'in the style of Brahms'. It is described here by the composer:

It was a pleasure to be asked to write a piece to celebrate such a fine artist as Michael Collins, and to have him play it on his 60th birthday. The title, *Romanza and Scherzo*, shows two sides of the player, and the form of the music. The clarinet initiates with a 'romantic' phrase, then the piano answers with a snatch of 'scherzo': they continue to converse upon these shapes; then the piano has a more continuous lyric passage, the clarinet commenting before setting out in the opposite mood – vivacious and sparky, the scherzo now fully worked up to a first climax. It cools into a broad melody – romantic again, but new, shared by participants previously argumentative or rivalrous – the piece's heart. The scherzo is resumed, going different ways, subsiding via brief recall of the piano's first lyric while the clarinet waits, to have the closing words as at the opening – its germinal cantabile phrase, then the germinal perky phrase, now also cantabile, fused into one for cadencing repose.

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