

# WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 30 October 2024  
7.30pm

This concert is dedicated to the Wigmore Ensemble

## Wigmore Soloists

Isabelle van Keulen violin  
Rachel Roberts viola  
Steffan Morris cello  
Tim Gibbs double bass  
Emily Beynon flute  
Olivier Stankiewicz oboe  
Michael Collins clarinet  
Jonathan Davies bassoon  
Alec Frank-Gemmill horn  
Michael McHale piano

Louis Spohr (1784-1859)

Nonet in F Op. 31 (1813)  
*I. Allegro • II. Scherzo. Allegro • III. Adagio •  
IV. Finale. Vivace*

Giovanni Bottesini (1821-1889)

Gran duo for clarinet, double bass and piano

*Interval*

Krzysztof Penderecki (1933-2020)

Duo concertante (2010)

George Onslow (1784-1853)

Nonet Op. 77 (1848)  
*I. Allegro spiritoso • II. Scherzo. Agitato •  
III. Tema con variazioni. Andantino con moto •  
IV. Finale. Largo - Allegretto quasi Allegro*

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During his lifetime **Spohr** was favourably compared with Mendelssohn and Weber, but his reputation declined following his death. Nevertheless, Wagner described him as 'worthy of the highest honour', while Donald Tovey wrote that 'his sense of beauty is such as only an unhealthy taste will despise'. Today one may hear only a very occasional performance or recording – perhaps one of his 15 violin concertos, four clarinet concertos, 10 symphonies or four double quartets for strings. His freshest inspiration is found in works written before the mid-1840s. It was in Vienna, during his two-year period (1813-5) as orchestral director of the Theater an der Wien, that Spohr wrote many of his finest compositions. Soon after taking up this position Spohr was approached by Johann Tost, a wealthy cloth-merchant for whom Haydn had composed several string quartets. Tost proposed that Spohr should write a succession of chamber works, of which he himself would take sole possession for three years before returning them to the composer. His eccentric scale of payments would be in direct proportion to the number of instruments involved. After completing two string quartets, Spohr asked Tost what kind of work he would prefer next, and the Nonet Op. 31 was the result. This attractive piece, completed in 1813, and the Octet Op. 32 are his most popular compositions. Although previous composers had written for a group of nine players – a rare combination – Spohr's Op. 31 is believed to be the very first piece actually called a 'nonet'.

The work begins with a violin melody (marked *dolce*), the first four notes of which prominently reappear in modified form in various other themes throughout the work. Complementing this craftsmanship is Spohr's fluent melodic style, while his apparent delight in the diverse instrumental textures offered by the combination of strings and wind accords with Tost's specific request to bring out the character of each instrument. Indeed, this kind of unusual combination often provided Spohr with special creative stimulus. Spohr's own virtuosity on the violin is reflected in some brilliant passages, particularly in the opening movement. The compact D minor *Scherzo* has two trios, the first of which is dominated by the violin. From its hymn-like beginning the slow movement develops into florid decorative writing of considerable eloquence. The vivacious and witty *Finale* concludes this consistently engaging work, one which perfectly demonstrates those qualities which contemporaries admired in Spohr.

Born in Crema, Lombardy, **Bottesini** became such a virtuoso performer that he was internationally known as 'the Paganini of the double bass', while as a conductor he was chosen by Verdi for the première of *Aida*. His many compositions for the double bass include two concertos. The *Gran duo* (unpublished until the 1950s) has several sections, beginning with an allegro which includes a very brief cadenza-like passage for each instrument. The following adagio, again including a few bars which suggest a cadenza-like freedom, leads to a lyrical andante in which both instruments are equally favoured.

Bottesini concludes with a brilliant allegro which demands agility across the full ranges of both instruments. The phenomenal melodic writing for double bass indicates how Bottesini drastically elevated its status as a solo instrument.

**Penderecki** composed five operas, eight symphonies, four string quartets, more than a dozen concertos and much religious choral music. Among his best-known works are *Threnody for the victims of Hiroshima*, *St Luke Passion* and *Polish Requiem*. In the latter half of his career Penderecki turned away from his avant-garde style and adopted a traditional musical language, saying that he was no longer 'the angry young man I used to be'.

Commissioned by the Anne Sophie Mutter Foundation, his rhapsodic *Duo concertante* dates from 2010. Its opening section, marked 'like a cadenza', leads to an allegretto scherzando of skittish character, before the violin introduces a five-note melodic figure. Eventually Penderecki recalls the cadenza-like style of the opening, then the scherzo-like passage. Special effects include banging the double bass with the hand and knee.

Descended from English nobility, **George Onslow** was born in France to a French mother and an English father. He differs from other French composers of his time in his preoccupation with instrumental music rather than opera, although he did also write four operas. From 1808 he studied with Anton Reicha. His chamber music includes 36 string quartets, 34 string quintets and 10 piano trios. His Nonet of 1848 begins with a movement characterised by an abundant melodic gift and an engaging vitality. Throughout the work, Onslow – like Spohr in his Nonet – occasionally treats his strings and wind as separate groups. From as early as bar 3 he demands of his players nimble agility in rapid passages, while the syncopation which soon becomes prominent in the accompaniment contributes to the restless feeling. However, the second main theme has a contrastingly broader character.

The following *Scherzo* maintains the high energy level of the previous movement, together with some fiery temperament, though the trio section in A major is more lyrical. The third movement is a large-scale set of variations on an easy-going theme in F major. The first variation is based on witty exchanges between wind and pizzicato strings. In the gentler Variation 2 all the strings are muted, then the following variation favours decorative writing for clarinet and bassoon. In Variation 4 the three upper strings in turn have busy embellishments of the theme before a minor-key variation concludes the movement. The *Finale* is a rondo beginning with a short introduction creating a sense of expectancy. The main rondo theme is in a leisurely 6/8, whereas the contrasting episodes and development are characterised by lively figuration. A coda (*vivace molto*) of more urgency ends this fine work. Hoping to enhance his profile in England, Onslow dedicated his Nonet to Prince Albert.

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