

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 31 January 2022 7.30pm

Schubert's Birthday

Francesco Piemontesi piano

Alexi Kenney violin

Daniel Müller-Schott cello

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Arpeggione Sonata in A minor D821 (1824)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Adagio • III. Allegretto*

Violin Sonata (Sonatina) in D D384 (1816)

*I. Allegro molto • II. Andante • III. Allegro vivace*

Interval

Piano Trio No. 2 in E flat D929 (1827)

*I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto •*

*III. Scherzo. Allegro moderato • IV. Allegro moderato*

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It is ironic that a work which long eclipsed **Schubert's** string quartets in popularity should have been composed for such an oddball instrument. The arpeggione – or, as it was usually called, 'guitar-violoncello' – was dreamed up by one Johann Georg Stauffer. As its name suggests, it was a hybrid: like a guitar, it had six strings and a fretted fingerboard, but was held between the knees and bowed like a cello.

One of the few people to have mastered the arpeggione was the Viennese guitarist Vincenz Schuster, a regular at the soirees held by Schubert's old friend Ignaz Sonnleithner. In the autumn of 1824 Schuster asked Schubert for a sonata, which duly became his party piece. By 1871, when the sonata was published, the arpeggione was virtually obsolete and its part adapted for cello.

Without probing any depths, the 'Arpeggione' is delightful, stress-free Schubert – an ideal birthday aperitif. The piano opens with a tune that may have been in Schumann's mind when he created the germinal theme of his piano concerto. But from the moment the cello repeats the melody, the piano retreats into the background. The leisurely first movement contrasts the plaintive opening theme with a skittering tune in popular style, fashioned to display the arpeggione's modest virtuosity.

The long-spanned theme of the *Adagio* reminds us that Beethoven's Second was a favourite symphony of Schubert's. Towards the end the music seems to become mesmerised. Then, without a break, the rondo glides in with a tune in Schubert's most genial vein, before whisking us to the wild Hungarian *puszta*.

The years 1815 and 1816 alone should scotch the myth of Schubert the feckless, happy-go-lucky Bohemian. Working as a reluctant teacher at his father's school, he supplemented his paltry income by giving private music lessons. He played the viola in the orchestra that had grown out of his family's string quartet; and he somehow found time to compose a phenomenal quantity of music, including four symphonies (Nos. 2-5), three masses, chamber works, sonatas, four one-act operas and over 250 solo songs.

Although Schubert quickly found his own voice in song, the instrumental works of these years reveal his reverence for the Classical Trinity of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Mozart, above all, was his idol. After hearing one of his string quintets Schubert wrote in his diary: 'As from afar, the magic notes of Mozart's music still gently haunt me...O Mozart, immortal Mozart, how many comforting glimpses of a brighter, better life have you brought into our souls.'

Mozart's spirit suffuses the three violin sonatas composed in March and April 1816. When they appeared in 1836, eight years after Schubert's death, they were advertised as 'sonatinas', doubtless to lure the lucrative amateur market. Yet only the D major Sonata, D384 – shortest and simplest of the three – justifies the diminutive.

Schubert seems to have modelled the opening theme, played first in unison then in free imitation between violin and piano left hand, on Mozart's great E minor Sonata, K304. But Schubert's compact movement is far more amiable, even naïve, not least in its jaunty

second theme. The gracefully Mozartian outer sections of the *Andante* enclose a plaintive song for violin, while the finale alternates a bounding refrain with episodes featuring bouts of mock-severe counterpoint.

The romantic myth of Schubert's neglect dies hard. With the championship of the baritone Johann Michael Vogl, his fame as a song composer grew rapidly after the publication of 'Erkönig' in 1821. His songs, partsongs and piano miniatures were in healthy demand among publishers. In 1827 Schubert was elected to the committee of the Vienna Philharmonic Society, and had every reason to look forward optimistically. Although suffering intermittently from fits of nausea, he led an active social life, dominated by musical parties and readings at the home of his friend Franz von Schober.

Significantly, too, Schubert organised a benefit concert in the hall of the Vienna Philharmonic Society entirely devoted to his own music. Held on 26 March 1828, the anniversary of Beethoven's death, the concert was a huge success. 'I shall never forget how glorious it was', wrote one of Schubert's friends. 'Enormous applause. Good receipts.' 'Everyone was lost in a frenzy of admiration and rapture', noted another friend.

The concert's centrepiece was the E flat Piano Trio, D929, composed the previous winter. Reviewing Schubert's two trios, Robert Schumann characterised the B flat as 'passive' and 'feminine', in contrast to the 'spirited', 'dramatic' and 'masculine' E flat Trio. Ignoring what to us is laughable sexism, it is hard to see how he could have found the E flat Trio 'more spirited' than its predecessor. It is, though, a more serious, far-reaching work. The assertive opening bars suggest Beethoven. But rather than exploiting their dynamic potential, as Beethoven would have done, Schubert builds the movement largely on an apparently incidental figure first heard on the cello. This later expands into a yearning theme which then spawns vast lyric sequences at the movement's centre.

The *Andante* opens with a haunting 'walking' theme (with shades of *Winterreise*) based on a Swedish folksong which Schubert had heard at a friend's house. At the movement's heart is a volcanic, quasi-orchestral eruption, typical of Schubert's late slow movements. Poised between a Classical minuet and a Romantic intermezzo, the third movement opens as a strict but amiable canon, with the strings imitating the piano at a bar's interval.

Launched by a relaxed, lolling tune, the finale is a huge and – even with the composer's later cuts – sprawling sonata structure. In the faintly exotic second theme, strings and piano in turn imitate a dulcimer or cimbalom. Then comes a master-stroke: a recall of the 'Swedish' theme from the slow movement, in a far-distant key. Schubert cannot resist reintroducing this theme in the coda, where it moves triumphantly from minor to major. The upshot is one of the earliest instances of 'cyclic form' beloved of so many 19th-century composers.

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