

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 31 January 2024
7.30pm

Schubert Birthday Concert

Esther Hoppe violin
Christian Poltéra cello
Ronald Brautigam fortepiano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Trio No. 1 in B flat D898 (?1827)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante un poco mosso •
III. Scherzo. Allegro • IV. Rondo. Allegro vivace - Presto*

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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On 26 March 1828 Schubert held a concert consisting entirely of his own music at Vienna's *Musikverein* - the only event of its kind to take place in his lifetime. The programme contained choral music and songs, as well as the opening movement of a string quartet (almost certainly the G major D887), and a 'new' piano trio performed by Josef Böhm (the leader of the quartet concerts in Vienna during Ignaz Schuppanzigh's absence in Russia), Josef Linke (Schuppanzigh's regular cellist), and the pianist Carl Maria von Bocklet.

In the previous month Schubert had received a letter from the publishers Schott & Co. of Mainz, inviting him to submit some of his music, and Schubert responded with a long list of works including a piano trio 'which has been performed here with much applause'. From the autograph score of the **Trio in E flat D929** we know that it was completed in November 1827. The work was performed on 26 December that year, by Schuppanzigh, Linke and Bocklet. The same artists gave a second performance the following month, at a *Schubertiade* given in the house of the composer's friend Josef von Spaun. It can only have been this work that Schubert offered to Schott the following February.

It was another of Schubert's friends, Leopold von Sonnleithner, who confidently identified the trio performed at Schubert's concert of 26 March 1828 as having been the one in E flat, and his recollection has generally been accepted. However, it is unlikely that Schubert would have repeated the same piece yet again at a concert consisting almost entirely of new compositions, and we need to take into account the fact that Sonnleithner, writing several decades after the event, could not even remember which string quartet movement had been included in the programme.

The whole question of the chronology of Schubert's two trios is complicated by the fact that on the very same day that Schott wrote to him, another German publisher, Heinrich Probst of Leipzig, sent him a request for pieces that were, as he said, 'not too hard to grasp'. Schubert answered both publishers on 10 April. To Schott he offered the trio 'that was played in front of a tightly packed hall in my concert, with extraordinary applause', asking 100 florins for it. To Probst, he merely mentioned the trio's success. Even so, it was Probst who was eager to publish the trio, and Schubert found himself in a potential dilemma. Did he hurriedly write a new trio for Probst, having offered the one in E flat to Schott? Or was Sonnleithner mistaken in thinking that the work performed at the concert of March 1828 had been the one in E flat, when it had actually been the B flat major? The truth is that the **B flat Trio D898** is one of Schubert's few large-scale masterpieces about whose origin we know virtually nothing, and the possibility that he composed it in the early months of 1828, especially for his concert in March that year, cannot be ruled out.

As things turned out, Schott rejected the E flat trio, on the grounds that it was 'probably large', and that they had recently published several works of its kind, and so Probst was free to issue it. Schubert managed to correct the proofs of his edition, but by the time the publication was announced, on 11 December, he had been dead for three weeks.

While the autograph score of Schubert's B flat trio has long since been lost, in the case of its companion we have not only the composer's final manuscript, but also his working draft of the first three movements. The latter is a fascinating document, and it shows how radically Schubert altered some of the music's details as he worked. In the case of the opening movement his most far-reaching modification was to change the key in which the *pianissimo* second theme appears, from F sharp minor to B minor. The repeated-note rhythm of this theme casts its shadow over the entire work; and it is in the key of B minor that Schubert much later introduces one of his most profound surprises: the return of the slow movement's theme during the course of the finale. In no other work in discrete movements did Schubert bring into play a similar use of cyclic form.

According to Sonnleithner, Schubert based the slow movement's theme on a Swedish folk melody he had heard sung by a young tenor from Stockholm named Isak Berg. Schubert's draft of the *Andante* shows that following the opening theme, the order of material in the piece was later changed: the *fortissimo* outburst based on the rhythm of the dropping octave punctuating the main theme had originally preceded the calm dialogue between violin and cello, with its smoothly rippling piano accompaniment, but the definitive version, sustaining as it does the subdued atmosphere of the movement's beginning for considerably longer, is infinitely more effective.

The third movement is not as scherzo, as it had been in the B flat trio, but a more relaxed piece whose theme is presented in canon throughout. The second half of the more energetic trio section introduces the repeated-note figure that had loomed so large in the trio's opening movement.

The finale is conceived on a scale which even by Schubert's standards is remarkably expansive. So worried was he about its length that he left posterity with a Brucknerian problem: not only did he strike out the repeat of the exposition, but he also marked two substantial cuts in the development section. The first of these, in particular, contained some splendid writing which Schubert can only have sacrificed with a heavy heart. All the same, he reserved his most uplifting inspiration for the coda, where the theme of the slow movement makes a last reappearance, its transformation from the minor into the major serving only to increase its fervour.

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