

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 5 May 2025
1.00pm

Sitkovetsky Trio

Alexander Sitkovetsky violin

Isang Enders cello

Wu Qian piano

Eivind Ringstad viola

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Trio in D Op. 70 No. 1 'Ghost' (1808)

I. Allegro vivace e con brio

II. Largo assai ed espressivo

III. Presto

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor Op. 15 (1876-9, rev. 1883)

I. Allegro molto moderato

II. Scherzo. Allegro vivo

III. Adagio

IV. Allegro molto



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Ludwig van Beethoven composed his two Op. 70 Trios (in D major and in E flat major) in 1808, escaping the city of Vienna to stay at the suburban estate of his patron and friend Countess Marie Erdödy. He dedicated the pair to Erdödy but changed his mind following a misunderstanding: the well-meaning Erdödy had secretly been paying Beethoven's servant a bonus for putting up with his difficult boss, but Beethoven mistook the payment as evidence of some kind of liaison between the two. The composer wrote to his publisher requesting the dedication be cancelled but his letter arrived too late for the change to be made.

The Op. 70 Trios fall into Beethoven's so-called middle period, during which his works took on a more expansive form and heroic expression. Notable in his output at this time are the 'Eroica' and Fifth Symphonies, the 'rescue' opera *Fidelio*, the three Op. 59 string quartets, and the 'Waldstein' and 'Appassionata' piano sonatas. The year ended with the monster benefit concert on 22 December for Beethoven at the Theater an der Wien, which saw the premières of the Fifth and Sixth symphonies, the Piano Concerto No. 4 and the *Choral Fantasy*.

The unanimous, explosive opening of the Op. 70 No. 1 Trio quickly gives way to a lyrical tune passed collegially between the instruments. Both these elements seep through the development section, as does the almost obsessive repetition of rhythmic fragments – a feature of the Fifth Symphony's first movement. There's no shortage of drama here, but nothing to prepare us for the darker, quasi-supernatural realm of the second movement (*Largo assai ed espressivo*) – both elemental and mysterious. For Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny (best known today as an inveterate writer of piano exercises), this movement conjured up the image of Banquo's ghost in *Macbeth*, hence the trio's nickname. With its diminished-seventh arpeggios and hushed tremolo writing, especially for piano, there is a sense of the gothic. As the writer and critic ETA Hoffmann noted, 'It is as though the master thought that, in speaking of deep, mysterious things ... one may not use ordinary language, only a sublime and glorious one.' The finale sweeps aside the darkness, shifting to an altogether easier-going mood that combines playfulness with individual virtuoso brilliance.

Just as Beethoven's 'Ghost' Trio to some degree owes its existence to a kind benefactor, so **Gabriel Fauré** composed his Piano Quartet No. 1 during summers on the Normandy coast, staying at the holiday residence of the wealthy industrialist Camille Clerc and his wife Marie. By this time, in the 1870s, the composer had returned to Paris, having left his organ post in Rennes (Brittany) and served in the Franco-Prussian War (for which he was awarded a Croix de Guerre). Through his teacher and lifelong friend Camille Saint-Saëns, Fauré had become a founding member of the Société Nationale de Musique Française, the concert series designed to promote French music. As an organist, he had deputised for Charles-Marie Widor at the Church of Saint-Sulpice and in 1877 he became choirmaster at La Madeleine. The

same year saw the successful première of his Violin Sonata at a Société Nationale concert, signalling his maturity. Composed in 1876-9, Fauré's Piano Quartet falls into the same group of works, as does the *Ballade* for piano. Alongside his rising career, Fauré was also dealing with the disappointment of his fiancée Marianne Viardot (daughter of the soprano and salon hostess Pauline Viardot) having broken off their engagement, after only four months. It seems that Viardot had been intimidated by the strength of the composer's passion for her. Fauré would later marry but there were nearly always significant others of one type or another – not least the singer Emma Bardac, who later became Debussy's second wife. Women were as much attracted to Fauré as vice versa, given his swarthy looks and personal charm. Fauré's friend, the critic Camille Bellaigue, recalled: 'Very tanned of face, with dark eyes and hair, he had a dreamy, melancholy air, illuminated now and then by the youthful twinkle of a street-urchin.'

The Piano Quartet No. 1's first movement opens with a strident theme, unanimous in the strings and punctuated by offbeat piano chords. Straightforward – even four-square – as it at first seems, it in fact conceals a subtly unsettling rhythmic asymmetry. The theme quickly rises to a peak before returning, this time with more easy-going part-writing in the strings and rippling piano accompaniment. The viola sets off the more flowing second theme. Later the piano borrows the rugged opening idea but transforms it into a more wistful and reflective mood, with the help of a lilting triplet pattern. The recapitulation reintroduces the two main themes again, but only at the end of the movement is the ruggedness of the first theme softened, those granitic offbeat chords of the accompaniment also being quelled.

Fauré placed the *Scherzo* second rather than third in the movement order. It is lightly prancing and delightfully playful with its airy plucked strings, combining innocent optimism with a cheeky wink. In the central Trio section the strings feign an attempt at decorum but this is corrupted by the ever-teasing piano writing. It's no surprise that, after the première, the *Revue et Gazette Musicale* commented on this movement's grace and delicacy.

One of Fauré's most haunting slow movements, the *Adagio* may have been coloured by the despair Fauré experienced following his wrecked engagement but even so the expression seems directed inwardly. There is no anger or self-pity but rather a touching sense of serene acceptance.

Fauré completely rewrote his original finale before publication. It begins with an ebullient, upwards-surgingly theme and a fast-rippling accompaniment that barely subsides, even with the arrival of a more lyrical idea, first heard on viola. There is some sumptuous writing but the overall impression is of brilliant virtuosity.

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