WIGMORE HALL

Friday 6 June 2025
7.30pm

Wigmore Soloists

Alexander Sitkovetsky violin
Sini Simonen violin
Rachel Roberts viola
Steffan Morris cello
Tim Posner cello
Tim Gibbs double bass
Michael Collins clarinet
Robin O'Neill bassoon
Alberto Menéndez Escribano horn

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quintet in C D956 (1828)
I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Adagio •
III. Scherzo. Presto – Trio. Andante sostenuto • IV. Allegretto

Interval

Octet in F D803 (1824)
I. Adagio – Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegro vivace • IV. Andante •
V. Menuetto. Allegretto • VI. Andante molto – Allegro

CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust www.cavatina.net

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On 25 September 1828, Schubert moved lodgings – on doctor's orders – to the fresh air of his brother's house in the Viennese suburb of Neue Wieden. A week later, on 2 October, he wrote to the publisher Probst that 'I have composed, among other things, three Sonatas for pianoforte solo … and finally turned out a Quintet for 2 violins, 1 viola and 2 violoncellos … If perchance any of these compositions would suit you, let me know'.

Somewhere around this time, it's known that Schubert played the viola in a performance of Beethoven's Quartet in C sharp minor, Op. 131 – and that it sent him 'into such transports of delight and enthusiasm that all feared for him'. He took a walking tour with three friends to Haydn's grave at Eisenstadt; but on 31 October his health took a turn for the worse. On 4 November he booked a course of counterpoint lessons with the composer Simon Sechter; a fortnight later, he was dead. His unpublished manuscripts were sold, ten days later, to the publisher Diabelli & Co – who did nothing with the Quintet until it was premièred, on 17 November 1850 by Georg Hellmesberger's string quartet. It was finally published in 1853, with the designation Op. 163.

So we're unlikely to find any first-hand explanation of why Schubert chose to write for the unusual combination of string quartet plus a second cello. C major is traditionally the brightest and sunniest of keys – but the brighter the sunlight, the darker and more pronounced the shadows. Within the quintet's very first chord there's chill, as a minor-key cloud obscures that sun. The two cellos, in octaves, form a sonorous bass as the *Allegro* finally takes hold; bars later, they unfold the glorious, singing melody of the second subject as the sweetest imaginable tenor duet. When in the recapitulation the duet returns, the viola, duskier and cooler, has taken the place of the second cello. Barely perceptibly, the shadows are lengthening.

In the *Adagio*, violin, viola and cello sustain their rapt, endless song as if hovering in mid-air; barely tethered to earth by the second cello's pizzicato below and the birdlike fragments of melody far above. It's almost too fragile to withstand the pain that Schubert throws at it in the movement's violent central section. A pounding hunting-*scherzo* suddenly halts for a *Trio* section of a near-static solemnity. And a jaunty dance-tune *finale* slows to near-immobility, as the matched pairs of instruments languish in bittersweet descending phrases. Schubert ends with one final ambiguity. His very last expression mark, written over the final note, was scrawled in such a way that it could be either an accent, or a diminuendo. Defiant shout or dying fall? It's forever open to the interpreters.

Young composers can't help but show their influences, and even in his greatest instrumental music it's never hard to guess what was at the back of Schubert's mind (and sometimes not even at the back). Yet the more obvious the imitation, the more utterly distinctive the results. In February 1824, when Ferdinand, Count Ferdinand von Troyer, a nobleman in the service of Beethoven's patron Archduke Rudolf, and a keen amateur clarinettist, commissioned from Schubert a work 'exactly like Beethoven's Septet', Schubert made no protest. He simply wrote, in barely four weeks, the single largest instrumental work he ever completed – 'with the greatest enthusiasm' noted his friend Moritz von Schwind.

To be fair, it was hardly a commission that an ambitious (and poor) composer could afford to spurn. Beethoven's Septet Op. 20 (1800) was one of the most successful works of its time, and an enduring source of income for its composer. Troyer's connections were impressive, and the performers he engaged to play the piece were equally influential, including Ignaz Schuppanzigh's string quartet and the bassist Josef Melzer. Troyer himself intended to play the clarinet part.

So the work that Troyer's invited guests heard that evening in March 1824 was indeed a piece almost 'exactly like Beethoven's Septet'. Schubert followed Beethoven's six movement layout almost to the note, adding only a second violin to Beethoven's line-up of string trio, bass, clarinet, horn and bassoon. Where Beethoven used a Rhenish popular song as the theme for his variation movement, Schubert borrows a melody from his own unperformed 1815 singspiel *Die Freunde von Salamanka* (though it's unlikely that anyone would have recognised it).

And yet Beethoven's work feels like the product of a powerful but firmly classical sensibility, barely a generation removed from the *divertimenti* of Mozart. Schubert's, by contrast, is a Romantic landscape, with an unmistakably open-air sensibility – usually sunny but not without distant rumbles of thunder. The eight players cease to be virtuosi in an elegant drawing room, and become friends – conversing, joking, sharing confidences. The brilliant violin writing and leaping, yodelling clarinet and horn parts are the spontaneous outpourings of a composer being wholly himself, as is the sheer, freewheeling freshness of so much of this music. The jaunty *Andante* and its eight variations; the galloping hunting-horn *scherzo*, and the exuberant *moto perpetuo* of the *finale* are as irresistibly Schubertian as the moments of high Romantic poetry, like the opening melody of the *Adagio* (an unambiguous compliment to Troyer) and the atmospheric slow introductions to the outer moments.

Equally Schubertian, sadly, was the Octet's fate. It wasn't heard in public until 16 April 1827, when Schuppanzigh organised a performance at the *Rote Igel* (Red Hedgehog) in Vienna. The review in the Vienna *Theaterzeitung* was good, but came too late for Schubert, who'd already had the piece rejected by two publishers. When the Octet was finally published, in 1853, two movements were omitted, and the composer had been dead for nearly 25 years.

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