

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 6 March 2024
7.30pm

Veronika Eberle violin
Adrien La Marca viola
Quirine Viersen cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Trio in C minor Op. 9 No. 3 (1797-8)

*I. Allegro con spirito • II. Adagio con espressione
• III. Scherzo. Allegro molto e vivace • IV. Finale.
Presto*

Albert Roussel (1869-1937)

String Trio Op. 58 (1937)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Adagio • III. Allegro con
spirito*

Interval

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Divertimento in E flat K563 (1788)

*I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Menuetto. Allegretto •
IV. Andante • V. Menuetto. Allegretto • VI.
Allegro*

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The three string trios Op. 9 are **Beethoven's** first unmistakably mature string chamber works: individual in voice, symphonic in scope and written with an uncanny technical mastery. 'Worthy of the mature Beethoven in his finest works' wrote the musicologist Basil Lam, 'the wonderful string writing might be the result of a long tradition of trio composition'. While the sheer energy of Beethoven's inspiration sometimes seems to strain at the bounds of the form, his writing for the ensemble is unfailingly gratifying and superbly idiomatic.

The three Op. 9 trios form a satisfying set, with the exuberant G major Trio Op. 9 No. 1 and the graceful D major Op. 9 No. 2 preparing the ground – as Beethoven had done in his three Piano Trios Op. 1 – for a final work of startling individuality and power. The 'C minor mood' has become one of the great clichés of Beethoven scholarship; still, it comes as a jolt to hear such dark, urgent music in such an intimate medium. Violent double-stopped chords slash the texture; even the second subject of the sonata-form first *Allegro* is accompanied by restless semiquavers. That energy rears up again at the heart of the poised, Haydn-like *Adagio*, and drives a bucking *hexentanz* ('witches' dance') of a *Scherzo*, complete with deceptively innocent trio. And Beethoven's fooling no-one with the quiet C major pay-off to his whirling *Finale*.

It's a splendid achievement, and Beethoven knew that Op. 9 was something special. On completion of the three trios in March 1798 he dedicated them to Count Johann von Browne, one of his most generous early patrons in Vienna – a gesture that gave the composer, in his own words 'the rare satisfaction of presenting to the first Maecenas of my Muse, the best of my works'.

Albert Roussel abandoned his early musical ambitions and joined the French navy in 1889. He saw active service in Indochina and was promoted to Lieutenant in 1893. But below decks, his comrades were impressed both by his piano playing and his attempts at composing, and a fellow officer told Roussel that he'd secretly shown his manuscripts to a naval bandmaster, who'd recognised Roussel's talent. It wasn't true; but this kindly attempt to push Roussel towards his true vocation did the trick. In 1894 he resigned his commission, and four years later entered the Schola Cantorum in Paris to study composition. By 1902 he was Professor of Counterpoint, and went on to teach Satie, Varèse and Martinů.

Roussel bought himself a second home within sight of the sea, at Vasterival near Dieppe on the Normandy coast, and retreated there each summer to compose. The summer of 1937 would be his last: he died on 23 August. Just six weeks earlier, on 10 July, he had put the finishing touches to his final completed work – his String Trio Op. 58. He dedicated it to the Trio Pasquier, an ensemble comprising three Parisian brothers whose cellist, Étienne, would three years later find himself held as a prisoner of war with the young Olivier Messiaen.

He's remembered today as one of the three performers who inspired the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*.

Roussel, however, shunned the idea of music with a programme. 'What I would like to achieve is a music that is entirely self-contained, music that aims to free itself from any pictorial or descriptive element', he wrote. 'I want only to make pure music'. In the String Trio, two lucid and lively neo-classical movements frame a central *Adagio* which unquestionably pushes deeper and darker – but which the composer would have been the first to deny was any sort of a valediction. 'He was a complete artist – a musician, a thinker, a man', remembered his colleague Charles Koechlin – and the final bars of the String Trio are as spirited an assertion as can be imagined of wit, energy and life.

Mozart entered tonight's final work in his personal catalogue on 27 September 1788 as '*Ein Divertimento a 1 Violino, 1 Viola e Violoncello: di sei Pezzi*'. We know little more about its creation than that. But throughout that summer Mozart had been writing begging-letters to his brother-freemason Michael Puchberg. We know that almost none of Puchberg's loans were ever repaid. We know also that earlier that year Mozart had made music at Puchberg's house – as well as a merchant, Puchberg was a violinist – and promised him 'a new trio'. And we know, finally, that Mozart associated the key of E flat with the Craft.

If this work was Mozart's gesture of gratitude, then Puchberg was richly repaid: more than two centuries on the *Divertimento* stands as perhaps the greatest string trio ever composed, imitated (most notably by Beethoven in his Op. 3) but never surpassed. Mozart's writing for this unforgiving medium is a technical *tour-de-force*: a brilliant and fluent violin line is matched by one of his warmest and most rewarding viola parts and the most sophisticated cello writing in any of his works, prefiguring the virtuosic cello parts of the 'Prussian' String Quartets (1789-90).

A sonata form opening *Allegro* is followed by a hymn-like *Adagio* in A flat: a searching, deeply affecting slow movement that serves as the work's centre of gravity. The first of the *Divertimento's* two minuets is a big-boned, energetic dance which anticipates Haydn's late quartets in its energetic play with cross-rhythms. Next comes an *Andante*: a theme and four variations of which the third, in B flat minor, strikes a deep vein of expressive melancholy. The second minuet playfully evokes the sound of horns; it has two trio sections, in the first of which the viola takes the lead. The *Divertimento* finishes with a sonata-rondo *Allegro* in 6/8 time, a big, free-wheeling country dance in which the air of relaxation belies the skill with which Mozart handles ensemble and material to balance out the first movement - now nearly 40 minutes behind us. Mastery has rarely been demonstrated with a lighter touch.

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