

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 7 February 2023  
7.30pm

## Schumann Quartet

Erik Schumann violin  
Ken Schumann violin  
Veit Benedikt Hertenstein viola  
Mark Schumann cello

Pablo Barragán clarinet

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

String Quartet in B flat Op. 67 (1875)

*I. Vivace • II. Andante •  
III. Agitato. Allegretto non troppo •  
IV. Poco allegretto con variazioni*

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

String Quartet in F Op. 41 No. 2 (1842)

*I. Allegro vivace • II. Andante quasi Variazioni •  
III. Scherzo. Presto - Trio • IV. Allegro molto vivace*

Interval

Johannes Brahms

Clarinet Quintet in B minor Op. 115 (1891)

*I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Andantino • IV. Con moto*

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**Brahms** was often reticent to release his music to the public. Like the First Symphony, his earliest string quartets (Op. 51) had a long wait in the wings. But after they finally appeared in print in 1873, the next work in line was much quicker to materialise and adopted an outwardly lighter approach than its predecessors. A 'useless trifle', according to Brahms, his String Quartet in B flat Op. 67 was written 'to avoid facing the serious countenance of a symphony', namely the completion of the First while he was holidaying near Heidelberg during the summer of 1875.

There is something scherzo-like about the work's opening movement, which constantly switches between compound duple time and three beats in the bar. Dynamic contrasts are similarly marked and there are numerous chromatic excursions, occasionally feigning a tragic mien. More genuine in its pensiveness is the stuttering material that follows, with yet another metrical profile, though the original jig also reappears in its midst, adding further complexity to an already discursive movement.

The ensuing *Andante* features a seemingly endless melody, which blurs phrase lengths and bar lines, as well as offering more harmonic surprises. Rhythmic interest comes from the continual presence of triplet decorations, recalling the metrical juxtapositions of the first movement, and a series of more clipped interjections, with courtly dotted tattoos.

Although the Quartet was dedicated to an amateur cellist, the third movement features a prominent solo for the viola, with the other players muted. Initially contemplative, the music soon becomes more dance-like, though the mood rarely settles – once again defying the composer's throwaway description. And, certainly, the finale is anything but trifling, with a series of variations that likewise reprises material from the first movement, thereby bringing us full circle.

Brahms's mentor **Schumann** was surprisingly methodical when it came to musical genres. During the 1830s, he focussed almost exclusively on the piano. He then began the 1840s with an equally intense study of Lieder – coinciding with his marriage to Clara Wieck – followed by symphonic music in 1841 and a series of chamber works in 1842. During the spring of that year, and another bout of depression, Schumann found solace in the quartets of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven, which, by June, had spurred the creation of two of the three works that were to be published in 1843 as his Op. 41. We hear the second of the set.

Like Brahms in his later Op. 67 Quartet, Schumann was aiming at something lightly worn, hence the monothematic sonata form with which the work begins. But despite the absence of a second theme, there is rhythmic and harmonic interest aplenty in the opening subject, as expectations are defied and energy set at a wonderfully high level.

The second movement, with its theme and variations, assumes the guise of a pensive, somewhat uneven lullaby, modelled on the slow movement of

Beethoven's String Quartet No. 12 in E flat Op. 127. Subsequent iterations of the theme turn contrapuntal, before assuming more gossamer textures, though the soulfulness remains. This is promptly shrugged off, however, in the virtuoso *Scherzo*, where the listener is, again, kept guessing, not only in the swirling outer sections but also in the rather curt *Trio* (which returns to herald a coda). Finally, Schumann responds to the jaunts and japes of the Haydn quartets he had been studying by providing an *Allegro molto vivace* that both summarises and caps the harmonic excursions of what has gone before.

We re-join Brahms's career towards its close, with one of a series of works written for the clarinet. Impetus had come from Richard Mühlfeld, a musician in the Court Orchestra in Meiningen, with whom Brahms collaborated frequently during the final chapter of his life. The composer was so impressed with Mühlfeld's playing that he called him the 'nightingale of the orchestra' and, significantly, all the works Brahms wrote for his late muse were conceived with the richer, more honeyed tones of the A clarinet in mind, including the Quintet Op. 115 of 1891.

Like the two quartets on tonight's programme, the prototype for Brahms's late masterpiece is a benchmark of Viennese Classicism, namely the similarly scored work Mozart wrote for his friend and colleague Anton Stadler in 1789. Composing this response just over a hundred years later, Brahms was harking back to the lambent melancholy of the Mozart, even underlining a sense of kinship by means of the beguiling thirds with which the work begins. But however charming the motif may sound, the ensuing argument is rarely languid.

Even the poised *Adagio* is full of syncopations, in turn urging a shift from major to minor, just as in the *Allegro* – a link emphasised by the clarinet's recollection of its turning motifs. The movement then moves on to something decidedly Hungarian in flavour, with *csárdás* rhythms and evocative string tremolandos. Once more, the music is combative, with a surprising modulation to B flat minor, before the tonic major returns in a bittersweet coda. Sprightlier is the *Andantino*, with its clarinet melody working in contrary motion with the cello. While this too has agitated moments, witnessed in another modulation to the tonic minor, happiness proves more steadfast than before.

The finale employs a theme and variation structure and, as in the work's model, the principal melody appears rather self-effacing. Yet such comparisons vanish when the clear, four-bar phrases erode and the mood becomes more brooding. Instead of Mozart's *buffa* antics, this *Con moto* is characterised by the wistfulness that tempered both the *Allegro* and the *Adagio*. And it is to those thoughts that Brahms returns in the final bars, with more pensive thirds framing his late Quintet.

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