

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 7 May 2024
7.30pm

Belcea Quartet

Corina Belcea violin
Suyeon Kang violin
Krzysztof Chorzelski viola
Antoine Lederlin cello

Tabea Zimmermann viola
Jean-Guihen Queyras cello

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

String Sextet No. 1 in B flat Op. 18 (1859-60)
I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Andante ma moderato • III. Scherzo. Allegro molto • IV. Rondo. Poco allegretto e grazioso

Interval

String Sextet No. 2 in G Op. 36 (1864-5)
I. Allegro non troppo • II. Scherzo. Allegro non troppo • III. Poco adagio • IV. Poco allegro



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In the early decades of the 19th Century, one of the most famous and influential composers of string music (and a brilliant violinist in his own right) was the Brunswick-born musician Louis Spohr. Considered the equal of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, Spohr's considerable output included a string of virtuoso concertos, 36 string quartets and a number of pieces for a variety of other string formations, including several 'double' quartets which served as Felix Mendelssohn's model for his effervescent Octet of 1825. In 1848, the year after Mendelssohn's death, Spohr also composed a string sextet – two violins, two violas and two cellos – and it was this combination that caught the eye of young **Johannes Brahms**, a mere teenager at the time.

In 1859 Brahms, now 25, wrote to a close friend: 'Spohr is dead! He may well be the last one who still belonged to a more beautiful era of art than the one we are suffering through. In those days, one could eagerly keep a look out every week for what new and even more beautiful work had come from this or that person. Now it is different. In a month of Sundays I see hardly one volume of music that pleases me, but many that make me physically ill.'

Leaving aside Brahms's cocky dismissal of his contemporaries, his decision to write string sextets tells us a number of things about his professional status at this time. The late 1850s were a difficult period for him as he sought to find his way as a young, still relatively inexperienced composer. His friend and mentor Robert Schumann had died in 1856 after several years in a sanatorium; his First Piano Concerto had been premièred in 1858 to hisses and catcalls in Leipzig; and he felt tremendous pressure to live up to Schumann's published prediction that he would be the great successor to the Beethovenian tradition. An early piano trio had met with some success already – but to turn at this stage to a genre as freighted as the string quartet (let alone a symphony) was beyond him. The sextet connected his name with that of Spohr, a revered artist to be sure, but one with rather less fraught associations than Beethoven. It was a way of entering – safely – the world of string chamber music.

The First Sextet was completed in the summer of 1860 and published the following year in both original form and piano duet reduction: which is to say that Brahms was nowhere near well-known enough to guarantee the work being a sure-fire success, and the duet reduction was an important financial back-up. Yet in both its piano and string manifestations, this Sextet is perfect for amateur musicians. It is generous in its proportions, the first movement unfurling as a succession of singing melodies that are all provided with opportunities to play.

After the warm opening *Allegro*, the second movement comes as something of a surprise. This is a set of variations on a theme that Brahms derived

from the old Baroque favourite 'La Folia', familiar from the virtuoso works of Corelli and Vivaldi. The ensemble is put through its paces here, the score littered with double stopping and roiling scales. (Brahms also made a ferocious solo piano version of this *Andante* and sent it to Clara Schumann as a birthday gift in September 1860.) The *Scherzo* returns us to the sunshine, all smiles and bounces, with a fantastically propulsive trio evocative of vigorous country dancing. The gracious closing *Rondo* once again provides all players with a chance to sing the principal themes.

The Second Sextet had a longer and more complex gestation. The first three movements were completed in 1864; but Brahms had already sent the opening theme of the third movement to Clara Schumann in February 1855. It seems that he dreamed up this idea before he was quite sure what to do with it. (It was included, in yet another sketch, with a couple of canons for vocal ensemble). The last movement of the Sextet was completed in May 1865, a full decade after this, and the whole was premièred in 1866.

The six years between the two Sextets had seen substantial changes in Brahms's personal and professional circumstances. He had moved to Vienna, added several hefty opuses to his catalogue (including two piano quartets and his mighty Piano Quintet) and had come as close as he ever did to getting married. He spent significant time with the object of his affection, a young singer named Agathe von Siebold, in the autumn of 1858 – but he was unable to commit to her, eventually backing out of the relationship. According to Brahms's biographer Max Kalbeck, this encounter left a material mark on the G major Sextet: after the soaring first theme we hear over whispered rocking semitones, a little idea is thrown between players which Kalbeck claims was a musical spelling of Agathe's name, A – G – A – H [B natural] – E. Whether this musical cipher was indeed intentional on Brahms's part or merely a coincidence is harder to say.

Like its predecessor, the Second Sextet is full of lyrical, long-breathed, Schubertian ideas and is broadly easy-going in nature. But it is also marked by a level of subtlety and variety that demonstrates the young composer's growing experience and skill. The first movement has moments of dark mystery and high drama lurking at its core; whilst the second involves a brilliant reworking of a Baroque-pastiche gigue that Brahms had written in his early 20s, the keyboard textures recast as pointed *pizzicato*. The melancholy *Poco adagio* unfolds in sinuous chromatic lines which recall those rocking semitones of the work's opening. The finale is the perfect balance of skittering excitement and lush, singable melodies.

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