

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 9 October 2021 7.30pm

**Benjamin Grosvenor** piano

**Hyeyoon Park** violin

**Timothy Ridout** viola

**Kian Soltani** cello

**Gustav Mahler** (1860-1911)

Piano Quartet movement in A minor (1876)

**Robert Schumann** (1810-1856)

Piano Quartet in E flat Op. 47 (1842)

*I. Sostenuto assai - Allegro ma non troppo • II. Scherzo. Molto vivace - Trio I - Trio II • III. Andante cantabile • IV. Finale. Vivace*

Interval

**Richard Strauss** (1864-1949)

Piano Quartet in C minor Op. 13 (1883-4)

*I. Allegro • II. Scherzo. Presto • III. Andante • IV. Finale. Vivace*

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The Piano Quartet is perhaps a more satisfying medium than either the Piano Trio or the Piano Quintet, rich though the repertoire for those ensembles may be. Ever since the mid-19th-century expansion of the piano's girth, balance has been the Trio's first difficulty, and it was from this period that Quintets for piano and string quartet began to establish themselves. (Most earlier Piano Quintets had followed a pattern defined by Hummel in 1802, with a double-bass instead of a second violin. Schubert's 'Trout' Quintet is the classic example of the genial divertimento that this line-up lent itself to.) Piano Quartets steer a course between a genre where the pianist is under constant restraint, and one where a string quartet (nearly always pre-formed, and accustomed to working on its own) can sometimes seem to take up arms against the alien piano, and dare it to do its worst!

**Mahler's** Piano Quartet movement was performed by the teenage composer and fellow students at the Vienna Conservatory on July 10th 1876, and repeated soon after at the home of a good friend of Brahms. It gives a fascinating insight into how Viennese students were taught to compose. In 1876, there was only one Brahms symphony, and only one Brahms Piano Concerto, though he had already composed all three of his Piano Quartets, and his Piano Quintet. The obsessive motivic unity that Brahms was to demonstrate ten years later, in the Cello Sonata Op. 99 and all subsequent works, and which led eventually to Schoenberg's 'method of composing with twelve notes', is there in embryo in Mahler's little piece. It has three ideas, and most of the juice is squeezed out of them, especially the groaning figure first heard in the piano's left hand.

**Schumann's** Piano Quartet, like his Piano Quintet Op. 44, is in the key of E flat. Both were composed in 1842, a year when Schumann tried to numb his resentment of his wife Clara's pianistic successes (and consequent absences on tour) with beer and champagne, and by writing libellous articles for his musical journal, one of which earned him a six-day prison sentence. That Schumann, a pianist but not a string player (like his protégé Brahms, but very unlike Mozart, Beethoven or Mendelssohn) had the piano in the forefront of his mind, is made clear at the end of the short introduction, when the piano can't resist tucking in a significant chromatic note before the violin's quite ready. The piano's right-hand riffs are strangely reminiscent of Weber – not a composer one would expect Schumann to approve of, but perhaps an indication of his sunny intentions in this work.

The scampering *Scherzo* has two *Trios*, one contrapuntal, the other with Schumann's trademark shifting of the bar-line. The first *Trio*, incidentally, contains an example of a double hairpin

(< >, meaning get louder and then softer) on a single note in the piano, which in principle cannot be done: a splendid reminder of the hidden depths of musical notation that can also be found in Mendelssohn and Schoenberg. The beautiful slow movement cello tune is unusual in incorporating four repeated notes in a phrase that comes round four times (16 repeated notes all together) – a shape perhaps more at home on the piano than the cello, but in fact full of expressive possibilities when transferred to strings. The cello is given a long rest to re-tune the lowest string for a really deep last chord. The *Finale* starts off as a fugue, and remembers just in time to turn itself into a double fugue at the end.

**Strauss's** Piano Quartet was first performed (the composer at the piano) in 1885. 20 years later, it having reached Manchester, the critic of *The Guardian* thought it showed Strauss to be 'a better Brahmsian than Brahms, avoiding all his model's worst faults'. The order of the movements shows that Schumann was probably in Strauss's mind too. In between the quartet's composition and its performance, the 21-year-old composer had conducted his Second Symphony (in F minor – it had had its première in New York) in the same concert that he was the soloist in Mozart's C minor Concerto, for which he wrote his own cadenza. Not all the music that year was minor-tinged, though: 1885 saw the publication of Strauss's first set of solo songs, Op. 10, which includes such favourites as 'Die Nacht' and 'Zueignung'. Four years later, Strauss composed the tone poem *Don Juan*, and the mature composer suddenly appeared. But the Piano Quartet is an insight into where that composer came from.

The long first movement is in conventional sonata form, with its two subjects and its two keys. The *Scherzo* has echoes of Beethoven's Ninth, even the grouping of the bars into threes that Beethoven proudly noted in the score, and the rush to the exit at the end. The F minor slow movement, to adapt Mark Twain's celebrated remark about Wagner, is bolder than it sounds: those delicious discords under the piano melody are – unprepared! The *Finale* is the best movement of all as far as the piano quartet texture is concerned, the instruments coming together in a kaleidoscope of different combinations and oppositions.

Both the youthful composers in tonight's concert give notice in these early works of their future proclivities. Mahler's violin part is marked *mit Leidenschaft* ('with passion') and, later, *sehr leidenschaftlich*, while, in his *Finale*, Strauss tells his pianist to play *mit Laune* ('with humour') – though in the end, C minor wins through.