

*Saturday 26th June 2021, 7.30pm*

## *Journey to Hollywood*

*Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama*

*Andante and Variations in B flat major, Op. 46*

*Robert Schumann (1810-1856)*

for 2 pianos, horn & 2 cellos (published originally as Op. 46 in a version for 2 pianos)

*Composed 1843*

*Published 1893*

*Tom Poster piano, Robin Green piano, Ben Goldscheider horn, Kate Gould cello, Alice Neary cello,*

We owe the pleasure of hearing Schumann's *Andante and Variations in B-flat major* in its original form due to the exertions of one Johannes Brahms. In the complete edition of Schumann's works edited by Clara Schumann with support from Brahms (published by Breitkopf & Härtel), he writes:

"[Here are] some things from the estate of Robert Schumann, which...must not be missing in this collection of his works. The Variations, Op. 46, appear here in their original form and scoring, based on the composer's handwriting. It cannot actually be proven whether the reworking was only carried out at the request of the publisher, as...tradition suggests."

One doesn't have to read very far between the lines to understand just what Brahms thinks of the "requests" of publishers. But if he meant to imply some sort of coercion, in this case he was wrong. Schumann was never happy with the work and removed it from his catalogue. Mendelssohn suggested that he publish it for 2 pianos, with the removal of a couple of the variations, and it is this version that stands as Op. 46. The premiere of the original version did not take place until long after the composer's death, when Johannes performed it alongside Clara in 1868.

Schumann composed the variations the year after his great Piano Quintet and Piano Quartet. He said of them that "their mood is very elegiac and I think I must have been very melancholy when I wrote them." The unusual choice of instrumentation contributes to that feeling, the warmth afforded by the two cellos and the wistfulness of the horn serving to enrich the already luxurious colours conjured up on the pianos.

After a brief introduction ending on a single-note horn call, the two pianos set out the AB-structured theme, seamlessly passing phrases back and forth over the harmonic commentary of the cellos and horn. Much of the writing for the pianos is technically possible for one player on one keyboard, but it is the interplay and dialogue between them that is so charming.

The first variation has a strummed pizzicato accompaniment under the imitative piano lines, one pianist finishing or reaffirming the other's utterance. The variations become more dramatic and involved until the appearance of a slower minor variation with mournful cello lines and sombre horn calls, one of the few moments when the horn takes centre stage. A sparse interlude follows for the cellos, which leads back to a gentle restatement of the theme. The variations of the second half of the work become more virtuosic, though Schumann manages to maintain a feeling of lightness. The horn is used to great effect in the most declamatory variation in a series of hunting calls. The conversation between the two pianos continues to dominate and delight until all instruments are drawn into the melodic dialogue. The piece ends in the tranquil mood of its opening.

## Clarinet Trio in A minor, Op. 114

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Composed 1891

Published 1892

- I. *Allegro*
- II. *Adagio*
- III. *Andantino grazioso*
- IV. *Allegro*

Robert Plane *clarinet*, Kate Gould *cello*, Tom Poster *piano*

The Clarinet Trio in A Minor, Op. 114 is, of course, one of the four chamber pieces that Brahms wrote with the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld in mind, the others being the Quintet, Op. 115, and the two sonatas, Op. 120. The Trio and the Quintet were both written in the summer of 1891 after Brahms had announced his retirement – Mühlfeld's exquisite playing summoned from Brahms works he had thought were beyond him.

All these late pieces for clarinet are often seen through the nostalgic prism of the ever-popular Quintet, but this misjudges the Trio, which inhabits a different world, or rather, is itself a complete world, with doubt and joy in equal measure. The first movement is one of those extraordinary essays that could only be by Brahms, in which every phrase, every motif, every rhythm, every note, seems to have been derived from a set of postulates as ironclad as those of Euclid, an emblem of rigour and total mastery - only to serve a musical surface that is uncertain, unstable, unpredictable, and disturbing, as if Brahms had been drinking from a non-Euclidean stein.

The Adagio is everything that the first movement is not: contemplative, settled, gently varied. If the first theme, with its long-limbed melody, already relaxes the mood, the second theme is contentment itself, the discovery of a perfect place married to the greater discovery of how to remain there forever.

The third movement begins with a simple waltz tune though the compositional procedures employed are anything but simple, with themes seemingly spinning out of the air of continuous variation. If Brahms doesn't quite arrive at the "skeptical music" "full of shadows" that Wallace Stevens, in his poem "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz" (a poem that has been a touchstone for Thomas Adès), argues is necessary to reanimate the waltz genre, it's only because for Brahms the waltz is (just about) still living, still a plaything, still a "mode of desire".

Throughout the work one can hear Brahms's characteristic use of falling thirds, a notable trait of his late style, a constant seeking down and down, a searching for rest, but the device is never more prevalent than in the last movement, which sweeps away the various attempts to define pleasure that predominate the middle movements and reclaims the disbelief of the opening Allegro. It is as if Brahms has been trying out different modes of happiness, and now says no to all that, as if, in retrospect, there had always been a strain to the smile. "Those who have seen me in society, where I seem merry and jest with others, will regard me as cheerful - you I hardly need tell that inside I never laugh." If the middle movements are Brahms out and about, his spirits gay and the day glistening, the last movement is in the interior, the true Brahms. The waltz has ended, and with it, an era.

## Piano Quintet in E major, Op.15

Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957)

Composed 1921

- I. *Mässiges Zeitmass, mit schwungvoll blühendem Ausdruck*
- II. *Adagio: Mit grösster Ruhe, stets äusserst gebunden und ausdrucksvoll*
- III. *Finale: Gemessen, beinahe pathetisch*

Elena Urioste *violin*, David Adams *violin*, Scott Dickinson *viola*, Alice Neary *cello*, Tom Poster *piano*

Born in Vienna in 1897, Korngold was a musical prodigy admired by Mahler, Strauss, and Puccini. At the age of 10 he began to study composition with Alexander Zemlinsky, and by 13 he was known all over Europe. In 1934, he moved to Hollywood to compose the score for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and would go on to win Academy Awards for *Anthony Adverse* and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. Pioneer of the thoroughly integrated film score, his circle of admirers then extended to include Errol Flynn, Laurence Olivier, and Ronald Reagan.

The Piano Quintet in E major was written in 1921, not long after Korngold had triumphed with one of his five operas,

*Die tote Stadt*. He played the piano in the premiere of the Quintet in Hamburg in 1923. The work is in three movements, the first of which is a sonata form, which is unabashedly Romantic from the first notes of its opening theme. Modulations are frequent and far-flung, and the melody is full of ardent leaps. The second theme shows the vocal craft of an already seasoned composer of operas. Throughout the movement Korngold pushes the players to achieve an almost symphonic weight.

The second movement is comprised of 9 variations on a theme from Korngold's set of songs, *Vier Abschiedslieder* (and thus bears a relationship with two other works played at this festival, Schubert's "Trout" Quintet, and Mendelssohn's Quartet in A minor, Op 13). Korngold was in love with Luise von Sonnenthal, but his parents preferred that he not be, and so these songs of farewell bear a particular poignancy that extends to the Quintet. The couple would eventually marry in 1924. The theme derives from the third of the songs, "Mond, so gehst du wieder auf" ("Moon thou riseth again") and wends its way gracefully through the changing metres of the variations. There are many beauties scattered throughout the movement, not least in the 6<sup>th</sup> variation where the violin soars over a rippling piano and pizzicato strings, and in the orchestral ambition of the last variation.

As with Mendelssohn's Quartet in A minor, and also Beethoven's Quartet in A minor, Op. 132, the last movement begins in high rhetorical drama, the violin bursting forth with an impassioned cadenza. However, unlike those other works, Korngold's finale is altogether more playful, full of rhythmic teasing, contrapuntal subtleties, and archly stentorian ironies, yet youthfully ardent through to its close.

*Programme notes © James Lea*

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