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SCHUMANN QUARTET

Thursday 9 February 2023, 7.30pm
Djanogly Recital Hall

PROGRAMME

String Quartet No.18 in A, KV 464
Allegro
Menuetto
Andante
Allegro non troppo

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756-1791)

String Quartet No.2 in F, Op.41 No.2
Allegro vivace
Andante, quasi Variazioni
Scherzo. Presto
Allegro molto vivace

Robert Schumann
(1810-1849)

Interval

String Quartet No.4 in E minor, Op.44 No.2
Allegro assai appassionato
Scherzo. Allegro di molto
Andante
Presto agitato

Felix Mendelssohn
(1809-47)



PROGRAMME NOTES

String Quartet in A, K464

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756-1791)

Allegro
Menuetto
Andante
Allegro non troppo

Shortly after settling in Vienna in 1781, Mozart came across Haydn's latest set of string quartets, his recently published Op 33. In his letter to potential buyers Haydn described the quartets as "written in an entirely new and special manner". Whether or not this was simply sales-talk, his achievement in moving the classical quartet style forward presented Mozart with a challenge he found both impossible to ignore and difficult to rise to, as he began work on the first set of quartets he had written since 1773.

Following Haydn's example cost Mozart a considerable amount of serious effort. He was never to find quartet writing easy (he felt much more at home composing string quintets, with their extra viola part), and the manuscripts of the six quartets he composed between December 1782 and January 1785 are full of corrections and false starts, witness to the "long, hard work" which he mentions in his letter dedicating the quartets to Haydn.

K464 is the last but one of the six; Mozart entered it in his catalogue of compositions on 10 January 1785. It is, perhaps, the most elusive of them. The scholar Alec Hyatt King went so far as to call it "remote, almost austere". But though it may seem, at first, to be somewhat impersonal in character, it does have a genuine expressive warmth, combined with Mozart's fastidious craftsmanship. Beethoven admired it particularly, even making his own hand-written copy of the finale.

The opening movement's flowing, gracious character tends to mask the ingenuity with which Mozart draws intricate textures from a few basic ideas (Haydn's influence making itself felt here), in particular, the falling first violin phrase at the start, the unison response for all four instruments, and the flurry of descending notes that marks the second main theme.

The minuet combines outward courtly elegance with hints of a more private emotional world beneath. These become more overt in the central trio section, which seems to verge on the edgy at times.

K464 is the only one of the Mozart's 'Haydn' quartets to include a set of variations. The six variations making up the third movement are based on a graceful theme which is treated to increasingly florid decoration in the first two variations. Mozart simplifies the textures in the third variation, before turning to the minor key for the fourth. Variation five returns to the major key to explore the rhythmic figure from the very start of the theme. The last variation opens with a drum-like rhythm on the cello, which passes in turn to the other instruments before settling back on the cello to underpin the last few bars.

The finale is a feat of contrapuntal skill which may perhaps reflect Mozart's encounter with the music of Bach and Handel. Roughly half-way through, the buzzing activity gives way, briefly, to a quiet, apparently slow-moving passage (though the basic pulse does not change), before it picks up again.

The quartet ends with a subdued, almost throwaway final cadence – enigmatic to the last.



String Quartet in F, Op.41 No.2

Robert Schumann
(1810-1849)

Allegro vivace
Andante, quasi Variazioni
Scherzo. Presto
Allegro molto vivace

“The string quartet has come to a standstill” wrote Schumann in 1842 in one of his regular pieces of music journalism. After the heyday of the classical string quartet, in the work of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, chamber music ensembles with piano had become increasingly popular. But 1842 was also the year Schumann made his own determined attempt to produce major pieces of chamber music. He had already begun thinking about writing quartets a few years earlier, and it was with the three string quartets of Op 41 that he began. After sketching the first of them, in June 1842, he immediately went on to sketch No 2; the third followed soon afterwards.

As a pianist his approach to composition was intimately bound up with the keyboard, not least in the large number of songs he composed in 1840, the year of his long-delayed marriage to Clara Wieck. So it is striking that he should have dispensed with the piano for his first mature chamber works. Only after the three string quartets did he go on to write for ensembles that included the piano.

To prepare himself, Schumann studied quartets by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. But it was his friend and contemporary Felix Mendelssohn who represented his ideal, continuing to compose string quartets, and doing so with a fluency and command of technique which enabled him to produce extended structures driven by musical momentum rather than literary or other non-musical ideas. It is to him that Schumann’s Op 41 string quartets are dedicated.

The first movement of the F major Quartet opens with a soaring (and rather Mendelssohnian) theme which tends to put the spotlight on the first violin, with the other instruments doing little more than filling in the harmonies. The balance is redressed somewhat in the more intimate second theme, with its separate entries for the two violins and viola respectively, and the four instruments are more thoroughly integrated in the later movements.

The *andante* behaves like a set of variations, with a marked change of character from one section to the next, but without any very definite connection with the gently rocking main theme – Schumann’s apparently rather odd marking (“*like variations*”), is, in fact, perfectly accurate. Both the scherzo and trio of the third movement are nimble, fleet-footed pieces in their sharply contrasted ways, while the finale seems to recapture the joyous ebullience of the last movement of Schumann’s ‘Spring’ Symphony, written the previous year.



String Quartet in E minor, Op.44, No.2

Felix Mendelssohn
(1809–47)

Allegro assai appassionato
Scherzo. Allegro di molto
Andante
Presto agitato

The Op.44 quartets were composed in 1837–8, then fairly extensively revised and polished when they came to be published later on in 1838. The E minor was in fact the first to be written, and was completed in its initial version on 18 June 1837. Mendelssohn's music maintains a characteristic balance of tension between his impulse towards classicizing form, and the rapid intensity of his romantic expressive drive: the markings *assai appassionato* and *agitato* are revealing in this connection, and without doubt are meant to apply to the performing style and the musical substance equally. His powerful sense of gesture and character is disciplined, and expressively channeled, by a taut sense of the need for integration – the emotions filtered through the intellect, perhaps. He inherits from his classical precursors a clear sense of the need for drama and strong rhythmic momentum (from Beethoven above all), while bringing to the task his own feeling about the quartet's potential for lyric utterance, together with a – by now distinctly romanticized – Mozartean sense of fluency in texture and thematic evolution.

In practice, this means that he often writes notably lyric themes, enlivened with freely polyphonic accompanimental voices, with more obviously driving and propulsive figures appearing as transitional or contextual ideas – but which will then go on to dominate the more overtly dramatic passages within the development and recapitulation. This aesthetic opposition between lyric statement and evolutionary – dramatically mobile and unstable – material governs Mendelssohn's stylistic range in quartet composition, and may be heard to great effect in the first movement.

Harmonically, the transition takes us towards B minor, a key which is then sidestepped and exchanged for G major, where we are offered another lyric theme as the first subject of the second group, and a restatement of the first (E minor) subject in the new key, before returning for the exposition repeat. The development is increasingly dominated as it goes through by semiquaver passagework, and the elements of the thematic and tonal reprise are skillfully reordered, to prevent too great or too regular a sense of symmetry.

The second movement, in E major, has an almost fairy-like sense of lightness and delicacy, coupled with a delicious hint of mystery – which is further reflected in the fact that the usual repetitions and developments of the Scherzo-Trio model are composed out into a continuously unfolding form that shows elements of sonata-rondo, but in any case, carries all before it, rhythmically speaking, with near-effortless ease.

The third movement, in G major, is a flowing lyric *Andante*, with beautiful but unobtrusive counterpoints throughout and composed in slow-movement sonata form, without a development, hence returning to the opening theme directly after the excursions and contrasts of the second group. The sheer euphony and textural ease of this movement are among its most attractive and

beautiful qualities. The finale is an extended and impassioned sonata-rondo made with relatively straightforward material but treated in a dazzling – if in essence brilliantly simple – variety of

ways. As a way of concluding the quartet tonally, the final thematic statements and the

peroration are given in a clear E major which brings the work to a conclusion on a beautifully imaginative note, yet without losing contact with the passion and intensity that have gone before.



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SCHUMANN QUARTET

Erik Schumann - Violin

Ken Schumann - Violin

Veit Hertenstein - Viola

Mark Schumann – Cello

The three brothers Mark, Erik and Ken Schumann have been playing together since their earliest childhood – meanwhile violist Veit Hertenstein completes the quartet. The four musicians enjoy the way they communicate without words. Although the individual personalities clearly manifest themselves, a common space arises in every musical work in a process of spiritual metamorphosis. The quartet's openness and curiosity may be partly the result of the formative influence exerted on it by teachers such as Eberhard Feltz, the Alban Berg Quartet, or partners such as Menahem Pressler.

A special highlight of the 22/23 season will be a concert tour to Singapore, followed by concerts in Adelaide, Australia. The quartet will also perform twice at the Concertgebouw Amsterdam and three times at the Wigmore Hall in London. In Europe, the quartet will embark on a major tour with Anna Vinnitskaya in April 2023, during which they will perform Robert Schumann's Piano Quintet in Brussels, Hamburg, Berlin, Geneva and elsewhere. Not to forget the ensemble's return to very familiar venues such as the Mozartfest Würzburg and the Schubertiade in Schwarzenberg/Hohenems.

Its album “Intermezzo” (2018 | Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Schumann und Reimann with Anna-Lucia Richter) has been hailed enthusiastically both at home and abroad and received the award “Opus Klassik” in the category quintet. It is celebrated as a worthy successor to its award-winning “Landscapes” album, in which in which the quartet traces its own roots by combining works of Haydn, Bartók, Takemitsu and Pärt. Among other prizes, the latter received the “Jahrespreis der deutschen Schallplattenkritik”, five Diapasons and was selected as Editor's Choice by the BBC Music Magazine. For its previous CD “Mozart Ives Verdi”, the Schumann Quartet was accorded the 2016 Newcomer Award at the BBC Music Magazine Awards in London. In 2020 the quartet has expanded its discography with Fragment and his examination of one of the masters of the string quartet: Franz Schubert. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the radio, the quartet will dedicate itself to a very special project: An album of pieces around and from 1923. Together with the Bavarian Radio, they will record works by Alban Berg, Leoš Janáček, Ernst Krenek and Aaron Copland.

Awards, CD releases – it is always tempting to speculate on what factors have led to many people viewing the Schumann Quartet as one of the best in the world. But the four musicians themselves regard these stages more as encounters, as a confirmation of the path they have taken. They feel that their musical development over the past two years represents a quantum leap. “We really want to take things to extremes, to see how far the excitement and our spontaneity as a group take us,” says Ken Schumann, the middle of the three Schumann brothers. They charmingly sidestep any attempt to categorise their sound, approach or style, and let the concerts speak for themselves.

And the critics approve: “Fire and energy. The Schumann Quartet plays staggeringly well [...] without doubt one of the very best formations among today’s abundance of quartets, [...] with sparkling virtuosity and a willingness to astonish” (Harald Eggebrecht in Süddeutsche Zeitung).