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Notos Quartet

Thursday 14 October, 7:30pm
Djanogly Recital Hall, Lakeside Arts

Programme Notes

Piano Quartet Movement in A minor

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

There is some confusion over the origins of this isolated work from Mahler's early years. In the summer of 1876 he completed his first year as a student at the Vienna Conservatoire, winning prizes for both piano and composition. In September a concert was organised in his home town of Jihlava, in Bohemia (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire centred on Vienna, now the western region of the Czech Republic), in which he appeared as a pianist, and his prize-winning work was performed. Recent research has cast doubt on the assumption that the Quartet Movement was the work in question. Both the Conservatoire's records and accounts of the concert mention a quintet, and there appears to some doubt as to the accuracy of the date 1876 on the manuscript. The possibility that it was written the following year as an entry in a competition organised by the St Petersburg Chamber Music Society cannot be ruled out.

Whatever the truth of the matter, it remains Mahler's only surviving piece of chamber music. The manuscript was preserved in a folder marked, by his wife Alma, "early compositions". The first performance since Mahler's death was given in New York in February 1964, and the score was published in 1973.

Not surprisingly for a student composition, there is little that suggests the Mahler to come. There are echoes of Brahms, which is perhaps to be expected. There are also some striking occasional suggestions of Dvořák – interesting in terms of Mahler's childhood in Dvořák's native Bohemia, and all the more remarkable given that at the time Dvořák had only just begun to make an impact in German-speaking musical circles.

While there may not be much that is particularly individual about the piece it offers a fascinating glimpse of the student Mahler getting to grips with matters of musical form and texture. There is also a stroke of originality in the brief violin cadenza shortly before the end.

Piano Quartet in E flat, K493

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Allegro

Larghetto

Allegretto

According to Constanze Mozart's second husband, Georg Nikolaus Nissen, whose unfinished biography of the composer was published after his death, Mozart was commissioned to write three piano quartets by the publisher Franz Anton Hoffmeister. He completed the G minor Quartet, K478, in 1785, but it was found too difficult, for both audiences and musicians, and Hoffmeister allowed Mozart to keep the advance on his fee on condition that he did not write the other two.

The story may or may not be true; but there is no doubt that with the G minor Quartet Mozart created

something unprecedented in the field of chamber music with a keyboard instrument. Previously this had been regarded as primarily a medium for domestic, amateur music-making, with the keyboard part having the main musical interest and any other instruments providing an accompaniment. But at the end of the 1770s Mozart produced a number of sonatas for keyboard and violin (convention purposely listed the instruments that way round) in which he began tilting the balance towards a more equal partnership between the two; the development continues in his two piano quartets.

Hoffmeister's string-playing customers, used to a simple accompanying role, were no doubt unprepared for parts as taxing as these. Mozart went ahead with a second quartet anyway, dating it in his own catalogue 3 June 1786. Hoffmeister got as far as engraving the violin part before abandoning the project, and it was eventually accepted by another publisher.

The key of E flat always drew from Mozart music with its own particular glow, and K493 is no exception. The first theme of the opening movement seems to sum up the work as a whole with its warm harmonic progression, and the perky march-rhythm which grows out of it. A short unaccompanied phrase in the piano right hand is echoed by the violin and turned into a fully-fledged new theme, but it is those original five notes that dominate both the development section and the brief coda.

Two earlier versions exist of the second movement's opening theme, which shows that Mozart didn't always get things right first time. This gentle, intimate movement manages to be compact in form while giving the impression of great expansiveness. The finale is a rondo which demonstrates Mozart's uncanny ability to write music which is light-hearted without being superficial.

Piano Quartet in A, Op.26

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Allegro non troppo

Poco adagio

Scherzo. Poco allegro

Finale. Allegro

When Brahms tackled a new genre for the first time, he often followed up his first attempt with a second soon afterwards, in a contrasted, usually more relaxed style. That is the case with his first two symphonies, his two string sextets and his first two string quartets.

His G minor and A major piano quartets provide another example. Both are on an extended scale, but where the first is stormy and passionate, with an exuberant gypsy-style finale, the second is generally more poised and mellow. Brahms' circumstances may have contributed. Through members of a women's choir he conducted for a time in Hamburg he got to know a Dr Elizabeth Rösing, who gave him the use of rooms in her suburban house in the summer of 1861, allowing him to escape from the family tensions in his parents' home and concentrate on composing. The tranquillity of his surroundings may well have contributed to a creative surge which, among other things, saw him complete his G minor Piano Quartet, possibly begun a couple of years earlier, and start work on this one, which he finished in the autumn of that year and dedicated to Rösing.

In addition, all four movements of No 2 may well owe something of their expansive character to Brahms' study of Schubert, who often used themes which were themselves on a broad scale to achieve spacious musical structures. The first movement opens with a long unhurried theme in two rhythmically contrasted halves, passing from the piano to the cello, then repeated by all the strings answered by the piano. The music relies for contrast on changes of rhythm and texture; the overall impression is one of graceful, flowing lyricism.

The slow movement begins in a somewhat drowsy calm, with muted strings shadowing the piano's opening theme. The atmosphere is unsettled by soft rippling flourishes low in the piano which are both a sublimation of figures characteristic of the cimbalom, the dulcimer-like instrument commonly used in Brahms' beloved gypsy music, and also echoes of similarly eerie passages in some of Schubert's songs. Twice, once on the piano, once on the strings, a more passionate melody disturbs the generally subdued atmosphere, but the movement finally

withdraws into stillness, with two final ripples from the piano darkening the very last bars.

Brahms called the third movement a scherzo, but it is more easy-going and lyrical than that might suggest, at least to begin with. After a deceptively gentle opening the music generates considerable power as it goes on. Things take a more austere turn in the central trio section, in the form of a starkly emphatic canon between the piano and strings.

There is more gypsy influence in the finale, a movement full of infectious energy, though a little more reined-in than the no-holds-barred rumbustiousness of its counterpart in the G minor Quartet. Brahms enjoys teasing our sense of rhythm with off-the-beat accents and some unexpected phrasing, and the final impression is of the composer at his most genial and relaxed.

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Notos Quartet Biography

Sindri Lederer | Violin

Andrea Burger | Viola

Philip Graham | Violoncello

Antonia Köster | Piano

Since its foundation in 2007, the Notos Quartett has won six first prizes and various special awards in numerous international competitions including those in Holland, Italy, England and China and has since established itself internationally, performing in renowned European concert halls such as the Berlin Philharmonie, Konzerthaus Berlin, Konzerthaus Vienna, Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Tonhalle Zürich, BOZAR Brussels, Philharmonie Köln, as well as important festivals in the Rheingau, Schwetzingen, Würzburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Usedom, Radio France in Montpellier and is regularly traveling abroad to Russia, Australia and Asia, and especially to China and Japan. In early 2022 the quartet will tour the US with several concerts.

In addition to the well-known masterpieces, the quartet is also committed to contemporary music and has already premiered several works dedicated to it by Beat Furrer, Bernhard Gander, Garth Knox and Bryce Dessner, among others.

The musicians also endeavor to track down lost and forgotten works of the piano quartet genre and to present them to a wider audience. This is also reflected in their debut CD *Hungarian Treasures*, which was released by Sony Classical/RCA in February 2017 and includes the worldwide first recording of the piano quartet by Béla Bartók, for whose rediscovery the ensemble attained worldwide attention and recognition. The second recording, *The Schönberg Effect*, again released by SONY Classical, is dedicated entirely to the great romantic Johannes Brahms - with the famous Piano Quartet in G minor and an arrangement of the Symphony No.3 by Andreas N. Tarkmann, created especially for the Notos Quartett.

The great interest in the Notos Quartett and its extraordinary programs are documented by numerous concert recordings, interviews and portraits in radio and television at home and abroad, such as ARD, ZDF, Deutschlandfunk, BBC, France Musique, ORF, NHK Japan and IPR USA.

It is important to the musicians to take a stand on social issues of our time. They were the first artists to return the prestigious German music prize *ECHO Klassik* that had been awarded to them in 2017 in the category *Newcomer of the Year* in response to the *ECHO Pop Awards* in April 2018, when an album with anti-Semitic language was distinguished. They triggered a protest movement that was joined by many well-known artists such as Igor Levit and Daniel Barenboim. As a result, the *ECHO* brand was abolished.

The social commitment of the ensemble is also reflected in its promotion of young musicians - another important aspect of the quartet's work. It has taught at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, led the masterclass *Saigon Chamber Music* in Vietnam and organizes the annual *Notos Chamber Music Academy*, which it founded in 2019 in co-operation with the *Jeunesses Musicales Deutschland* in Weikersheim.

In addition to Günter Pichler, the leader of the legendary Alban Berg Quartet, with whom the quartet studied in Madrid at the Escuela Superior de Música Reina Sofía until 2017, the quartet's companions, teachers and supporters include the Mandelring Quartet, Menahem Pressler, Andrés Schiff, Clemens Hagen and Uwe-Martin Haiberg.

Made possible by the *Merito String Instruments Trust*, the Notos Quartett plays on instruments from old Italian masters and as Pirastro artists, exclusively on strings made by the renowned string manufacturer *Pirastro GmbH*.