

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Benjamin Grosvenor Quartet: Strauss & Brahms

Friday 18 October 2024, 7pm

Queen Elizabeth Hall

Classical music has always had reinvention at its core. Throughout our programme, we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – capture that trailblazing spirit with works that broke the mould across the ages and brand-new approaches to timeless classics.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Strauss Piano Quartet in C minor, Op.13 38'

Interval

Brahms Piano Quartet No.3 in C minor, Op.60 35'

Performers

Hyeyoon Park *violin*

Timothy Ridout *viola*

Kian Soltani *cello*

Benjamin Grosvenor *piano*

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes, including an interval.

Richard Strauss (1864–1949)

Piano Quartet in C minor, Op.13 (1883–84)

Allegro

Scherzo. Presto –

Andante

Finale. Vivace

The 20-year-old Richard Strauss' sole piano quartet is a vastly ambitious and accomplished work, 40 minutes long and overflowing with inspiration, energy and virtuosity. Yet it has ended up as a glimpse of a path that he decided not to take.

Strauss' father, Franz Joseph Strauss, first horn of the Munich Court Orchestra, loathed the music of Richard Wagner and attempted to steer his prodigiously gifted son towards the

classical methods of Mozart and Mendelssohn, rather than the 'progressive', narrative-driven strand of Romanticism. Brahms, too, passed the young Strauss by until he went to study in Berlin in 1883, aged 19. There he eagerly soaked up the composer's mix of rigour, ruggedness and passion. He duly chose the same key as Brahms' Piano Quartet No.3 for his own effort in the genre.

Its world premiere took place in Weimar on 8 December 1885; soon afterwards it won a piano quartet competition run by the Tonkünstler-Verein of Berlin. Strauss could, perhaps, have become a new Brahms – but he chose not to. His Violin Sonata (1887) was his last chamber work before he turned instead to the flamboyant orchestral tone poems which made his name.

The Piano Quartet is virtually a portrait of a young composer at a crossroads. He already had the skill to take many different strands, draw out the best in each and weave them into a language entirely his own. Although the quartet's chunky writing and strong structural outlines connect it strongly to Brahms and Beethoven, its ultra-expressive language also links it to the world of Liszt and Wagner – for Strauss, more previously forbidden fruit that he had discovered with relish.

Beginning in brief quietude, the first movement's energy quickly ratchets up into an outpouring of passion and tenderness. The rhetorical first theme gives way to a second idea in soaring unison on the strings over surging waves of piano accompaniment. The development section goes on to probe the depths of these ideas' inherent contrasts.

Next, the mercurial Scherzo packs a punch, foreshadowing such inspired moments as the start of Act III of Strauss' opera *Der Rosenkavalier*. The trio section's lyrical interlude briefly reappears before the coda. A lavishly expressive slow movement ensues that seems the heart of the piece, sometimes positively crying out for the full orchestra.

The Finale is full of rhythmic drive and heady passion. Through this hard-driven sonata-rondo, Strauss sustains the intensity right up to the final chord.

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) Piano Quartet in C minor, Op.60 (1875)

1. *Allegro non troppo*
2. *Scherzo. Allegro*
3. *Andante*
4. *Finale. Allegro comodo*

'Music has no subject beyond the combinations of notes we hear, for music speaks not only by means of sounds, it speaks nothing but sound.' So wrote Eduard Hanslick, chief critic of the influential Viennese newspaper the *Neue Freie Presse*. In his treatise *On the Musically Beautiful* (1854) he rejected any connection between music and 'affect states' (i.e. human emotions). Hanslick was an advocate and friend of Johannes Brahms, but virulently opposed to Wagner. This division helped to entrench for over a century the odd notion that music should be 'pure', devalued by external associations – even though most listeners respond to it in a chiefly emotional way.

Brahms' works, supposedly at the opposite polarity from Wagner or Liszt, have often been considered ideally 'pure'. Yet beneath the surface, they are crawling with proof to the contrary, and his C minor Piano Quartet, the most powerful of his three, is no exception. Though premiered only in 1875, it was first written around two decades earlier, at a very different time of Brahms' life.

In October 1853, aged 20, Brahms met Robert and Clara Schumann in Dusseldorf. He hero-worshipped them both and developed a hopeless passion for Clara. Four months later, Robert suffered a severe mental collapse and attempted suicide. He was confined thereafter to a mental hospital, where he died in July 1856. These events impacted on Brahms like a meteor strike.

He quietly adopted Robert's penchant for musical ciphers and symbolic themes, including some representing Clara. Trapped between his mentor's illness and his own feelings for that mentor's wife, he packed such symbols into his B major Trio Op.8 and the C minor Piano Quartet. Later he rewrote both extensively: in 1873–74, he changed the quartet's key from C sharp minor to C minor (C possibly for Clara), transformed the Finale into the Scherzo, and created new third and fourth movements.

More mature now, and more sardonic, he told his publisher: 'On the cover you must have a picture, namely a head with a pistol to it. Now you can form some conception of the music! I'll send you my photograph for the purpose... you can use the blue coat, yellow breeches, and top-boots ...' This was the garb of Goethe's Werther, in the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, who shoots himself for love of an unattainable married woman. Perhaps Brahms was trying to excise his early emotional excess. Nevertheless, some Clara themes linger: the five descending notes heard in various incarnations, especially in the first movement, are everywhere in Robert's music, symbolising her.

A blank piano unison initiates a questioning introduction before the first theme gears up into a driven idea with a two-note motif (is it a sigh? 'Clara'? Both? Neither?). A calming second theme in E flat major then unfolds in long-breathed phrases. In the ensuing adventures in thematic transformation, nothing is ever quite as expected; and the movement ends almost as enigmatically as it began.

The Scherzo, turning the two-note motif upside-down, has a fierce, taut-coiled energy that, in the centre, Brahms controls through a tense build-up and outburst. Eventually the music hurtles towards a conclusion that unexpectedly swerves to the major.

That transformation ushers in an Andante in E major (a key related to the original C sharp minor, but a remote choice beside C minor). Like the slow movement of Robert Schumann's Piano Quartet, it opens with a songful cello solo; the violin extends this into a duet and the viola sidles in. The central section inhabits an introspective world resembling Brahms' late piano pieces: music of many questions that only raise more in response.

The Finale's rondo theme unfurls above a purling counterpoint; along the way Brahms appears to reference other C minor compositions, notably Mendelssohn's Piano Trio No.2, with its chorale theme, and the unmistakable motif of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Again, however, twists of fate raise questions that cannot be answered. Instead of an ultimate triumph, the coda winds down to conclude in a brusque final cadence.

Programme notes © Jessica Duchon, 2024

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