



City of Birmingham
Symphony Orchestra

CENTRE STAGE: BRAHMS STRING SEXTET

CBSO Centre, Birmingham | Friday 14 April 2023, 2pm

Part of the Osborn Chamber Music Programme

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Duo in G major for violin and viola, KV.423

Johannes Brahms String Sextet No.1 in B flat major, Op.18

Philip Brett – Violin I

Charlotte Skinner – Violin II

David BaMaung – Viola

Jessica Tickle – Viola

Kate Setterfield – Cello

Catherine Ardagh-Walter – Cello

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Duo in G major for violin and viola, K.423

Allegro

Adagio

Allegro

In 1783 Mozart and his new wife Constanze travelled from Vienna to Salzburg, to meet the family. There he was visited by Joseph Haydn's brother Michael, who was ill and unable to meet a commission from his employer – Mozart's former *bête noire*, Archbishop Colloredo. Michael Haydn had worked alongside Leopold Mozart and the young Wolfgang in Salzburg for many years; he was a friend of the family and was considered (by many contemporaries) to be almost the equal of his more famous brother. Mozart called him "our Haydn", and deeply respected his skill. On this occasion, however, Michael needed help: and Mozart won't have minded the opportunity to put one over on his detested former boss.

Showing characteristic neighbourliness and spontaneity Mozart offered to write the two *Sonate a due* (Duo sonatas) required – and the two Duos K.423 and K.424 were first performed as the work of Michael Haydn. Mozart preferred to play the viola during chamber music sessions and was perfectly acquainted with the virtues of the instrument; in fact, he loved it. The evidence is clear; in Mozart's chamber music the viola never takes second place to the violin. It's a distinct, often pensive voice in its own right, engaging in a lively and articulate conversation with the more exuberant violin.

Mozart's Duos avoid gimmicks: they're filled, instead, with a wealth of ideas and a restrained (but unmistakable) sense of theatre. Conversation triumphs, as well as a quiet undercurrent of solemnity that must have contrasted vividly with the rococo

architecture of the Salzburg palace where the works were heard for the first time. The Archbishop accepted them as the work of Michael Haydn and reportedly never spotted the difference. But then, he had more important things to worry about.

Johannes Brahms (1833-97)

String Sextet No.1 in B flat major, Op.18

Allegro ma non troppo

Andante ma moderato

Scherzo: Allegro moderato

Rondo: Poco allegretto e grazioso

Laura von Meysenbug was a piano pupil of Clara Schumann, and sister of a senior official at the court of Prince Leopold of Lippe-Detmold. The Prince was a cultured ruler who maintained a fine orchestra and a state choral society. The 24-year-old Johannes Brahms, meanwhile, had by the spring of 1857 been living with Clara in Dusseldorf for over three years – initially to offer support during her husband Robert's final illness, but latterly out of an intense but frustrated love for Clara herself. Laura was ideally placed to bring the young composer to the attention of the Prince, and Brahms duly paid a short visit to Detmold, making an excellent impression. He was immediately engaged to spend that autumn at the court as piano-teacher to the Royal household and conductor of the chorus.

The opening in Detmold had been timely. Detmold was a quiet town that nonetheless enjoyed a lively cultural life under the benevolent eye of its Prince. Brahms liked it, and returned in 1858 and 1859, finding the atmosphere conducive to composition. He needed an opportunity to distance himself from the claustrophobic intensity of his relationship with Clara, and what it represented – both personally and creatively. When

he left for Detmold in September 1857 Clara wrote to a friend that “my heart bled”.

But just days later we find Brahms writing to Clara that “You must seriously try to alter, my dearest... Passions are not natural to mankind... The ideal and genuine man is calm both in his joy and his sorrow”. As his biographer Malcolm MacDonald puts it, “this from the composer of some of the most passionate music of the 1850s!” But the music that Brahms created in his Detmold period indicates an artist undergoing genuine change. While he continued to work on the tempestuous masterworks that had preoccupied him earlier in the decade, these three years also saw the creation of Brahms’ earliest, and sunniest, orchestral works (the two Serenades Op.11 and Op.16) and the first ideas for his String Sextet in B flat, Op.18.

This was Brahms’ first piece of chamber music without piano, and only his second piece of published chamber music of any sort. His perfectionism is well known; his 14-year struggle with his First Symphony and his comment that “You don’t know what it means to the likes of us when we hear his [Beethoven’s] footsteps behind us” reflect his attitude to the established classical genres. But the only significant string sextet before Brahms’ was Spohr’s Op.140 of 1848 – good, but hardly Beethoven. By writing a sextet Brahms neatly sidestepped the whole issue of his classical inheritance, and the result was a work that brims with lyricism, spontaneity and warmth.

But the composition of the Sextet was not all sunshine and relaxation. Brahms never created without self-criticism, and the piece was revised and remodelled with all his usual rigour. He submitted early drafts to Clara Schumann, the composer Julius Grimm and his friend, the great violinist Joseph Joachim. Even after he’d released the finished work for its first performance – at Hanover on 20 October 1860, led by Joachim – Brahms was anxious, declining to attend the premiere on the grounds that “I’m somewhat nervous about this long and sentimental piece”.

And despite the happiness of his time in Detmold and his burgeoning professional reputation, the aftermath of his relationship with the Schumanns can rarely have been far from his thoughts. Although Brahms was habitually reticent about the personal content of his music, something might well be read into the fact that he chose to make a solo piano transcription of the Sextet’s darkest and most severe movement, the D minor *Andante*, as a gift for Clara’s birthday on 13 September 1860. Both Clara and Johannes played the

transcription frequently in private and public, though it was never published in either of their lifetimes.

The Sextet as a whole, however, was sold by Brahms to the publisher Simrock for 16 Friedrichsdor in July 1861 and – despite some initial resistance in those notoriously slow-on-the-uptake musical centres, Vienna and London – was adopted with delight by string players across Europe. Its string writing has a fluency and naturalness that Brahms was never to surpass (it’s often forgotten that as a boy Brahms played the cello even before the piano), and this, together with the music’s instantly appealing character, means that to this day it receives hundreds of private domestic play-throughs for every public performance.

Allegro ma non troppo: The two cellos launch an expansive and flowing sonata-form first movement, with a dance-like swing. But Brahms’ formal logic is also in play; listen out for the four-note figure (three quavers and a crotchet) that appears in the lower instruments at the end of the second group – and hear how he transforms it into the movement’s whimsical pizzicato coda.

Andante ma moderato: Brahms takes a bass-line from the famous baroque melody *La Folia* and a mood from the *Andante* of Schubert’s *Death and the Maiden* quartet to create one of his most powerful variation-movements. The key is D minor, the mood is bitter, and sombre violas and cellos dominate the palette until, with the fourth variation, major key sunlight shines through at last. The close is deeply consoling.

Scherzo: A short, bright but high-powered movement on the Beethoven model, with an even faster and more brilliant central Trio section. Listen again for the four-note figure from the first movement; even at his most playful, Brahms is the master of his material.

Rondo: Another exquisitely-turned cello-melody opens this genial, leisurely and unquestionably *grazioso* finale. The most serenade-like movement in the whole sextet, it sees no need to rush matters when there are so many and so satisfying combinations of melodies and instruments to work through – and you’ll hear that four note figure again in a soaring cello counter-melody. Only in the last half-page do all six instruments break into a run as they race together for the final bar.

Programme note © Richard Bratby

COMING UP ON CENTRE STAGE...

CBSO Centre, Birmingham

CELLO ENSEMBLE

Friday 28 April 2023, 2pm

One cello sounds gorgeous, so imagine the mouthwatering sonic deliciousness when a whole team of them play in close harmony. The CBSO’s cello section has a story to tell, with melodious musical tales from by Grieg, Rossini, Tchaikovsky, Puccini and many more.

MUSIC AND POETRY

Thursday 11 May, 2pm

Two glorious art forms, beautifully interwoven in a performance programmed by CBSO musicians. Featuring Purcell, Finzi, Penderecki and Mozart, this is a concert to take your breath away.