

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 4 May 2024  
7.30pm

This concert is supported by David and Clare Kershaw

Renaud Capuçon violin  
Julia Hagen cello  
Igor Levit piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Trio No. 1 in B Op. 8 (1853-4 rev. 1889)  
*I. Allegro con brio • II. Scherzo. Allegro molto •  
III. Adagio • IV. Finale. Allegro*

*Interval*

Piano Trio No. 2 in C Op. 87 (1880-2)

*I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto •  
III. Scherzo. Presto - Poco meno presto •  
IV. Finale. Allegro giocoso*

Piano Trio No. 3 in C minor Op. 101 (1886)

*I. Allegro energico • II. Presto non assai •  
III. Andante grazioso • IV. Allegro molto*



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**Brahms's** creative engagement with the piano trio spans almost his entire compositional career – but not quite as neatly as the opus numbers of this evening's programme might have you believe. His first piano trio doesn't survive at all, although we know thanks to early correspondence that it was completed – and then subsequently rejected and destroyed – by the year of his 20th birthday. And the Piano Trio in B major of 1854 was also the last of his trios, in the sense that he heavily revised it and issued an entirely new version in 1891.

The B major Trio was completed in January 1854 and published – thanks to a warm endorsement by Clara Schumann – by the distinguished house of Breitkopf & Härtel. In its original form it was very substantial, with outer movements around 500 bars long and a lengthy contrapuntal passage in the opening *Allegro* which reflected Brahms's newfound interest in Baroque and Renaissance repertory. All four movements also bore heavy traces of Robert Schumann's influence, from characteristic harmonies to the interplay of instrumental lines and keyboard textures. But even before the piece appeared in print, Brahms wrote to his good friend Joseph Joachim that 'I would have liked to keep the Trio, so that I could have adjusted it later'.

The chance to do so came over three decades later, when his long-standing publisher Fritz Simrock bought up Brahms's early works from other houses and offered him the option of making alterations to them before re-issue. The B major Trio was the only piece Brahms opted to revise, and the changes he made were so extensive that the result, as he joked to Simrock, was more an 'Op. 108' than an 'Op. 8'. Gone is the vastness of the outer movements, which are shorn of around 200 bars apiece; gone, too, the extended counterpoint of the first movement and many of the Schumann references.

The beautifully long-breathed melody which begins the first movement is from the original; the skilful unwinding of that theme, with those subtle shifts to unusual keys and moments in which the clouds seem to obscure the sunny countenance of the opening, are Brahms's later efforts. So too are his manoeuvres through different time signatures, and the elegant fluidity with which he draws us through this *Allegro*. The scampering *Scherzo* and dancing *Finale* similarly combine features of both versions. But it is in the slow movement where Brahms makes the fewest, and most magical alterations: tiny adjustments to the opening dialogue between piano and strings which turn it from a beautiful, youthful work to a heart-twistingly exquisite movement by a mature master.

In the summer of 1880, Brahms began piano trios in C and E flat major, sending movements for inspection to Clara Schumann and one or two of his other most trusted friends and advisors. By 1882, he had completed the C major Trio but the other piece had

vanished altogether, another victim of his ferociously high standards. What, then, of the survivor? It is a substantial four-movement piece, with a broad, generous opening *Allegro*; but there is something in the strings' unison presentation of the opening theme that hints at a Classical inspiration (above all, Mozart, whose music Brahms adored). Of course, Brahms does not unfold and develop the melody in a Mozartian manner, and it is precisely the quasi-symphonic textures of the work that disguise the hat-tip. A theme and variations follows; inflected with Hungarian melodic shapes and rhythmic catches, this movement is melancholy and heartfelt, with a wonderfully strident variation full of double-stopping and percussive chords amid the more obviously tender and lyrical sections. An impishly mysterious *Scherzo* comes next, skittering and dancing across the keyboard; while the *Finale* is full of sunshine and cheer.

The C minor Trio dates from 1886, and a highly productive summer in which Brahms also composed his Second Cello Sonata and his Second and Third Violin Sonatas. This Trio is quite a different beast from its predecessor – above all in the extent to which it derives its shape and direction from just a tiny number of brief musical motifs. (Arnold Schoenberg later remarked that from Brahms he learned 'economy, yet richness'.) The grandly strident bars of the opening provide all that is needed, in its most compact form, to 'grow' the longer themes that make the movement. As the *Allegro* unfolds, we move from the dark minor-key opening to a lyrical second subject, violin and cello singing together over rising arpeggiations in the piano; but that opening motif never entirely leaves us, driving the music onwards and pulling the whole movement together.

There is a troubled uncertainty to the scherzo: although it is light-footed in its presentation, the pianist frequently leaves harmonies hanging in the air with no real sense of which direction we will be taken in when the line finally resolves. Any lingering fears might be soothed away in the lullaby rocking of the following *Andante* – but this is also not quite as it appears, since Brahms writes it as a series of seven-beat phrases rather than keeping to the familiar lilt of even numbers. Consequently, the score alternates time signatures to keep this rhythmic pattern in play. It is a tribute to Brahms's sense of line and pacing that he is able to make us more – or less – aware of this unusual feature as the movement unfolds, with some moments of real gentleness and others which draw attention to the unsettled foundations of the melody. We are brought up short at the end of the scherzo with two unexpectedly loud final chords from the piano, which set us up for the action-packed finale, all taut virtuosic writing and thrillingly precipitous cross-rhythms.

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