
Philharmonia

Thursday 9 May, 6pm
Royal Festival Hall

Eunsley Park – violin
Nuno Carapina – violin
Rebecca Chambers – viola
Richard Birchall – cello
Alexander Rolton – cello

SCHUBERT String Quintet in C major (50 mins)

Allegro ma non troppo

Adagio

Scherzo. Presto – Trio. Andante sostenuto

Allegretto

Schubert has always been one of my favourite composers. In fact I don't think there is a single musician to contest his genius. Schubert's String Quintet is one of the greatest pieces – a true pinnacle of the chamber music repertoire, and having the opportunity to perform it today with my dear colleagues and friends from the Philharmonia Orchestra is definitely a highlight of the musical season for me. Schubert's tremendous output was always impressive, but nothing matches what he achieved in 1828, when he was gravely ill and at death's door at the age of 31. It is heartbreaking to comprehend the unfulfilled potential when we see the astounding quality of the works he composed during his final year and a half: *Winterreise*, the Ninth Symphony, the B flat and E flat Piano Trios, the Four Impromptus, the Sixth Mass, his last three piano sonatas, and this String Quintet.

Completed in September 1828, the Quintet was Schubert's last instrumental work. The addition of a second cello to the standard string quartet format results in a greater sonority, warmth and richness to the sound. Schubert works his signature magic through familiar methods: tender lyricism, ravishing melodies, unexpected modulations, and a contrasting and surprising mix of moods.

The opening of the first movement sets the scene with shifting harmonic colouring and a typical device in Schubert's music: the switching between major and minor, which portray shifts of hope and despair. The lilting second subject, introduced by the cello duet is one

of my favourite passages; instantly recognisable, super expressive and nostalgic.

The intricate textures of the tender but melancholy Adagio immediately capture one's aural attention. The sustained notes of the melody, played by the middle strings feel almost endless. The mood is then interrupted by an intense emotionally charged middle section. The third movement is a vivacious, rhythmically energetic country dance which is contrasted by a broody and sombre, minor-key Trio.

The finale sounds like it was written for many more instruments. You can hear Hungarian and Viennese themes and right at the very end you will notice that even the final note – the arrival C tonic note is preceded by a rather unusual D flat grace note; Schubert's little touch of ambiguity.

Trying to convey the exposed perfection of this piece is a challenge: Schubert often writes awkwardly for string instruments. But what I was reminded of every time was that we are all totally in service of the music. And that the existence of this piece, with its unique combination of serenity, drama, charm and pathos, is in itself the biggest gift and fulfilment that we, as musicians or listeners can hope for.

Programme notes by Eunsley Park

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