

# EVENT FIVE

Sunday 15 September 2024 3:00pm  
St Olave's Church, Marygate Lane



CONCERT BY FESTIVAL ARTISTS

**Ben Hancox, Magnus Johnston** (Violins)

**Gary Pomeroy, Simone van der Giessen** (Violas)

**Marie Bitloch, Tim Lowe** (Cellos)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 – 1791)

String Quintet in C minor, K 406

*Allegro*

*Andante*

*Menuetto in Canone*

*Allegro*

The last ten years of Mozart's life were spent in Vienna in precarious independence from both patron and immediate paternal advice, a situation aggravated by an imprudent marriage. Initial success in the opera-house and as a performer was followed, as the decade went on, by increasing financial difficulties. By the time of his death in December 1791, however, his fortunes seemed about to change for the better, with the success of the German opera *The Magic Flute*, and the possibility of increased patronage.

The String Quintet in C minor, K 406 is the composer's own arrangement of a Wind Serenade, K. 388, for two oboes, clarinets, horns and bassoon, written in 1782 at the end of July, shortly after the completion of the *Singspiel Die Entführung aus dem Serail* ('The Abduction from the Seraglio'). It is mentioned by Mozart in a letter to his father on 27th July in that year, described as *Nacht Musique* but is not in the form or mood of a Serenade. The later arrangement was designed to be advertised with the String Quintets K. 515 and 516 in April 1788 in the *Wiener Zeitung*, where they are announced as *schön und korrekt geschrieben* ('Beautiful and correctly composed'). By then Mozart was entering each new work into his catalogue of compositions but he did not enter C minor quintet, perhaps because it was an arrangement rather than a new work.

The quintets were initially available from Johann Michael Puchberg, a textile-merchant and fellow freemason of Mozart. Puchberg had lent various sums of money to the composer so the advertised quintets, available on subscription,

represented an effort by Mozart to repay Puchberg. The failure of this attempt can be seen from a second advertisement in the Wiener Zeitung on 25th June, extending the subscription period to 1st January 1789. Publication by the Viennese publishing house Artaria followed in 1789 and 1790, with the third of the quintets, K 406, appearing in 1792 after the composer's death. Since the wind serenade used pairs of oboes and clarinets, it was a straightforward matter to map these to the pairs of violins and violas. Such is Mozart's finesse with the transcription that without knowing the back story it would not be apparent that the quintet was not in its original form.

### The Piece

The C minor opening of the quintet is not entirely dissimilar to that of Beethoven's piano concerto in the same key, both starting out with quite brutally raw unison statements answered by a more poignant, fully harmonized quiet response. The quiet response, however, has the first violin reaching ever higher in a series of melancholic sighs. This dialogue between austere, almost heartless music and music that pleads and questions gives the movement its shape and meaning. The whole movement concludes uncompromisingly in C minor.

The Andante moves into the relative major and seems precisely to embody the feeling which inspires us to create words like "bittersweet." A gentle lilt is felt throughout despite off-balance stresses and heart-rending harmonic clashes. Throughout the movement Mozart makes small adjustments to the musical material of the original wind serenade. There is a beautiful, innocent charm at the conclusion after some passages of angst had created tension.

The Menuetto is in the form of a canon in which the violin enters first, with the cello following at an interval of one bar. The theme starts with some rhythmic ambiguity, having a pulse in three which is twice as slow as the meter of the dance, a device more commonly used in the baroque (to which this movement pays homage) at the ends of phrases. The contrasting trio section is for string quartet, with the second viola silent, and is a canon in inversion, a musical depiction of the still beauty of a reflection in water.

A series of variations closes out the work, in which neighbouring variations often serve as foils to each other through startling juxtapositions. At two points in the movement the original idea of a wind serenade makes itself felt. The first of these is a variation in E-flat major in which we hear "horn fifths" – the call of hunting horns in the woods. Of course in the original we hear actual horns, and here we have a reference to the idea of horns in the violas. Then in the final variation, having found our way to C Major, we hear the type of music we might have expected all along in a serenade, and we escape the interior, complex world we have generally been in and come outside to a joyful open air ending.

## **Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897)**

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

Brahms wrote over 100 chamber music works but only a quarter of his output survived the intense self-criticism of his early compositions. For most of the nineteenth century the shadow of Beethoven hung over German music. His dominance in virtually every genre was so complete that no composer could escape comparison to the departed master. His concertos, symphonies, quartets and much more were the benchmark in German national musical culture (and, of course, beyond German boundaries).

The less than confident young Johannes Brahms managed to thwart the intimidating spectre of Beethoven by waiting until he felt more able to write the symphonies and quartets that he knew lay within. In the meantime he honed his skills through works in other forms not linked to Beethoven. These compositions were able to stand on their own merits and through them Brahms developed the conviction he needed to come out from under the shadow of Beethoven.

One early attempt to find his own voice was Brahms's String Sextet No. 1, Op.18 scored for pairs of violins, violas, and cellos, an ensemble untouched by the great master. It was a genre known only to a few lesser talents and particularly the cellist and genius composer Boccherini who wrote prolifically for the string quintet which is not a million miles away from the sextet with the addition of his own instrument. Indeed Boccherini's set of six sextets composed in 1776 were the first to be written (No.1 in E flat major was played at last year's YCMF). Come 1860, the twenty-seven-year-old Brahms opted for a sextet exactly because of its rarity. Brahms also loved the warmth of tone and sonority of the cello. His choice of the 'cello for his first published sonata (op.38) reflects his lifelong affinity with the sunset quality of the instrument and when he finally wrote his masterful symphonies can be heard time and time again in the cello melodies that abound.

At the time the Op.18 sextet was written, young Brahms was spending his summer as music master of the royal court of Detmold, where his duties were sufficiently limited to allow plenty of time for country walking in the local woods. Perhaps that mellow atmosphere contributed to the composition's gentle charms. But there may be another reason for the music character. The sextet is a harbinger of the passion that infuses so much of his music, perhaps in this case with a backstory because he was writing the piece in the aftermath of breaking his engagement to the singer Agathe von Seibold. Perhaps he was relieved, "I have shaken off my last love", (even though he encoded her name in the sextet). This is not a heartbreak piece but one of glorious release and invention.

After completing the sextet Brahms sent it to his friend, the violinist Joseph Joachim, with a note, "I have been quite a long time over it and I do not suppose

that this will have raised your expectations... but with God's help, nothing is impossible." Joachim, after playing through the piece with friends, expressed cautious optimism and arranged a premiere in Hanover on October 20, 1860. Brahms was present for the occasion, as was his dear friend Clara Schumann, who remarked of the piece, "It was even more beautiful than I had anticipated, and my expectations were already high." Spared the burden of Beethoven's ghost, the new sextet – and its young creator –scored a success. It is one of his most glorious works; tuneful, colourful and inventive. Above all using the six voices with creativeness and melding them into a wonderful ochre acoustic - a wash of sunset sound.

### The Piece

Its radiant first movement offers a wealth of contrasting melodies, sometimes featuring one player or another, at other times, blending the entire ensemble together. The second movement, the only one specifying a truly slow tempo, brings a set of variations on a melody based upon Hungarian rhythms and sonorities; Brahms was no Hungarian, but had heard plenty of that country's music, thanks to his Hungarian-born colleague, violinist Joseph Joachim. The short and spirited third movement leaves Hungary behind, turning instead to the high spirits of more generic folk music moods. For his finale Brahms at first sets aside expectation, choosing elegance and grace rather than the high drama that would more frequently close a multi-movement composition. Only in the final pages does bold expression take centre stage, allowing the sextet to conclude with unalloyed fervour.

The sextet's reception at its first performance in Hanover must surely have given the young composer a much needed confidence boost. Brahms for Brahms's sake. And for us a joyful conclusion to York Chamber Music Festival 2024.

