



Oxford Chamber Music Society

Frith Piano Quartet

3 March 2019

Benjamin Frith, piano

David Le Page, violin

Robin Ireland, viola

Richard Jenkinson, cello

With **John Tattersdill**, double bass

Johann Nepomuk HUMMEL 1778-1837

Quintet for piano, violin, viola, cello and double bass in E flat major/minor, Opus 87

1. *Allegro e risoluto assai* 2. *Minuet and Trio: Allegro con fuoco* 3. *Largo* –
4. *Allegro agitato*

Although composed in Vienna during October 1802 this work had to wait two decades to be published, and then in a revised version to accommodate the piano range's octave increment (to 6½). It is likely that pirated copies of both circulated freely; in fact, Hummel, put out by the plethora of musical sharks, was a copyright pioneer. In the Vienna of 1822 Rossini was the talk of the town; Beethoven had composed his late piano sonatas and was on the brink of writing the quartets, all to be ignored for a century. And what about Schubert (star struck by Maestro Crescendo, and intending to dedicate his last three piano sonatas to Hummel)? At least a piscatorial ditty by him had reached as far as the ears of a mining entrepreneur in Lower Austria. And, but, yes: there was Johann Nepomuk Hummel. Although he didn't always get all his own way – he endured two court appointments (well, he was sacked from the second), but enjoyed the third, at Weimar, legendarily corpulent and flattered to know Goethe – with a calculating eye composed for the voracious maw of the amateur market, calmly producing beautifully crafted piano, instrumental and chamber pieces for every household in search of social status or marrying off an accomplished daughter or two. There was abundance in other genres too – but never a symphony: there he knew his place. *It was a serious moment*

for me when Beethoven appeared, he said. As a pianist with a Europe-wide reputation he had been the proud full-time child protégé of Mozart, admired by Haydn, and when Beethoven played, before his deafness, they were in friendly (sort of...) rivalry: extrovert elegance versus a razzle-dazzling cosmos. [For fun, I can't resist a mention of Daniel Steibelt, biliously bonkers in his piano rivalry with Ludwig van. Lauded in Paris, he was a shady character, one who could have been brewed by Balzac's black coffee; his wife liked accompanying him on the castanets.] In short, the Viennese saw Hummel as fine a composer and pianist as Beethoven, and altogether more congenial a personality. However, although the classical grip on his music loosened a little (it became increasingly like Schubert!) – and we must on no account diminish his formative influence on Chopin, Liszt and Schumann – the changing times of the 1830s began to sweep it all way; at least, until the 1950s when trumpeters started looking for another concerto to play with the evergreen Haydn. But in his heyday, he took care to pass on a little advice to his pupil Ferdinand Hiller: *Your purpose is to touch the heart, to instil joy, to delight the ear... Enjoy the world while you attempt to provide it enjoyment... never forget this watchword: Moderation.* So perhaps it is not surprising that in 1819 this Quintet (or it may have been the composer's own money-spinning arrangement of the Septet for piano, flute, oboe, horn, viola, cello and double bass Op 74) was played in the presence of Franz Schubert in a spirit of great amity in Lower Austria.

... one can feel the presence of two centuries

The first movement opens with the sprucely declaimed four-note motif which is its foundation rock: we have encountered something similar in two other works this OCMS season: the Mozart G minor Piano Quartet K478, and the Beethoven String Quartet in F Op18 no 1 (also published, as it happens, in 1802). The piano replies, and a concerto-like dialogue follows (all this is in E flat minor, but the title page of the original publication confusingly says E flat major). After some keyboard flamboyance (this really is a work by a pianist!) the tender A flat second subject is announced by the strings, shifting to end the exposition (marked for repeat) in the 'correct' relative major of G flat. In the development the strings dramatically hold on to the four-note motif against the excited coruscations of the piano, leading the way into what is hardly a recapitulation at all, and a coda – both with new ideas. The E flat minor second movement is marked as a minuet, but is really a scherzo; one can feel the presence of two centuries throughout this work. With the solo violin, there is a dab of Hungarian gypsy – a familiar exoticism of the day; the trio politely plays scales. Although marked as a discrete movement, the Largo, with its Gothic string chords and piano reveries, is really only an intriguing curtain-raiser to the final rondo. This is made of sterner stuff, with a resolute main theme driven by the piano. In the first episode we seem to be in a micro painting from John 'Mad' Martin, if you know of him, with storm clouds, semiquaver hail and a redeeming light emanating from the violin. In the second, with their partner all but gagged, the viola, violin and cello break out in smiles, but the piano escapes for a revenging manic conclusion. Any more thrills and spills and we would all need the smelling salts.

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN 1770-1827

Quartet for piano, violin viola and cello in E flat major, Opus 16

1. *Grave – Allegro ma non troppo*
2. *Andante cantabile*
3. *Rondo. Allegro ma non troppo*

When this delightful work was first performed in Vienna, 6th April 1797, it was as *A Quintet for Fortepiano and Four Wind Instruments* (oboe, clarinet, horn, bassoon). On publication as Opus 16 in March 1801 (the year before the Hummel), by the drollly named Tranquillo Mollo (also a purveyor of globes, maps and city views), this version appeared alongside string parts to create the piece we are hearing today. Such an arrangement had to be purely commercial, aimed at the amateur market: there simply existed more customers for strings than wind, and a crooked someone else would have eagerly taken on the task. The origins of the piece went back to 1796, and his hearing of the sublime Mozart E flat Quintet for Piano and Wind K452 at some point during a tour of Prague, Dresden, Leipzig and Berlin between February and July. He was so smitten, he decided to compose a piece utilising its forces and structure; the fact that his friend, Baron Nikolaus Zsemaskall von Domanovecz (the dedicatee, by the way, of the F minor Op 95 String Quartet) turned out to own the autograph must have been an additional incentive. In the event, the Mozart and Beethoven, away from the obvious, are two very different works, immediately evident from the slow introductions.

... wrenching the main theme in half

Mozart launches his masterpiece with both processional dignity and warm lyricism as he introduces his instruments. Beethoven, in the same contrast of assertion and response is altogether more expansive and portentous, *Hier bin ich*, a fist tightening and yielding, the piano commanding. After this build-up, the opening of the first theme (derived from the introduction) on the piano seems to spring from his inner child; then again, on the violin, bounding towards two other glittering tunes, the latter also seeded by the opening section. The exposition is marked, as usual, for repeat. The development begins with a short burst of elemental fury, and, blood pressure down, continues with a false recapitulation (caught you!) in the wrong key, A flat: Beethoven is clearly having the time of his life. In the real heedlessly non-literal recapitulation, he confirms this by wrenching the main theme in half with a piano cadenza to announce a gamey coda. Warning: if you aren't delighted by the *Andante cantabile*, please test your pulse. I have little else to say. It is a kind of rondo variations, with the main theme transformed on its three appearances; there are two episodes, in G minor and B flat minor, and a lingering coda. The finale is designated as a Rondo, and is a movement full of delightful wit and comic timing. A hunting theme sets off, and we are quickly in the first episode. In a good yarn, the mini-cadenza for piano linking the return to the rondo theme became an immense one: at one performance of the wind version ... *Beethoven suddenly began to*

improvise... and entertained himself and the others for a considerable time – but not the other players. They were displeased... and even very angry. It was really very comical to see them... putting the instruments in their mouths, only to put them down again. At length, Beethoven was satisfied and dropped back into the Rondo. The whole company was transported with delight. That performance took place in November 1804; in the morning the *Eroica* Symphony had been rehearsed for the first time. To return to the music: the third and last episode begins (but ends quoting the second!) as a variation on the hunting theme – which duly returns at the end to form a coda, marking the end of the hunt. Perhaps we have missed Beethoven's original horn in this movement? But one can certainly understand how 'the market' supported two versions of such an entertaining work.

INTERVAL - around 15 mins

Franz SCHUBERT 1797-1828

**Quintet for piano, violin, viola, cello and double bass in A minor.
D667, Op 114 (*Forellenquinttet* / *Trout Quintet*)**

1. *Allegro vivace* 2. *Andante* 3. *Scherzo* 4. *Theme and Variations: Andantino – Allegretto* 5. *Finale: Allegro giusto*

In the summer of 1819, the twenty-two-year-old Schubert went for a holiday to the village of Steyr, near Linz, in the mountainous countryside of Lower Austria. He was the guest of a tin mining magnate, one Sylvester Paumgartner, and accompanied by his most loyal friend and supporter, the Court Opera singer, Michael Vogt, who also happened to have his roots there. But far more important than being an engineer, mine host was an enthusiastic amateur musician who had rounded up a group of local talent for music-making at his house (now honourably adorned with a plaque): he played the cello, and there was a pianist, violinist and a double bass player. We know they delighted in playing a piece by our old friend Hummel: either the Piano Quintet we have heard or the composer's own arrangement of the Septet, or maybe they played both. But a companion work was wanted. This was certainly the instrumentation specified when Schubert was commissioned for the task, the other part of the deal being the incorporation of his song from about two years earlier, *Die Forelle*, *The Trout*, which happened to be the miner's favourite. The composition's history then becomes a bit of a gnawed bone for scholars as there is no manuscript, but it is likely that Schubert started work there and then, completing it on his return to Vienna in September. Was there a performance at Steyr? Of course there was, but we have no record of it. We owe the piece's popularity to the efforts of Carl Czerny, purgatorial composer for generations of pianists, who used the existing

parts to publish an edition in 1829, and moreover bankroll performances which had it *declared a masterpiece by those connoisseurs present*.

... wide-eyed countryside warmth

As befits the circumstances of its commission the quintet is a relaxed (in two movements *very* relaxed) serenade/divertimento style piece, full of wide-eyed countryside warmth. Quite without any say-so from Schubert, but picking up the piscine theme, we might imagine we are dozing by a river bank as it opens... A wake-up chord, an upwardly stretching piano arpeggio, dreamy legato music – and then everyone realises its holiday time and that the marking at the top of the page is *Allegro vivace*. So, hey presto, no more delay! The sunny, buoyant first theme is mainly on the fiddle, energized by triplet arpeggios: note how the dominance of the piano's upper register not only gives a sense of pellucid watery flow (the original accompaniment seems to be darting just below the river surface), but also balances the cello and double bass. All change: the theme goes to the piano, the arpeggios on the violin. *In a bright little stream, in joyous haste, a playful trout flashed past me like an arrow...* And as if from a bend in the river, we might think a skiff suddenly appears, with sparkling triplet dalliance betwixt violin and cello. The short time left to this exposition (which, although marked, isn't usually repeated) is eventful; the piano introduces another theme adding to the out-of-doors jollity, the violin taking over – but the sun disappears behind a cloud and there are a few very magical seconds in the strings with the piano in high octaves. The holiday mood resumes (another new theme!), but before the full-close is reached we hear the 'musing' from the very opening bars, the piano trilling above. The development is primarily concerned with the main theme, and modulates from key to key, a Schubert hallmark. There are no surprises in the recapitulation.

... the building blocks are unforgettable

If Schubert had expected a more rewarding fate for the work (but any performance was a stroke of fortune for him) he might have tried a little harder in the slow movement. But hold on – the building blocks are unforgettable: three distinctively characterised themes – the first a model of serenity, the piano – to continue with my imaginings – evoking the river and its tranquillity, with maybe just a stirring of the trout. *I stood by the shore and in sweet contentment I watched the little fish bathing in the clear stream...* Two couples walk by (violin and cello), and then a voluble piano with a diffident violin, fading away. And what does Schubert do? Develop this material like any other self-respecting composer? No, with the most famous rise of a minor third in music he repeats it, note for note. And we'll surely all be delighted with his indolence. The Scherzo is true to the spirit of the word *joke*. It's magnificently vigorous, with playful contrasts of dynamics and tricky accents. The amiable trio sounds like a conversation between piano and strings, with nods and disagreements.

... composed for friends amidst friends

And now for the variation movement, beginning of course with *The Trout* theme, played on the strings. The first four variations are straightforward. In the first the tune is given ornate treatment by the piano with triplets from violin, viola and cello and determined pizzicato from the bass; in the second the viola and cello have the theme, the violin enthusiastically descanting; and the double bass makes a spot-lit appearance in the third, supporting a piano now inebriated on those pervasive triplets. Next a touch of drama, with two minor to major key outbursts: *the fisherman's rod quivered and the fish was struggling on his hook. I felt the blood stir within me as I looked at the cheated trout.* Modulations form a bridge to the fifth and final variation, wherein the cello leads with an expansive and beautiful solo. This slips into the coda (some say sixth variation), comprising a cheery Allegretto fantasy on the song, replete with the original leaping figuration on the piano. In the finale we can sense very closely the feeling of it being composed for friends amidst friends, with the very idea that it would be heard and loved two hundred years later (short of a few months) on a March afternoon in Oxford inconceivable. One can say that the movement is even more lazily cobbled than the Andante. A one chord summons introduces a bright Hungarian-style theme, strings and piano alternating, with vigorous development in its wake. A carefree second theme is also developed, and in a very blustery fashion, concluding with a kind of coda and then a full close. This is music with nowhere to go – except – what's this? – transposed up a fifth and repeated; and then a transposition back down for a third time round, except most performances don't grant this pleasure. You know, there's piece by Erik Satie which could theoretically be repeated until the extinction of human life... It's called *Vexations*, and Schubert it isn't. Even after a third time I think we would leave happy and uplifted, certainly not vexed.

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