

Arisonto Horn Trio 21 March 2025

Clara Schumann (1819-1896) Three Romances for violin & piano Op.22 (1853)

1. *Andante molto*

3. *Leidenschaftlich schnell*

Our concert this evening starts with '*a marvellous, heavenly pleasure*' - George V of Hanover's reaction to Clara Schumann's *Three Romances for Violin and Piano* when played for him by Clara and its dedicatee Josef Joachim. The three pieces were inspired by her husband Robert's 43rd birthday in a year (1853) that was a turning point in Clara's life: in 1853 she met the 22 year-old Joseph Joachim, already an international star on violin, and the relatively unknown 20 year-old Johannes Brahms. They both became Clara's life-long supportive friends. In February 1854, Robert attempted suicide and at his own request became a patient in an asylum near Bonn. That December, Joachim was his first visitor – Clara was not allowed to visit. Not that she would have had much time, being the sole bread-winner through concerts and teaching for their family of 7 young children.

That she had previously found the time, in the midst of these responsibilities, to compose the *Three Romances* is partly a tribute to the strict and broad musical training that her overbearing and tyrannical father had subjected her to. He had also instilled in her a style of piano playing, promoted in his teaching manual ("*Wieck's Piano Education for a Delicate Touch and a Singing Sound*"), that, by giving prominence to the composer rather than the performer, was in contrast with the then fashionable virtuosic showmanship of, for example, Liszt.

György Ligeti (1923 - 2006): Trio for Violin, Horn and Piano (1982)

Andantino con tenerezza

Vivacissimo molto ritmico

Alla marcia

Lamento. Adagio

The Arisonto write:

"Written as an 'homage to Brahms,' György Ligeti's Horn Trio of 1982 marked a breakthrough after several years of creative silence following his opera *Le Grand Macabre*. Inspired by Johannes Brahms' own Horn Trio, Ligeti adopts traditional structures such as A - B - A ternary forms in the first three movements and a passacaglia in the final movement, yet he filters them through his own distinctive voice, blending the past with his exploratory techniques. The result is a deeply original work that retains what Ligeti described as a 'distinctly ironic distance' from its historical roots.

"Born in Romania to a Hungarian Jewish family, Ligeti's life was shaped by upheaval, including the loss of his mother and brother in the Holocaust and his escape from Hungary after the 1956 uprising. He was deeply influenced by a wide range of music - from Renaissance polyphony to Eastern European folk music and the avant-garde experiments of Darmstadt in the 1960s.

"The Horn Trio, written after five years of creative struggle, reflects his profound imagination and his ability to blend innovation with tradition. The opening movement (*Andante con tenerezza*) sets the tone with its haunting lyricism and poignant introspection. Ligeti employs overlapping melodic lines and subtly unstable harmonies, creating a sound world that feels simultaneously familiar and otherworldly. The following *Vivacissimo molto ritmico* bursts with rhythmic vitality, an exuberant dance inspired by imagined folk traditions from a fusion of Balkan, African, and Caribbean cultures. The third movement, an angular march, uses rhythmic dislocations between the violin and piano to produce a disorienting, jagged quality, while the horn's voice hints at something extraterrestrial in the central trio section.

The final *Lamento* is the emotional heart of the work, its grief-stricken passacaglia theme unfolding with devastating poignancy. Throughout the piece, but particularly in this movement, Ligeti employs different tuning systems for each instrument: the natural horn, with its overtone-based tuning, contrasts with the equal tempered piano and the flexible intonation of the violin. This creates a sense of constant tension and instability that never quite resolves. "

INTERVAL

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Horn Trio in E ♭ Op 40 (1865)

Andante

Scherzo: Allegro – Molto meno Allegro

Adagio mesto

Allegro con brio

The early 1860s were a productive time for Brahms' chamber music: 2 string sextets, 2 piano quartets, a piano quintet and a cello sonata as well as this horn trio. As a child Brahms learned piano, cello and Waldhorn, so perhaps this work, written shortly after the death of his mother, involved the instruments of his youth (he specified that the horn part could be substituted by a cello). Brahms was breaking new ground with this horn trio since it is the first piece ever written for the combination of violin, horn and piano. The piece was written to be played on the natural horn (Waldhorn); the valve horn was not well developed in the 1860s and Brahms enjoyed the contrast in timbre between the open natural notes and those produced by hand-stopping.

The overall structure of the work is unusual for Brahms since it echoes the old Church Sonata (*Sonata di Chiesa*) – a form

much used by Corelli - with four movements alternating slow-fast-slow-fast. It is also unusual in that the

opening *Andante* is the only first movement in Brahms' chamber music that is not in sonata form; it also features alternation, with a

broad, nostalgically tender *Andante* (*illustrated*) alternating with a more animated section (*illustrated*) in an A-B-A-B-A pattern. The third appearance of "A" takes on a magical quality by stating the theme *pianissimo* in the remote key of G flat - six flats for the violin and piano but effectively only three flats for the Horn which is in Eb to start with).



The sprightly *Scherzo* leads into a much slower trio section with the extreme key signature of 7 flats; the horn and violin

play the somber melody in thirds (*illustrated*) presaging the upcoming slow movement. This theme was first written

by the 20-year-old Brahms in 1853 (the year he met Clara Schumann, see above) as a little *Albumblatt* in the visitors' book of the director of music in Göttingen. The book passed to Princeton's library and Brahms' contribution to it was spotted by Christopher Hogwood almost 160 years after it was written.



Brahms' anguish at the death of his mother moulds the powerfully elegiac third movement, *Adagio mesto* (slow and sad). It opens in the 6 flats of Eb minor with dark colours and mournful semitones from the piano (*illustrated*). The violin and horn follow with a poignant and tender

espressivo theme (*illustrated*) that sets the mood for a wonderful movement. A few lines before the end Brahms introduces a related theme - a folk tune that his mother used to sing to him (*illustrated*). Speeded up, it becomes the theme of the Finale.



With the *Allegro con brio* Finale, mourning passes. Its joyful theme, introduced by the violin (*illustrated*), is joined by Waldhorn hunting calls to bring the work to a triumphant conclusion.



Programme notes by Chris Darwin