

## Notes on the program

### **GIOACHINO ROSSINI (1792-1868)**

*Sonata No. 1, in G, for two violins, cello and double-bass (c1804)*

“Six dreadful sonatas composed by me at the country estate of my friend Agostino Triossi, when I was at a most infantile age, not even having taken a lesson in accompaniment, the whole composed and copied out in three days.” That’s what’s an older Rossini wrote when he came across the score of a manuscript he’d written in the summer of 1804 when he was just 12. These delightful *sonate a quattro* are the earliest of his works to have survived and they have been in the repertoire ever since he wrote them. They were first published in an arrangement for string quartet. A version for wind quartet followed in 1828/9. Then, in 1954, the original manuscript was discovered in the Library of Congress in Washington and it showed that Rossini originally created the sonatas around his host’s instrument, the double bass. Triossi played the bass part, his cousins played first violin and cello, while Rossini himself took the second violin part. Rossini recalled that everyone played ‘like dogs.’

Like its companions, today’s G major Sonata includes surprisingly little that is derivative. It sounds – well – like Rossini and not like a composer who was not yet a teenager and had his head too much in the scores of Mozart and Haydn. Emulating the easy-going spirit of the 18<sup>th</sup> century divertimento rather than that of the more earnest string quartet, the young Rossini writes graceful, elegantly flowing lines in the opening movement, allowing his two violins to compete for attention, while cello and double bass add resonance to the overall sonority. The slow movement gently unfolds around musical ideas introduced in its opening measures. A quick half tone shift upwards from the E-flat slow movement leads into a jocular finale. Here, the two violins again spar with one another, allowing the cello a token tune, with even a moment in the limelight for the double bass.

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### **WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756-1791)**

*Quintet in E flat, for horn, violin, two violas and cello, K.407 (1782)*

Mozart called him an ox, a donkey and a fool. He wrote jokes and ribald comments in the copies of music he gave him. Once, he threw the parts of some concertos and symphonies on the floor and made the man who was often the butt of his dubious humor collect them on all fours. Yet, despite this, Mozart composed some of his most likeable music for his lifelong friend Joseph Leutgeb (1732-1811), including the four Horn Concertos and his only Horn Quintet. Leutgeb was a gifted player, renowned for his skill on the 18<sup>th</sup> century hand horn, the ancestor of the modern valved instrument. As a soloist, he developed techniques that were more advanced than the varied lip pressure that was traditionally used by horn players of the time. He traveled widely and was acclaimed in Paris for his ability to ‘sing an adagio as perfectly as the most mellow, interesting and accurate voice.’ To achieve

this, Leutgeb used hand-stopping to increase the number and vary the tone color of the notes at his disposal. He did this at a time when soloists were rare and most orchestral horn players were expected to be able to produce common fanfares and not much else. In Leutgeb, Mozart had a true virtuoso who could extend the expressiveness of an instrument that Mozart was naturally disposed to favor.

Throughout the Horn Quintet, Mozart is especially sensitive to the tone color of the five instruments, choosing the darker sonority of two violas plus violin and cello (rather than the more usual string quartet, with two violins) to draw out the mellow, romantic timbre of the featured instrument. The horn plays almost continuously and is required to match the agility of the string instruments, leading many to hear the work as a horn concerto with a chamber music accompaniment. In the outer movements of the Horn Quintet Mozart presents lively, extrovert music, often with a sense of humor, always with constantly shifting textures. The *Andante* is music of great beauty and intimacy, a love duet between the horn and first violin. The Horn Quintet, believed to have been composed in Vienna towards the end of 1782, is scored for a combination of instruments without precedent. It is a unique offering to a friend Mozart had known since earliest childhood and whom the composer mentions in his very last letter.

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### **FRANZ SCHUBERT (1798-1828)**

*Octet in F, for for clarinet, bassoon, horn, two violins, viola, cello, and bass, Op. 166, D.803 (1824)*

When Ignaz Schuppanzigh, the portly Viennese violinist whom Beethoven called ‘Falstaff,’ brought together eight musicians to give the première of Schubert’s Octet, he chose much the same group who gave the première of the Beethoven Septet almost a quarter century earlier. The clarinetist, however, was now Ferdinand, Count Troyer, who is reported to have commissioned the Octet from Schubert with the stipulation that it closely resemble Beethoven’s Septet – that composer’s most popular work during his lifetime. Both works are in the divertimento tradition, with six rather than four movements and an overriding feeling of well-being and relaxation. Schubert maintains a similar key relationship between movements to those in the Beethoven. Like Beethoven, he includes both scherzo and minuet (though reversed in order) and chooses a theme and variations as the fourth movement. He follows Beethoven’s lead by including a slow introduction to both first and last movements. Schubert does, however, add a second violin to Beethoven’s single violin, completing the string quartet foundation to the ensemble of mixed strings and winds.

Schubert took the month of February 1824 to fulfill the commission, delivering a work designed to appeal to its listeners yet, despite its outward resemblance to the Beethoven Septet, still speaking with his own voice. Imitation here is, indeed, the sincerest form of flattery. (Schubert worshipped Beethoven and – like Schuppanzigh – was to be a pallbearer at his funeral in 1827). Both works open with an 18-measure Adagio introduction to the opening movement. Schubert builds anticipation for what is to follow and adds unity by incorporating a short dotted figure in both sections. Indeed, the dotted rhythm continues to bring a feeling of unity throughout each of the movements of the Octet. The luxuriant, seamless melody that opens the first slow movement is given to the clarinet. The

modulations that ensue could only have come from Schubert's pen. An exuberant scherzo follows, rustic and unbuttoned, maybe even a little prophetic of Bruckner. The melody of the variation movement that Schubert provides next is shared by both violin and clarinet and is drawn from a love duet from his comic opera *Die Freunde von Salamanka* (The Friends from Salamanca). Schubert here provides seven variations to Beethoven's five. A graceful minuet then leads to the somber, mysterious introduction to the finale. This culminates in a vigorous march-like theme which is given a thorough working through. It's a fitting conclusion to a piece that is conceived on a symphonic scale yet which maintains the cheerful grace of a true piece of chamber music played among friends.

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