

Ripon Concerts, September 2023

It's a joy to be back, and to have the chance to fill you in a little on some of the music you'll be hearing in this fabulous 2023/24 season of six concerts between October and March. When I was last here a few years ago I took us on a sort of round-the-world tour of the repertoire you had featured in your new concert season. But today I want to take a slightly different approach – although again, there's definitely an international line-up across this year! – and I want to start with your own logo: 'Ripon Concerts: Chamber Music with Passion'.

Ever since I was a student, I've been fascinated by the idea of what constitutes 'chamber music' and why. And I suppose that's to for several different, but rather entangled reasons: the first is of course the question of what chamber we're talking about, and *whose* chamber, for that matter: are we talking Austrian aristocracy, Victorian upper middle classes, a piano showroom-cum-public forum (Steinway/Wigmore Hall) or a purpose-built acoustically sophisticated 'chamber' for paying ticket holders? Then there's the people playing in said chamber: are they employed by the owner of the building? Are they freelancers? Do they include the composer or did they commission the composer to write what they're playing? Are they even professionals, or could they be amateurs? Third comes *how* they're playing: what instruments, and how suitable the instruments might be for the chamber in question, because you're going to struggle to make a clavichord or even a harpsichord audible in the Royal Albert Hall, but a brass band in your front room might be a bit much. And last of all, there's *what* they're playing, the question of the programme that they've put together, and which composers are represented and why, and whether you actually are told in advance precisely what you're going to hear and that's why you've come to listen; or if half the fun of it is not knowing, of being surprised, of encountering not just pieces but juxtapositions of pieces in ways you might not expect.

So let's start with what looks to be the easiest programme in the series, from January 2024, which is students from the Royal Northern College of Music playing works by Beethoven. Beethoven's always an interesting figure to consider because his life spans such a major shift in musical and cultural history, for the end of the Enlightenment to the arrival of Romanticism, and through the period of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, as well as the arrival of industrialisation and mass production. Why all of these things together? Well, it's all about the chambers we're considering here.

When Beethoven was writing his early piano sonatas like the E major Sonata op.14 that you'll be hearing in this concert, he had half an eye on the newly-emerging middle class amateur audience that would enjoy pieces of this kind, and thus buy them to make Beethoven some cash. Industrialisation meant urbanisation (and obviously this happens at different rates in different parts of the world/different countries). But broadly speaking urban environments like Vienna were shifting during Beethoven's lifetime to incorporate more people with office and clerical jobs as well as the hugely expanding Austrian civil service. So these were people with education, social and career ambitions, and a desire to demonstrate their cultural cache through engaging in cultural pursuits – like playing music. So compare the opening of the 'Pathétique' Sonata in C major op.13, completed in 1798 and feels pretty big and intimidating... with the opening of the E major Sonata op.14 no.1 and I hope you'll agree, feels rather friendlier as an amateur prospect for a nice evening with a glass of wine rather than all the Sturm und Drang of its predecessor. And beyond the Sonata, Beethoven also produced a string quartet arrangement of this sonata, which would also have been quite amateur-friendly. Arrangements are a serious financial boon to composers in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – we're obviously pre-recording here and most people don't have their own musicians to hand to play them a nice symphony or octet of an evening, so if you can sell arrangements, you can make music available

to a huge number of people for them to engage with themselves: piano duet versions, string and piano reductions, quartets, trios, choral or vocal arrangements – you name it, the most popular and successful pieces of music got it. And this is something we've rather lost a sense of in our own time, because we *do* have recording, and that means we have a very firmly developed sense of what the 'original' or 'proper' version of a piece is, as opposed to its arrangements, which we consider worth *less*, a compromise that the composer has been forced into. Interestingly Beethoven and a number of other composers (Brahms among them) had no problem at all with arrangements if they as the composers were able to do the arranging, for the simple reason that as Beethoven himself explained to his publisher, composers can take far greater liberties with their own music than a bought-in arranger, because they can be freer with changing things, leaving them out, adding them in, and making the end result more idiomatic for the end user, so to speak. So the op.14 no.1 string quartet version you'll be hearing in that concert is also by Beethoven, and indeed is not in the same key – he's stuck it up a semitone into F major to make it nicer for the string players to play it. And there are other changes too, which no doubt the performers will discuss with you on the night.

Both the original sonata and its quartet arrangement were dedicated to a woman called Josephine von Braun, and this is our reminder that Beethoven might have his eye on the amateur market, but he still knows that wooing the people with cash and influence is important. Josephine von Braun was the wife of an industrialist (a wholesale silk merchant) and court banker called Peter von Braun, a Baron and the managing director of both the Vienna Burgtheater and the Theater an der Wien. So the dedication was a way of trying to butter von Braun up because Beethoven wanted to hold a concert for his own benefit [explain] in one of those theatres and thought this would put him in the Baron's good books. It didn't work – he didn't get his benefit concert, even though he also dedicated a horn sonata to Josephine von Braun a few years after this piano sonata. But it was von Braun who was involved in commissioning Beethoven's one and only opera *Fidelio* in around 1803/04. The first version of *Fidelio* was then given in 1805, but cut short because rather inconveniently Napoleon's troops had recently invaded Vienna and so the audience was largely unappreciative French soldiers. The revamp in 1806, also in one of Braun's theatres, only ran for two performances, because he had some kind of almighty falling out with the theatre management and walked off after the second night with all the scores and parts so that they couldn't give any more shows. So all in all, I think we can conclude that whilst the Sonata you'll be hearing in various versions in January is a great piece, the capital p/small p politics around its dedicatee were not so marvellous in the short or long term. Win some, lose some.

Let's hop back to the first concert of the season, and the Sacconi Quartet, who will be performing a programme of three string quartets from the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and it's Mozart I want us to turn to next. Because the B flat Quartet K589, his penultimate quartet, completed in 1789, was very much written with a royal chamber in mind – and indeed a royal performer within the ensemble. This is the second of the so-called 'Prussian' Quartets, which was intended as part of a set of six quartets for King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia, who was a keen amateur cellist. So the idea was to write these pieces for the king, and offer him the dedication. This would on the one hand have guaranteed Mozart a fee of a nice gold snuffbox full of coins or similar; and on the other would have bought the King a period of sole access to the score – perhaps a year or six months – after which Mozart would have been able to publish and sell the score more widely. And this was a very standard model of dedication and publication for musicians including Beethoven in the late C18th and early C19th. Unfortunately several things went wrong for Mozart: first of all, he didn't finish the whole set of six – he only wrote three. Secondly, it doesn't seem as if the pieces ever reached the King; and thirdly, the three that were written were only published after Mozart's death, at the very end of 1791. So he derived no financial or reputational benefit from what could have been a very grand dedication, as well as a potential way out of his own rather desperate financial situation at this time.

You can hear straight away that this quartet is all about the emperor playing the cello, and of course, you've got to be careful with such gracious gestures that you judge the level of proficiency correctly – which he does, very beautifully, by giving the King the solo melody in the *second movement*, not the first: so it's very high, yes, but it's also slow. There's more time to work out what note you need to play next!.

I should say, by the way, that when this quartet was published – and the same goes for Beethoven's Sonata quartet arrangement as well as his op.18 quartet that you'll hear played by RNCM students next January - what is being published is not a score. It's parts only. Because the audience for this music is liable to know, broadly speaking, how a string quartet is supposed to work – that is to say what forms the movements will be in, how many themes to listen out for and in what order... these are small-scale, intimate pieces where players and listeners are equally 'in on the joke' so to speak: they can follow the conventions just using their ears. It's only once composers start messing formal expectations to the point that you can't really hear the old forms you're expecting any more, that you need a full map, a full score, to show you how the thing fits together. There was a fascinating project at the University of Oxford some years ago in which period instrumentalists rehearsed late C18th and early C19th string quartets using first editions of the scores. There are no bar numbers. There are no rehearsal letters. The players had to negotiate rehearsals and where they stopped or started by talking about the structure of the movement: we go from where the second theme starts; where we move into D major; when the opening melody comes back, or whatever. And they sense of how the piece worked shifted because of the ways they had to talk about it. Miniature scores don't really appear until around the 1850s. So any chamber music you hear prior to that is likely to have been issued only with parts, not with a score to show you the way.

OK, so we've had music written for amateurs; music written for patrons; music intended for performance in grand palace spaces by kings, and music for you to do yourself at home. If we hang onto the Sacconi's programme for a moment, we also find here two later string quartets which are very much written with professional musicians in mind, for performances in spaces that don't exist for Beethoven and Mozart, which is to say public chamber venues. Robert Schumann wrote an opus of three string quartets (his only string quartets) in 1842, when he was in his early 30s, and was particularly interested in Haydn as a model. (Funnily enough he later arranged these three quartets for piano solo, so it's a direct reversal of the Beethoven Sonata, but again with the aim of reaching amateur musicians in their own home.) The third quartet is within the grasp of very capable amateurs (and was published, parts only, in 1843); but it was premiered in the Leipzig Gewandhaus by Ferdinand David's string quartet [Mend's leader, Mend VC performer at its premiere 2 years after this string quartet in March 1845 cond Mend].

Benjamin Britten's Third Quartet was among his final compositions, completed in 1975 and intended for performance by the Amadeus Quartet, who workshopped the piece with the composer, but gave the premiere in December 1976, the month after Britten's death, at Snape Maltings where of course, a series of non-musical buildings have been beautifully repurposed to be suitable purpose-fitted performance spaces for paying audiences (just like the original Gewandhaus in Leipzig, though it's been rebuilt several times now to be more suited to its musical purposes!). And actually, just like the Mozart late quartet references to *Così fan tutte*, Britten's final quartet uses several quotations from his last opera, *Death in Venice*. Quite what those quotations are supposed to mean, and indeed, what the rather unfinished end to the piece is supposed to represent, is a bit less clear. When Britten attempted to explain the lack of resolution at the end of the Quartet, he 'ventured that the only possible verbal translation of these last, unfinal notes was, "This is not the end". Whereupon Donald Mitchell, the

composer's authorised biographer, recounted that in reply to the question what this end meant, Britten had said, "I'm not dead yet".'

So far, so fairly standard in terms of performing ensembles and repertoire choices. But you're also going to hear two concerts of what we might call miscellany programming, or at the very least a sort of pick n' mix line-up of music from multiple different periods and combining original pieces and arrangements, and those are the performances you'll hear from The Pelleas Ensemble in November (harp, flute and viola) and Ensemble 360's wind players in February. Now obviously the Pelleas Ensemble have chosen to constitute themselves into a group with a fairly small amount of historical repertoire in existence that is specifically for them – and if you have come across this ensemble grouping before it will probably be as a result of Debussy's Sonata for flute, viola and harp, in one of his final pieces from 1915. But crucially, they are an ensemble interested in working with contemporary composers, and indeed arranging music to suit their instruments. So you'll see from their programme that we've got everything from Debussy and Prokofiev orchestral pieces reduced right down for trio, to some C17th madrigal by the Italian composer and singer Barbara Strozzi; there's Baroque arrangements from the music of Jean-Philippe Rameau; and a partially tweaked work by Ethel Smyth, originally written for flute, oboe and piano, so a trio formulation that can be slightly more straightforwardly reworked. And two pieces which fit the ensemble nicely: Debussy's solo flute work *Syrinx*, and Richard Rodney Bennett's response to *Syrinx* from 1985, composed to celebrate the 50th birthday of the Nash Ensemble, which Bennett wrote quite deliberately for the same combination as that late Debussy sonata, with different movements for different combinations of instruments.

This seems a good moment to talk about instruments, in fact, not to mention the amount of time (and space) travelling that we've got going on in this programme. Flutes, harps and violas have all been around a while, but instruments are technological, and technologies change. So the flute that Henry Roberts will be playing broadly dates from a design developed in 1847 by a German maker called Theobald Boehm,¹ which involves using keys on the simple cylinder that the early flute consisted of to stabilise its tuning; and the fact that it's metal and has a conically bored head joint but a cylindrical body ensures that the sound carries more robustly than a hollowed-out tube. It's important that the flute is now quite loud, because when Debussy wrote *Syrinx*, he wrote it as incidental music for the three-act play *Psyché* by Gabriel Mourey, premiered in December 1913... and that meant it had to be audible in a theatre space. The viola that Luba Tunicliffe will be playing is the hardest of these three instruments to predict, actually, because there's no such thing as a standard-size viola. Whereas cellos and violins come in fairly predictable proportions, violas can be any of a number of different sizes, because various different performers and designers have experimented with trying to adjust its proportions for maximal richness of tone, sonority, lightness of sound, and so on – and by the way there's Lionel Tertis, a leading British viola virtuoso of the mid C20th, who promoted what became known as the 'Tertis' mode, which is quite big! But as with the flute, it's around the early nineteenth century that string instruments like the viola are altered to allow for increased string tension and indeed a different shaped bow which allows for better projection, clearer tone, performances in bigger spaces... you see where I'm going with this: the instrument technology shifts and the music moves out of the private chamber and into the public chamber concert, with bigger halls, larger audiences, and the need for players to make more noise. And once again with the harp, the big moment of innovation comes in around 1810, when the harp and piano manufacturer Sebastian Erard patents the double-action harp [notch up flattens, notch down sharpens], and various tweaks have then been made since

¹ Trained as a goldsmith like his dad but also a professional flautist.

then to improve clarity of sound, smoothness of action and indeed weight, because harps are big! And heavy on the shoulder to play for long periods of time.

I want to touch just briefly on Ensemble 360's programme, which is similarly original works for wind ensemble plus arrangements, because two pieces on this line-up deserve special mentions. The first is Samuel Barber's *Summer Music*, which was written in the mid-1950s and was originally going to be a rather odd septet of 3 winds, 2 strings and piano, but eventually became a piece developed closely with the players of the New York Wind Quintet who had been putting together charts of the hardest chords to play as an ensemble in terms of tuning, tone, and so on. And Barber came to their rehearsals, asked for copies of the charts, and wrote the piece to be *hard*, and hard on the terms of this particular Quintet, so that they could make difficult, beautiful, unusual sounds as an ensemble.

But there's a catch, which is that the New York Wind Quintet was NOT the ensemble for which Barber was supposed to be writing this piece – he had been commissioned by the Chamber Music Society of Detroit, and the reason this project is particularly interesting, is that it's the first commission to have been financed by public subscription in the US, with the audience asked to pay what they could, and the society acting as a guarantor, effectively, to make sure that Barber got a reasonable fee. So this was a project of 1954, and the piece was finally premiered first in Detroit and then by the New York group in 1956.

The other piece to flag here is Luciano Berio's Op. No. Zoo, and I'll say very little about this except that it's a complete delight and requires its players to speak as well as play. But you can look forward to that in February.

And that leaves your two mystery programmes. We're used to the idea that a Tango group like Tango Calor Trio, might not announce their setlists in advance (and you might want to ponder *why* that's fine and whether you'd be similarly up for a piano quintet who only reveal in advance that they're a piano quintet but not what they'll be playing. But your real golden ticket of the season is the last concert in March, with the fabulous Alice Coote and Julius Drake in their *Unknown Recital*, where you can expect the unexpected, from David Bowie and Joni Mitchell to Schubert and John Lennon and all sorts of other things in between. And Alice is to be hugely applauded, I think, for being willing to perform so much of her favourite music across multiple centuries and styles in a single recital. Of course, the reason she can do this is that we trust her as a superb performer and communicator. And trust is what musical performance is all about, from players trusting the composer, to audiences trusting both. Enjoy your new season, from the familiar to the surprising – that's the perfect combination for a happy series of concerts.