



Oxford Chamber Music Society

Ensemble Mirage

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Timothy Ellis, horn
Alexandra Lomeiko, Rosemary Hinton, violins
Emily Pond, viola
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Ludwig van BEETHOVEN 1770-1827

Septet in E flat major, for clarinet, bassoon, horn, violin, viola, cello and double bass, opus 20

1. *Adagio – Allegro con brio* 2. *Adagio cantabile* 3. *Tempo di Menuetto and Trio*
4. *Tema con variazione: Andante* 5. *Scherzo: Allegro molto e vivace and Trio*
6. *Andante con moto alla marcia – Presto*

The Septet is beyond question one of Beethoven's most enjoyable works. Sketched and composed 1799/1800, the piece shared its public premiere with the First Symphony, a piano concerto (probably the C major), and arias from Haydn's *The Creation*, at his first major benefit concert at the prestigious Burgtheater in Vienna on 2nd April 1800 – a significant landmark in the graduation from pianist to composer. Very quickly the enlivening tuneful urbanity of the piece made it so popular that the threat of bootlegging spurred Beethoven to publication in 1802 – he urged its printing *a little faster – because a rabble is awaiting it... there are rogues in the Imperial town as well as at the Imperial court*. In short, although he wanted the royalties, he never forgave the Viennese *donkeys* for preferring it to his more significant works. The overall character of the work, including the six-movement structure, is a high point in the transformation of the eighteenth century serenade and divertimento (i.e. outdoor/indoor entertainment music), with its frequent employment of the *harmonie* or wind band, into something more suitable for the new concert halls with their middle-class audiences. Mozart's great E flat string trio Divertimento can be seen in some ways as an immediate model, but the blending of strings and wind was an appealing novelty. Hummel, Spohr and Krommer were

among others who adopted the template and hoped for success; but it was the twenty-seven-year-old Schubert who eventually wrote the masterpiece. Beethoven was fortunate in the players he had at his disposal, young professionals who were encouraging and facilitating the public performance of new chamber music. There is some virtuoso writing to master, with the double bass underpinning the harmonic and rhythmic structure upon which the work is built, like the old baroque continuo. We know the often florid violin part was written for Ignaz Schuppanzigh, who founded the first professional string quartet, and with it was an indomitable companion to Beethoven's quartet writing; the Opus 18 project of six quartets was about to come to fruition (see our concert on 27th January).

... Beethoven at confident full throttle

The **Adagio** introduction is cunningly constructed of both portentousness and charm, with the violin and the wind exchanging courtesies. A clarinet flourish hails the extraction of tongue from cheek, and the violin, always on the go, bounces in with the frolicsome **Allegro con brio** first theme, eagerly pursued by the clarinet. There is a lively transition to the second subject, again announced on the fiddle, but its double dose of elegant delight is eagerly shared by the other instruments (this Allegro exposition may be repeated). The development is obsessed with the transition, and the recapitulation veers off course (is it still the development?), and as for the coda – well, you'll enjoy it! All this shows Beethoven at confident full throttle – not breaking new ground where it really matters it is true, but hardly immune to surprise. In his *Specimen Days* the American sage Walt Whitman, he of the elemental beard, had quite a lot to say about this work: *Dainty abandon, sometimes as if Nature is laughing on a hillside in the sunshine...* The E flat **Adagio cantabile** cannot but make an impression, like a beautiful gently swaying operatic aria (*cantabile* indeed!) developed in two distinct parts. The violin is again prominent, and the wind instruments all have their moment – but singing above all is the clarinet. Heinrich Baermann, the great master of the instrument (and an inspiration to Weber) commented: *The artist who manages to perform this beautiful motif [i.e. the main theme] with the same intimacy and warmth which Beethoven thought and felt, should inspire every listener.* The guileless **Menuetto** takes its theme from a sonata written for children around 1795, in G major, and published later as Opus 49/2. And in the trio Uncle Ludwig has a game with the violin, the clarinet and the horn, and the hemiola.

... a tune on the fiddle about as unstuffy as could be

The **Tema con Variazione** is the central movement of what is a symmetrical scheme. The theme itself apparently came from the composer's native Rhineland, *Ach Schiffer, lieber Schiffer* [i.e. a lucky boatman of some kind], and in its four-square simplicity is ideally suited to such light-hearted treatment. It is stated by the strings and clarinet, and each of the five variations has a prominent part for Schuppanzigh. The first is with fellow-strings, the second with clarinet, the third clarinet and bassoon, and then – mysteriously – the winds; finally jollity for the whole ensemble, before the double-bass smiles in the most whacky Haydn-like coda Haydn didn't

compose. Instead of another minuet, Beethoven now gives us an early **Scherzo**, brimming with al fresco energy. The horn suggests the hunt – *sounding through the tangle of the forest*, as Whitman would have it – and in the trio a cello on its high register (no joke for players!) leads a country dance. To balance the opening movement Beethoven again writes a slow **Andante** introduction to the finale. March-like and stately, and dominated by the horn, it releases – **Presto** – an earworm of a tune on the fiddle about as unstuffy as could be – *spontaneous, easy, careless...* to quote Good Old Walt for the last time. This is (to be stuffy) a sonata-rondo hybrid, with two main subjects. At the end of the development, if we're thinking in such terms, there is a wind chorale with pizzicato – believe it or not, the opening theme of the work transformed – followed immediately by a mini violin cadenza. Only pure joy remains.

INTERVAL – around 15 minutes

Franz SCHUBERT 1797-1828

Octet in F major, for clarinet, horn, bassoon, string quartet and double bass, D803

1. *Adagio – Allegro* 2. *Adagio* 3. *Scherzo: Allegro vivace – Trio*
4. *Andante con variazioni* 5. *Menuetto: Allegretto – Trio* 6. *Andante molto – Allegro*

A consequence of the popularity of his Septet which might possibly have won even Beethoven's approval (mmm – anyway, we'll never know) was the wonderful work which occupies the remaining hour of our concert. Count Ferdinand Troyer, amateur clarinettist and chamberlain to Beethoven's friend and pupil, the Archduke Rudolf, decided, as Counts can, that he wanted a Septet of his own, with the same six movement divertimento structure. Surprisingly he asked Schubert, hardly on the aristocratic radar, who took to the task with a will in February 1824, completing the piece on 1st March. Although Schubert must have felt Beethoven (still alive) was looking over his shoulder, there isn't a bar in the piece that could have been written by his great hero; two liberties were taken (read on), and the scale was obviously more expansive. He was lucky to hear the work twice, firstly at a private play-through at Troyer's residence (the Count was apparently pleased with what he heard); and at a public performance for the Vienna Musikverein at the Red Hedgehog Inn's recital room on 16th April 1827, where it shared the billing with an arrangement of the *Emperor* Concerto and other works in memory of Beethoven, whose death had occurred two weeks earlier. The ensemble on both occasions was led by Ignaz Schuppanzigh, who had undertaken the same role for the Septet. A review could have been worse – *Schubert has proved himself a gallant and felicitous*

composer, but it questions *the long duration*. Publication had to wait until 1853, and then without the fourth and fifth movements!

...the radiant little wind chorale

One variation on the original Beethoven was to enrich the sonority with a second violin. The effect is immediately evident in the **Adagio** introduction, with the strings and wind in almost antiphonal play. Schubert, like Beethoven, gives an air of self-importance to the music, especially in its ambiguous harmonies, which shift and unsettle. Note also the dotted (long-short) rhythms, which occupy the rest of the movement. The rising octave motif 'on your marks' for the clarinet and horn anticipates not only the **Allegro** theme which follows immediately, but the other thematic material as well. The first theme is buoyantly eager, strongly underpinned by the said dotted rhythm. The second subject begins in D minor on the clarinet, but immediately switches to F for the horn. Orthodoxy demands the key should be the dominant C, but our expectations are again teased until a third exuberant theme arrives with violin flurries. I labour the point to remind you how the music is shaped by Schubert's inexhaustible harmonic ingenuity. This exposition might well be repeated. Off we go again with the development, which lurches up a semitone to the remote key of F sharp minor as it develops the second subject: for the radiant little wind chorale we find ourselves in A flat, heralding a return of Adagio music – in turn forming a bridge to the hardly literal recapitulation; indeed, the instrumental palette is transformed. The first subject opens the coda at high speed, but the music calms and the horn evocatively reclaims the second theme, echoing Weber and anticipating Bruckner, those great forest-dwellers.

...one of the loveliest melodies ever conceived

I try to imagine count Troyer's facial expression when he saw what this unprepossessing, on-his-uppers, sick man had written for him in the **Adagio**. Did he realise it was one of the loveliest melodies ever conceived for the clarinet? Perhaps; but he could hardly know it would still be listened to – and I expect in rapt silence – on an autumn afternoon in Oxford nigh on two hundred years later. This long-breathed opening theme is in B flat, the clarinet providing a descant to the first violin when it is repeated. After a breath-catching modulation, the music is expanded by a second theme, closely related to the first. A rising dotted upbeat pattern introduces the contrasting theme in the tonic F. Yet another exquisite harmonic shift leads to a short violin and clarinet cadenza. The opening is now reprised, initially by the first violin, with a descant now on the horn, and then by cello and clarinet. Almost inevitably, there are some dramatic modulations before Schubert permits himself to move on to the coda. This begins with the strings in canon, but the music darkens and fragments; the clarinet plays a variant of the main theme against shuddering strings. This was a time of huge distress for the composer, who was suffering from syphilis, a patiently delivered death sentence. *Every night when I go to bed I hope I may not wake....* he wrote. It was the time also of the A minor (*Rosamunde*) String Quartet (February – early March 1824) and the

Death and the Maiden Quartet (March 1824) – to remind you, the Octet was finished on 1st March!

...with smiles broad enough to split their faces

Any disturbing note is dispelled by the bucolic **Scherzo** – and this is indeed a musical 'joke', a snappy scherzo of scherzos, with frothing good humour and a clarinet high on schnapps. The trio, in C minor, with its running bass, is for strings joined by clarinet, and has the quality of a folksong. You will note – a second change – that Schubert has reversed Beethoven's placing of the Minuet and Scherzo. But – as with Beethoven – we now have a **Theme and Variations**. The perky theme comes from his youthful (1815) opera, *Die Freunde von Salamanka*, unperformed and to remain so until 1924: *Lying under the canopy of the trees... the shepherd longs for his fair one...* These are hardly sophisticated variations, more embellishments of the theme, with great enjoyment from our composer in deploying his little band; there are seven of them. The theme itself, in two parts, is shared by the violin and clarinet, and the first easy-going four variations are led in turn by violin, clarinet, horn, and cello – note the violin flourishes in three and four, for Schuppanzigh. Next we switch to C minor for a first reminder of the current popularity of Weber's spine-tingling *Der Freischütz*, just three years old; and then pure sentiment in A flat from the enfolding counterpoint of strings and clarinet, seen off, in the last variation, by the return of the Scherzo's boozy fiddler and his band, with smiles broad enough to split their faces. And listen (and watch!) for the horn in the coda. Was this a private joke of some kind? Once we have heard the finale, we can clearly understand why Schubert moved his Scherzo, and moreover why there is such a sedate **Menuetto**. The closing phrase of the first part of the dance, on the strings, is delightfully taken up by the clarinet; when the music returns it is intensified and transformed in texture. The trio is a country waltz, a Ländler. The horn opens a lovely codetta. Savour every bar of this movement! – and the next. This begins with a chill blast, **Andante molto**, but I'm inclined to think these are dark tremolos of terror blowing in again from Weber's *Freischütz* Wolf's Glen rather than the depths of Schubert's unquestionably suffering being. In the main **Allegro** he creates, in the guise of sonata-form, the kind of comic opera he yearned to write, but in miniature and without words. Rossini, who was as wildly fashionable as Weber, had a hand in this to be sure, but it's Schubert's eternal laughter we hear. So it's quick march in those shiny boots. The horn is shouting orders in a jolly subsidiary theme leading to a dramatic transition (what disaster has befallen?) to the second subject – 'chirpy' is the word with all those trills, which end up chirruping away to an imitation full orchestra. The development takes the marchers up hill and down dale; a Rossinian crescendo leads to the fortissimo recapitulation – are we meant to throw our caps into the air? As a kind of coda, the eldritch terrors return again. But in a coda on a coda, they are laughed away as if Schubert could barely control his borrowed-time exuberance.

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