

Patrick Allen/operaomnibus



Benjamin Grosvenor & Doric Quartet

Monday 11 February 2019 7.30pm,
Milton Court Concert Hall

Schubert Quartettsatz

Chopin Piano Concerto No 1 in E minor
(chamber version)

interval 20 minutes

Fauré Piano Quintet No 1 in D minor

George Garner



Benjamin Grosvenor piano
Laurène Durantel double bass

Doric Quartet

Alex Redington violin (leader)

Ying Xue violin

Hélène Clément viola

John Myerscough cello

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Welcome

A warm welcome to this evening's concert given by one of the most acclaimed string quartets around today – the Doric Quartet, which was formed 21 years ago, when tonight's pianist Benjamin Grosvenor was just 6 years old!

This is the first of a pair of concerts they are giving together (the second is on 26 May). Central to the two programmes are Chopin's piano concertos in their chamber-music incarnations. Chopin's orchestral writing lends itself particularly well to this treatment, and in effect turns the pieces into piano sextets, with the addition of a double bass to the string ensemble. This evening we hear the First Piano Concerto in E minor, with its delectably beautiful slow movement and its energetically rustic finale.

We begin with Schubert, and the *Quartettsatz*, the only movement he completed of a proposed C minor Quartet. But it stands alone as a powerful musical statement, combining drama and pathos in equal measure.

Benjamin Grosvenor and the Doric Quartet end with Fauré's ravishing First Piano Quintet, a work that occupied him for some years and which is full of the nuanced colourings and subtle emotions that are so characteristic of this composer.

It promises to be an amazing evening. I hope you enjoy it.

Huw Humphreys
Head of Music, Barbican

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Quartettsatz in C minor, D703 (1820)

Why did Schubert leave so many works unfinished? Was he just easily distracted? Or could it have been that he lacked the staying power of his older contemporary Beethoven? When the latter hit a problem, he would usually redouble his efforts; Schubert's 'solution', by contrast, often seems to have been to put the problem piece on one side, perhaps meaning to come back to it some day later – but that day never came. That could well be what happened with the unfinished Quartet in C minor. After completing what was obviously intended to be the first movement of a full-length string quartet, he started work on a second, an Andante, but after some 40 bars the sketch tails off, and so – fortunately, some might say – the *Quartettsatz* ('Quartet Movement') stands magnificently alone.

What makes this all the more surprising is that this single completed movement represents a magnificent breakthrough in Schubert's writing for string quartet. His first 11 quartets were all products of his teens and while, like some of his early symphonies, they have charm and some striking invention, none of them has come close to being a settled repertoire piece. The debt to Haydn, also to Mozart and (to a significantly lesser extent) Beethoven, is clear enough, but there are few signs that Schubert

had learned from them very deeply – at least not when it came to quartet texture. Perhaps the restriction of writing for himself and his family and friends fettered his imagination; even his biographer John Reed lumps them together unenthusiastically as 'the schoolhouse quartets'. But then, in 1820, when Schubert was 23, came a sudden, startling lurch forward. The *Quartettsatz* is a remarkably compact and powerful musical drama, intellectually some way in advance of the charming and romantically atmospheric 'Trout' Quintet, composed the previous year. It is also brilliantly conceived for quartet as an ensemble of four solo voices: arrange it for full orchestra and something vital would be lost – a sure sign that this is true chamber music.

A gripping crescendo, built on an increasingly anxious tremolando figure, enters on the four instruments in turn, plunging us straight into the eerie, tempestuous world of the famous song *Erkönig* ('Erl-King', 1815). After this, lyricism struggles to assert itself, but memories of the opening cast recurring shadows (especially in the cello) until the end brings us back full circle, with an exact return of the opening crescendo leading to three emphatic final chords. Perhaps Schubert was right to give up on the second movement: after such a stunningly gripping ending, nothing more is needed.

Fryderyk Chopin (1810–49)

Piano Concerto No 1 in E minor, Op 11

(1829–30) (chamber version)

1 Allegro maestoso

2 Romanze: Larghetto

3 Rondo: Vivace

Chopin's two piano concertos were written during the years 1829–30, around the time he turned 20. In fact the concerto known as No 1 was the second to be written – the numbering reflects the order of publication, not of composition. Chopin gave the premiere of this E minor Concerto in Warsaw in 1830, at what was to be his last public appearance in his native Poland. According to his own testimony, it was greeted with 'ear-splitting "Bravos"'. But when he played the concerto in Paris five years later, at a concert to raise money for Polish refugees, the reaction was much more mixed, and this set the tone of critical discussion about the piece for well over a century. There was plenty of praise for Chopin's great melodic freshness and, perhaps more ominously, moments of genius, but when it came to his handling of the concerto as a form, that's where the trouble started. The problem was that many of Chopin's critics were so devoted to the Beethovenian model of the piano concerto that they were simply unable to give credit to composers who approached the medium in a different spirit.

To today's listeners it can seem extraordinary that so many intelligent, musical people could be fixated on what it's tempting to call 'structural correctness' – especially when Beethoven himself had done so much to challenge orthodoxies and conventions. Yet Chopin was regularly taken to task for an apparent weakness in handling so-called 'sonata form'; and for his approach to the relationship between soloist and orchestra. 'In Chopin', complained Hector Berlioz, 'all the interest is concentrated on the piano part; the orchestra in his piano concertos is merely

a cold, almost superfluous accompaniment.' It is true that Chopin's understanding of the orchestra fell a long way short of his thrilling, exquisite identification with the piano, and the role of the orchestra in both concertos is more often to shadow or amplify the piano writing than to set itself up as a dramatic competitor. But if you forget about Beethoven and take Chopin on his own terms, the originality and beauty of this concerto speak for themselves. And perhaps they can do so even more intimately and poetically in an arrangement like this one for piano, string quartet and double bass – such arrangements were common in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and Chopin himself rehearsed the First Concerto in this form before the Warsaw premiere.

In any case, from what Chopin told his friends and associates, the poetic idea behind this music would seem to be a long way from Beethovenian struggle, whether with outer or inner forces. Despite its terse, sternly minor-key beginning, the first movement's introduction soon turns to the brighter major key, as a lilting melody emerges (originally on violins), marked *cantabile*, 'singing'. This sets the tone for much of the remainder of the movement, despite reminders of that stormy beginning. In fact when the soloist first takes over the opening theme it immediately transforms it into a pianistic aria, with luscious embellishments recalling Italian *bel canto* opera, even if they lie way beyond the technical capabilities of any human singer.

It is when we get to the central slow movement, the 'Romanze', that we arrive at the true heart of the matter. 'I have not tried to display power in this movement', Chopin wrote to a close

friend, 'it is a quiet and melancholy romance. Its effect is meant to be like that of gently gazing upon a place that awakens a thousand sweet memories, like a reverie in a beautiful moonlit night in spring.' If that sounds close to love poetry, Chopin would probably not have disagreed – at least when talking to those who knew him well. (He was much more guarded with concert or recital audiences.) The slow movement of the recently completed F minor Concerto was, he told the same friend, composed under the influence of his never-to-be-declared love for the singer Konstanca Gładkowska. Chopin's feelings for Konstanca were still painful at the time he wrote this F minor Concerto, and it's highly likely they left their mark on the E minor too – not least on the tender muted string writing that opens the music.

The finale, on the other hand, explicitly reflects another of Chopin's great loves – the folk music of his oppressed native country. The model here is the *Krakowiak*, a highly syncopated two-in-a-bar dance popular in Chopin's time in the region surrounding the city of Kraków. The piano plays with the dance rhythms and ornaments the melodic motifs lavishly and brilliantly, while the ensemble keeps bringing us back to the classic off-the-down-beat *Krakowiak* rhythm. Chopin wasn't given to self-congratulation, but after he played through the concerto prior to its Warsaw premiere he observed, 'Rondo – impressive.' He also added of the first movement, 'Allegro – strong.' Approach his Piano Concerto No 1 without preconceptions and it's hard not to agree.

interval 20 minutes

Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924)

Piano Quintet No 1 in D minor, Op 89 (1887–95, 1903–5)

1 Molto moderato

2 Adagio

3 Allegretto moderato – Un poco più mosso – Tempo 1

Robert Schumann's Piano Quintet of 1842 may not have been the first work for this combination of piano and string quartet, but it effectively defined the medium. Impetuously, moodily Romantic, thrillingly virtuosic in its piano writing, it placed the piano in a dramatic relationship with the four string instruments, not so much as solo voices (as in Mozart's wonderful Piano Quartets), but more as an ensemble. That makes acoustic and textural sense: the four strings combined were more able to contend on equal terms with the increasingly powerful 19th-century grand piano, and as a four-part team they could match it harmonically too – 'four-part' harmonic writing, defined during the Baroque era, was still at the root of a lot of Romantic-era musical

thinking. Schumann's Quintet cast a long shadow: the piano quintets of Brahms (1864), Franck (1879) and Dvořák (1887) are all indebted to Schumann's model, and they in turn were hugely influential.

Fauré, too, clearly found Schumann's great example inspiring, but in the case of his First Piano Quintet – apparently composed in bursts between 1887 and 1905 – the influence is more oblique. True, the piano part can be very challenging (Fauré himself had a formidable keyboard technique), but it is rarely the kind of overtly virtuosic writing found in the Schumann, and especially in the Brahms and Franck quintets. Instead the pianist often finds him- or herself

acting as an accompanist in a song, grappling with a ferociously difficult piano part while at the same time having to remember, as the legendary accompanist Gerald Moore put it, not to be 'too loud'. If Schumann is the key influence here, it is Schumann the master of *Lieder*. As a result, much of the melodic material in Fauré's First Piano Quintet is entrusted to the strings, and much of it is song-like. On one level Schumann's quintet is unmissably a love song to his virtuoso pianist wife Clara, and Fauré's too often sounds like an outpouring of love, whether reciprocated or not is hard to say. However if that is so, Fauré's is a much more delicate, private confession. But that's not to say that it lacks passion: beneath its refined, restrained surface, Fauré's music can often convey very deep feelings indeed. It's just that it tends to do so – that word again – obliquely.

Even so, the Paris premiere of the First Quintet in 1906 was greeted with wild applause, and Fauré was called back to the platform five times. According to the organist-composer Louis Vierne there had been nothing to match the intensity of the applause in French chamber music since the since the premiere of the Franck Quintet 26 years earlier.

At first the notion of an audience going wild over such music may seem slightly perplexing: the opening is one of the most beautiful in all chamber music, but the voice is soft, withdrawn

almost – this is a very long way from the extrovert proclamation at the start of the Schumann. But as the music unfolds, the beguiling beauty of the melodic writing and the wonderful sustained current that carries it all forwards grow increasingly captivating. The same is true of the Adagio, in which ideas don't so much develop, on traditional lines, as drift dreamily into one another. Melodically and harmonically, however, this is more unpredictable than in the first movement: the strangely tangential thinking typical of Fauré's late style is beginning to define – or perhaps it would be better to say 'un-define' itself here.

The finale begins with something uncharacteristically robust: a more four-square theme than anything so far, in increasingly resolute piano double octaves. If it sounds rather like a Fauréan take on the 'Ode to Joy' theme from Beethoven's 'Choral' Symphony, its initial variation treatment strengthens that impression. But before long Fauré is fully himself again: unlike some of his countrymen, he was able to take what he needed from German models and transform it for his own purposes, apparently without effort. As in the first movement, we are carried forwards on a wonderful melodic-harmonic tide, building to a scintillating conclusion – and now that first Parisian audience's noisy enthusiasm is perfectly easy to understand.

Programme notes © Stephen Johnson

About the performers

Patrick Allen/Operaomnibus



Benjamin Grosvenor

Benjamin Grosvenor piano

British pianist Benjamin Grosvenor is internationally recognised for his electrifying performances, distinctive sound and perceptive interpretations. His virtuosic command over the most arduous technical complexities underpins the depth and understanding of his music-making.

He first came to prominence when he won the Keyboard Final of the 2004 BBC Young Musician Competition at the age of 11. He performed at the First Night of the 2011 BBC Proms aged just 19. He was announced as the inaugural recipient of The Ronnie and Lawrence Ackman Classical Piano Prize with the New York Philharmonic in 2016.

Recent and forthcoming concerto highlights include engagements with the Boston, Chicago, Finnish Radio, London, Melbourne, San Francisco and Washington National Symphony orchestras, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the La Scala, London and New York Philharmonic orchestras, Gürzenich Orchestra Cologne, Hallé, Orchestre National de Lyon and the Orquesta Nacional de España. He has worked with esteemed conductors, including Vladimir Ashkenazy, Andrey Boreyko, Semyon Bychkov, Riccardo Chailly, Sir Mark Elder, Edward Gardner, Alan Gilbert, Manfred Honeck, Vladimir Jurowski, Emmanuel Krivine, Andrew Manze, Ludovic Morlot, Kent Nagano, Sir Roger Norrington, Gianandrea Noseda, François-

Xavier Roth, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Leonard Slatkin, Nathalie Stutzmann, Michael Tilson Thomas, Krzysztof Urbanski and Kazuki Yamada.

Highlights among this season's recitals are concerts at the Barbican, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, Munich's Herkulessaal, Palau de la Música Catalana Barcelona and in Madrid's Ciclo Grandes Intérpretes, San Francisco Performances, Sydney Symphony Orchestra's recital series and Milan's Società dei Concerti. Also a keen chamber musician, he joins Tabea Zimmermann and others for Schubert's 'Trout' Quintet at Bonn's Beethovenwoche 2019, and together with the Doric Quartet performs piano quintets by Fauré and Dvořák, as well as chamber settings of Chopin's piano concertos, here at Milton Court.

In 2011 Benjamin Grosvenor signed to Decca Classics – the youngest British musician ever, and the first British pianist in almost 60 years, to sign to the label. His fourth Decca CD, *Homages* (2016), presents works in which great composers pay tribute to their predecessors, including the Bach/Busoni *Chaconne*, Franck's *Choral, Prélude et Fugue* and Liszt's tribute to Italian folk song, *Venezia e Napoli*. The disc was warmly received and won a *Diapason d'Or*.

During his career to date, he has received *Gramophone's* Young Artist of the Year and Instrumental Awards, a Classic BRITS Critics' Award, UK Critics' Circle Award and a *Diapason d'Or* Jeune Talent Award. He has been featured in two BBC television documentaries as well as in CNN's *Human to Hero* series.

The youngest of five brothers, Benjamin Grosvenor began playing the piano aged 6. He studied at the Royal Academy of Music with Christopher Elton and Daniel-Ben Pienaar, graduating in 2012 with the Queen's Commendation for Excellence. In 2016 he was awarded an RAM Fellowship. He has been supported since 2013 by EFG International, the global private banking group.



Laurène Durantel

Laurène Durantel double bass

French double-bassist Laurène Durantel is one of the most distinctive advocates of her instrument in a wide range of repertoire, from the Baroque to contemporary music and musical theatre. She is active as a soloist and chamber musician, as well as giving one-woman shows. She has appeared at leading European venues and has worked with the Ébène Quartet, Matthias Goerne and Jean-Guihen Queyras, among others. She is also a member of Ensemble Variances, founded by composer and pianist Thierry Pécou.



Doric Quartet

Doric Quartet

Alex Redington violin (leader)

Ying Xue violin

Hélène Clément viola

John Myerscough cello

The Doric Quartet has firmly established itself as one of the leading quartets of its generation, receiving enthusiastic responses from audiences and critics across the globe. It performs in leading concert halls throughout Europe, including the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Vienna Konzerthaus, Berlin Konzerthaus, Frankfurt Alte Oper, Hamburg Laeiszhalle and

Antwerp De Singel, and is a regular visitor to the Wigmore Hall. The quartet tours annually to North America and made its Carnegie Hall debut in 2017.

It also has a busy festival schedule and has performed at the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, West Cork, North Norfolk, Cheltenham, Delft, Grafenegg, Schubertiade, Risor and Schwetzingen festivals. Last year it took over artistic directorship of the Mendelssohn on Mull Festival where coaches and mentors young professionals in the field of string chamber music.

A recent highlight has seen the quartet take on John Adams's *Absolute Jest* for string quartet and orchestra with performances at the Vienna Konzerthaus conducted by the composer, with the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic at the Concertgebouw and with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra conducted by Markus Stenz. Their recording of the piece with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra under Peter Oundjian, released on Chandos last year, was named Recording of the Month in *BBC Music Magazine*.

Highlights of this season include a residency at Aldeburgh's Britten Weekend where the group will perform and subsequently record Britten's complete quartets. It returns to the Wigmore Hall three times and elsewhere performs at Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, Dortmund Konzerthaus and Musée du Louvre in Paris. Further afield the quartet undertakes its annual North American tour. It returns to Australia for a nationwide tour with Musica Viva, including the world premiere of a new quartet by Brett Dean co-commissioned for the Doric by Musica Viva, Berlin Konzerthaus, Carnegie Hall, Amsterdam String Quartet Biennale and the Edinburgh International Festival.

Since 2010 the Doric Quartet has recorded exclusively for Chandos Records. Its 2017 release of Schubert's *Quartettssatz* and G major Quartet was named Editor's Choice by *Gramophone* and nominated for a *Gramophone* Award. Future releases include quartets by Mendelssohn, Britten and the complete Haydn Op 33 Quartets.

The quartet's violist Hélène Clément plays a viola by Giussani, 1843 generously on loan from the Britten-Pears Foundation and previously owned by Frank Bridge and Benjamin Britten.