

Omega Ensemble



Momentum

Schubert and Mendelssohn

7:30PM | Tuesday | 13 November 2018
City Recital Hall

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Momentum

Schubert and Mendelssohn

Tuesday 13 November 2018

7:30pm

City Recital Hall

Presented as part of the 2018 Virtuoso Series

Felix Mendelssohn

String Quintet No.2 in B flat major, Op.87

David Bruce

Gumboots

Interval (20 mins)

Franz Schubert

Quintet in C major for two violins, viola and two cellos,
D. 956

Approximate work durations: 30mins — 25mins — 50mins

This concert will last approximately 125 minutes with interval.



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Omega Ensemble reserves the right to alter scheduled artists and programs as necessary.



This evening's performance will be recorded by ABC Classic FM for future broadcast.

About the music

Introduction

The year 1828 began well for Schubert. In January, at one of those private soirées known as ‘Schubertiades’, he presented several new works for piano duet and one of the two great Piano Trios. He composed the Fantasia in F minor, D. 940, for piano duet, and the publisher Probst issued the Piano Trio in E flat, D. 929. On 26 March, he commemorated the anniversary of Beethoven’s death with the only public concert devoted to his own work during his lifetime, attracting a full house.

As the year progressed, he composed several more piano duets and several liturgical pieces such as the Mass in E flat, D. 950, and a setting of Psalm 92. His health declined, but his creativity was, to say the very least, undimmed. He completed the set of songs now known as the *Schwanengesang* (‘swan song’), then the three last piano sonatas and began work on the Quintet, which he finished in October in time to write *The Shepherd on the Rock* and make substantial sketches for three movements of a new symphony.

That work-load would exhaust a perfectly healthy composer, let alone one in the late stages of an incurable disease; and it is especially remarkable that those pieces are not only masterful, but are all examples of Schubert’s seemingly effortless ability to create musical structures of vast scale. And for all that many of these works are often achingly tragic, there is much that is celebratory. The eponymous shepherd on his rock, for instance, reaches the depths of despair only to be cheered by the sudden arrival of spring; the Quintet explores an amazing variety of emotional landscapes.

We don’t know why Schubert wrote the Quintet, a genre that by definition threatens to disrupt the poise and equilibrium of the traditional quartet, with its ‘four intelligent people having a conversation’, as Goethe put it. Musicologist Peter Gülke has argued that the composer

chose the extra cello, rather than viola, because ‘Schubert the lyricist sings most freely in the tenor; at any rate, he constantly begins in the tenor. Therein lies [an] obvious reason for the enlargement of the quartet to a quintet – the establishment of the tenor register as the fount of musical invention.’

We have to be wary of ascribing biographical meaning to works of absolute music, but it is hard not hear something of the composer’s personal voice in this work, and see it as a piece that makes a heroic stand against tragedy and extinction.

British composer David Bruce has made a similar point when discussing his clarinet quintet *Gumboots*, noting that ‘life-enriching art has been produced, even inspired by conditions of tragedy, brutality and oppression, a famous example being Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time*’. *Gumboots*, too, grows out of appalling conditions, those of the brutally exploited workers in the diamond mines of apartheid-era South Africa; the miners’ response to their conditions was to create defiantly vibrant music and dance using the very instruments of their oppression – chains and gumboots. Bruce celebrates this energetic spirit in the second half of his piece, while the first part offers space for reflection.

While he would die young, a mere two years after his String Quintet No.2, Mendelssohn, unlike Schubert, was hugely successful in his own time. Popular across Europe, he was esteemed by royalty in various German kingdoms and in Britain, sought after as a composer and conductor, blessed in early life with a family who offered high levels of material and moral support. On the fact of it the most conservative of the ‘Romantic Generation’ born around 1810, Mendelssohn was in part responsible for the revival of Baroque music, notably Bach’s choral work. Perhaps more than any of his age cohort he understood how to fuse new ‘romantic’ notions of musical sound and expression with the structural and formal principles of Viennese classicism and the Baroque. In that sense,

he was one of the earliest 19th century composers to understand and assimilate the lessons of the last works of Beethoven and those of Schubert. Much of the energy of his String Quintet No.2, like Schubert's, comes from the shifting alliances within the somewhat unstable group of five players.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

String Quintet No.2 in B flat major, Op.87

- I. Allegro vivace
- II. Andante scherzando
- III. Adagio e lento
- IV. Allegro molto vivace

Mendelssohn was lucky, growing up in Berlin, a major centre for the performing arts, where he enthusiastically absorbed the music he heard in concerts and opera houses. Keen to support the musical talents of his children, in 1822 Mendelssohn's father, the banker Abraham Mendelssohn, held a regular series of Sunday concerts at the family home where Felix and Fanny would perform with paid members of the Court Orchestra. Among works written for these concerts were 13 string sinfonias, studies in different aspects of formal design. With these and the Octet to his credit, by the age of 18 Mendelssohn had well and truly mastered writing for string ensembles. The first of his two string quintets dates from this time, 1826, and it was nearly two decades before he revisited the genre.

Despite Boccherini's many quintets with 'extra' cello, the ensemble with two violas bore the imprimatur of Mozart and Beethoven, both of whom, like many composers, enjoyed playing viola in chamber music as it placed them at its heart, so to speak. Mendelssohn wrote his B flat Quintet while enjoying a summer vacation at the spa town of Bad Soden, near Frankfurt where he had moved that year. Having extricated himself from various royal duties some months before he was even more than usually productive.

The Quintet is a work of great assurance, even for Mendelssohn, though he himself was never happy

with the finale, so the piece was not published during his lifetime. It begins with a substantial first movement, where the first violin announces a bravura line over a vibrant texture made almost orchestral by the use of the extra instrument. The momentum, enlivened by energetic triplet figures, never slackens, and the texture is almost always full scored. By contrast, the Andante scherzando is full of light and air, and inevitably invites comparison with works such as the Octet and Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* scherzo.

The Adagio, thought to be one of Mendelssohn's finest, alternates stately and urgent rhythms, transparent and richly dark textures, dense polyphony and whimsically ornate solo writing that reaches a sudden bright patch of major tonality at the end.

The finale returns to the world of driving rhythms and rich harmony, double- and triple-stopping allowing for chords of eight or more notes. Once again, the first violin has the lion's share of bravura writing, though this also suffuses the other parts, especially as the piece races to its conclusion.

David Bruce (b. 1970)

Gumboots

- I. Part I
- II. Part II

There is a paradox in music, and indeed all art – the fact that life-enriching art has been produced, even inspired by conditions of tragedy, brutality and oppression, a famous example being Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, written while he was in a prisoner of war camp. Gumboot Dancing bears this trait – it was born out of the brutal labour conditions in South Africa under Apartheid, in which black miners were chained together and wore gumboots while they worked in the flooded gold mines, because it was cheaper for the owners to supply the boots than to drain the floodwater from the mine. Apparently slapping the boots and chains was used by the workers as a form of communication which was otherwise banned in the mine, and this later developed into a form of dance. If the examples of Gumboot

Dancing available online are anything to go by, it is characterised by a huge vitality and zest for life. So this for me is a striking example of how something beautiful and life-enhancing can come out of something far more negative. Of course, this paradox has a far simpler explanation – the resilience of the human spirit.

My *Gumboots* is in two parts of roughly equal length, the first is tender and slow moving, at times ‘yearning’; at times seemingly expressing a kind of tranquillity and inner peace. The second is a complete contrast, consisting of five, ever-more-lively ‘gumboot dances’, often joyful and always vital.

However, although there are some African music influences in the score, I don’t see the piece as being specifically ‘about’ the Gumboot dancers, if anything it could be seen as an abstract celebration of the rejuvenating power of dance, moving as it does from introspection through to celebration. I would like to think however, that the emotional journey of the piece, and specifically the complete contrast between the two halves will force the listener to conjecture some kind of external ‘meaning’ to the music - the tenderness of the first half should ‘haunt’ us as we enjoy the bustle of the second; that bustle itself should force us to question or reevaluate the tranquillity of the first half. But to impose a meaning beyond that would be stepping on dangerous ground – the fact is you will choose your own meaning, and hear your own story, whether I want you to or not.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Quintet in C major for two violins, viola and two cellos, D. 956 (1828)

- I. Allegro ma non troppo
- II. Adagio
- III. Scherzo: presto – Trio: andante sostenuto
- IV. Allegretto

Just why Schubert wrote his celebrated String Quintet is unclear, and, sadly, he never heard it performed; the premiere had to wait, it seems, until 1850. Nor do we know why he chose to add a second cello, echoing the works of Boccherini, rather than the extra viola preferred

by Mozart and Beethoven, and various later composers.

As does Beethoven’s *Eroica*, Schubert cultivates a nice ambiguity at the work’s opening: long-held chords establish neither speed nor metre, and are, significantly, not played by all five instruments. We gradually become aware that the seemingly slow introduction was in fact in the same metre as the allegro material that follows, and that material expands in short motifs on the implications of the two chords heard at the start. By contrast, there follows one of Schubert’s most beautiful tunes, given to the two cellos in what Peter Gülke calls the ‘radiantly “illegal”’ key of E flat, accompanied by a short, repeated rhythmic motif in the upper parts. It is such juxtaposition of the lyrical and the motivic, the huge range of textural changes and the sudden and colourful gearshifts into remote keys that partly explains how Schubert sustains this immense structure.

In the adagio the greatest songwriter of his time seems, at first, to have abandoned melody, when in fact he has miraculously slowed it almost to a standstill, enlivening the texture, again, with repeated short rhythmic figures. The impassioned central section is in F minor, a chord that shares one note with the main key of E major: so close, and yet so far.

The almost unbearable spell of the adagio is broken by an earthy, cantering scherzo in C, but this in turn is compromised by the central Trio section, a brooding interlude – again in a paradoxically close but remote key, D flat – with falling melodies and darkly glowing timbres. The shimmering return of the scherzo can’t erase the sense of underlying tragedy.

Dvořák believed Schubert to have been among the first to introduce Hungarian elements into ‘art music’, and the main theme of the finale bears him out. Its genial swing is offset by frequent, unexpected changes of key, and the emphatic repetition of short motifs. And in the work’s final moments the acceleration becomes alarming before the almost brutal minor gesture with which it concludes.

Mendelssohn and Schubert notes by Gordon Kerry.
Bruce notes by the composer.

Musicians

Georgina Oakes, Clarinet

Orchestras Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra Amsterdam, Ensemble InterContemporain Paris, MusicAeterna Diaghilev Festival Orchestra Russia, Britten-Pears Orchestra England, Philharmonisches Orchestra Freiburg, Webern Symphonie Orchester Vienna, Royal Theatre Vienna Orchestra, Bayerischen Philharmonie Munich **Ensembles** Ensemble Offspring 2018 Associate Artist, Aurora Chamber Music Festival Sweden, The Juilliard School ChamberFest New York. **Selected Recordings** MusicAeterna - Mahler, Symphony 6 "Tragic" (Sony Classical) Juan Diego Florez - Bésame Mucho (Sony Classical) Aldeburgh Winds - Strauss: Metamorphosen Serenade 7 & Symphony (Linn Records). **Awards/Study** Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique Paris, Magister Diplom - Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Vienna, MMus - Hochschule für Music Freiburg, BMus - Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Laureate of the Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship Tokyo Foundation, Australian Music Foundation Young Musician Award, Ian Potter Music Foundation Award.

Anna Da Silva Chen, Violin

Orchestras Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, Canberra Symphony Orchestra **Ensembles** Australia Piano Quartet, Selby & Friends, Ensemble Q. **Awards/Study** BMus Performance (4th year, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, USYD), Kendall National Violin Competition winner, National Fine Music 102.5 Young Virtuoso Award winner, Australian National Youth Concerto Competition winner, Gisborne International Music Competition prize-winner, ABC Young Performers Awards string and grand finalist.

Airena Nakamura, Violin

Orchestras Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra (Principal Second Violin). **Ensembles** Australian Chamber Orchestra, Omega Ensemble, Caro String Quartet. **Selected Recordings** Omega Ensemble: Munro-Mozart-Palmer (ABC classics). **Awards/Study** BMus (Honours).

Neil Thompson, Viola

Orchestras Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra, Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Adelaide Symphony Orchestra. **Ensembles** The Nano Symphony, Caro String Quartet, Australian Chamber Orchestra, Skyline String Quartet, Omega Ensemble. **Premieres** Anthony Pateras, 'Crystalline' String Quartet. **Selected Recordings** Omega Ensemble: Munro-Mozart-Palmer (ABC classics), Hive (Kammerklang). **Awards/Study** BMus (Honours), Elder Conservatorium, Adelaide, ANAM (Full Scholarship), ACO emerging artist, SSO fellowship.

Amanda Verner, Viola

Orchestras Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Philharmonia Orchestra, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, The Hallé, Verbier Chamber Orchestra, Australian Chamber Orchestra. **Ensembles** Sinfonia Grange au Lac, Aurora Orchestra, Le Cercle de l'Harmonie, Les Dissonances, Jubilee Quartet, Philharmonia Chamber Players, Camerata RCO, Concertgebouw Chamber Orchestra, MELEResemble, Curtis 20/21. **Awards/Study** Curtis Institute of Music, Cleveland Institute of Music, Seiji Ozawa Academy, Lac Lemon Masterclasses, Switzerland, Chloe Trevor Music Academy, American Soundscapes (solo debut Carnegie Hall).

Paul Stender, Cello

Orchestras Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra. **Ensembles** Australian Chamber Orchestra, ACO Collective, Omega Ensemble. **Selected Recordings** Omega Ensemble: Munro-Mozart-Palmer (ABC classics).

Howard Penny, Cello *

Orchestras Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Australian Chamber Orchestra, Vienna Chamber Orchestra, Camerata Salzburg, Austrian Radio Symphony Orchestra. **Ensembles** Beethoven Trio Vienna, Concentus Musicus Vienna, Merlin Ensemble. **Selected Recordings** Works for cello solo (Tall Poppies); Beethoven Triple Concerto (Vienna Chamber Orchestra); complete trios by Mozart and Mendelssohn; Boccherini sextets; orchestra works by Beethoven, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Haydn, Dvorak, Bartok (COE/ Harmoncourt). **Awards/Study** Winner NYCC and YPA (Australia); finalist Prague Spring International Cello Competition and ARD Competition Munich (trio); Gold Medal for services to Chamber Music in Austria. Head of Strings at ANAM.

* Howard Penny appears courtesy of the Australian National Academy of Music.

Omega Ensemble

The Ensemble

Alexandra Osborne, violin
Anna Da Silva Chen, violin
Veronique Serret, violin
Catalin Ungureanu, violin
Airena Nakamura, violin
Neil Thompson, viola
David Wicks, viola
Amanda Verner, viola
Paul Stender, cello
Howard Penny, cello †
Alex Henery, double bass
Sally Walker, flute
David Rowden, clarinet
Georgina Oakes, clarinet
Lloyd Van't Hoff, clarinet †
Nicola Bell, oboe
Celia Craig, oboe
Josh Oates, oboe
Todd Gibson-Cornish, bassoon
Michael Dixon, horn
Clemens Leske, piano
Maria Raspopova, piano
Samuel Hogarth, piano †
Lee Abrahmsen, soprano †

† = Guest Artist

Omega Ensemble is one of Australia's foremost professional chamber music groups. Founded in 2005 by clarinettist David Rowden, the Ensemble has fast become a powerful musical force in Sydney, hailed as 'first-rate musicians' (The Daily Telegraph) and 'one of the best chamber music outfits in town' (Sydney Morning Herald).

The Ensemble presents some of Australia's most outstanding talent, as well as international guest artists, in a powerful chamber music setting. In addition to their work with the Ensemble, many of Omega's core musicians also hold principal roles in professional orchestras, including Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, Australia Opera and Ballet Orchestra and the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, USA.

The Ensemble's artistic programs are diverse and provocative, presenting music from the late-Baroque to the 20th century, as well as frequent World and Australian premieres. Omega have to date commissioned over 40 works from leading composers, including Elena Kats-Chernin, Andrew Ford, Matthew Hindson, George Palmer and most recently, American composer Nico Muhly.

Omega Ensemble performs regularly in Sydney and Melbourne, as well as frequent touring to regional areas and appearances at national music festivals. In addition to performances at home, Omega has also toured to China, with sell-out performances and masterclasses at the Beijing Central Conservatory, Chang Chun's JiLin College of Arts and Dalian University.

In addition to concert performances, the Ensemble also maintains a growing On Demand catalogue of live concert videos, available online as well as broadcast on Australia's national airline, Qantas, In-flight Entertainment. The Ensemble's live performances regularly air on radio, including ABC Classic FM and its debut studio album was released on ABC Classics in 2016. In 2018 the Ensemble launched the Omega Classics label for independent release of new studio recordings, and an expansive back catalogue of live recordings.

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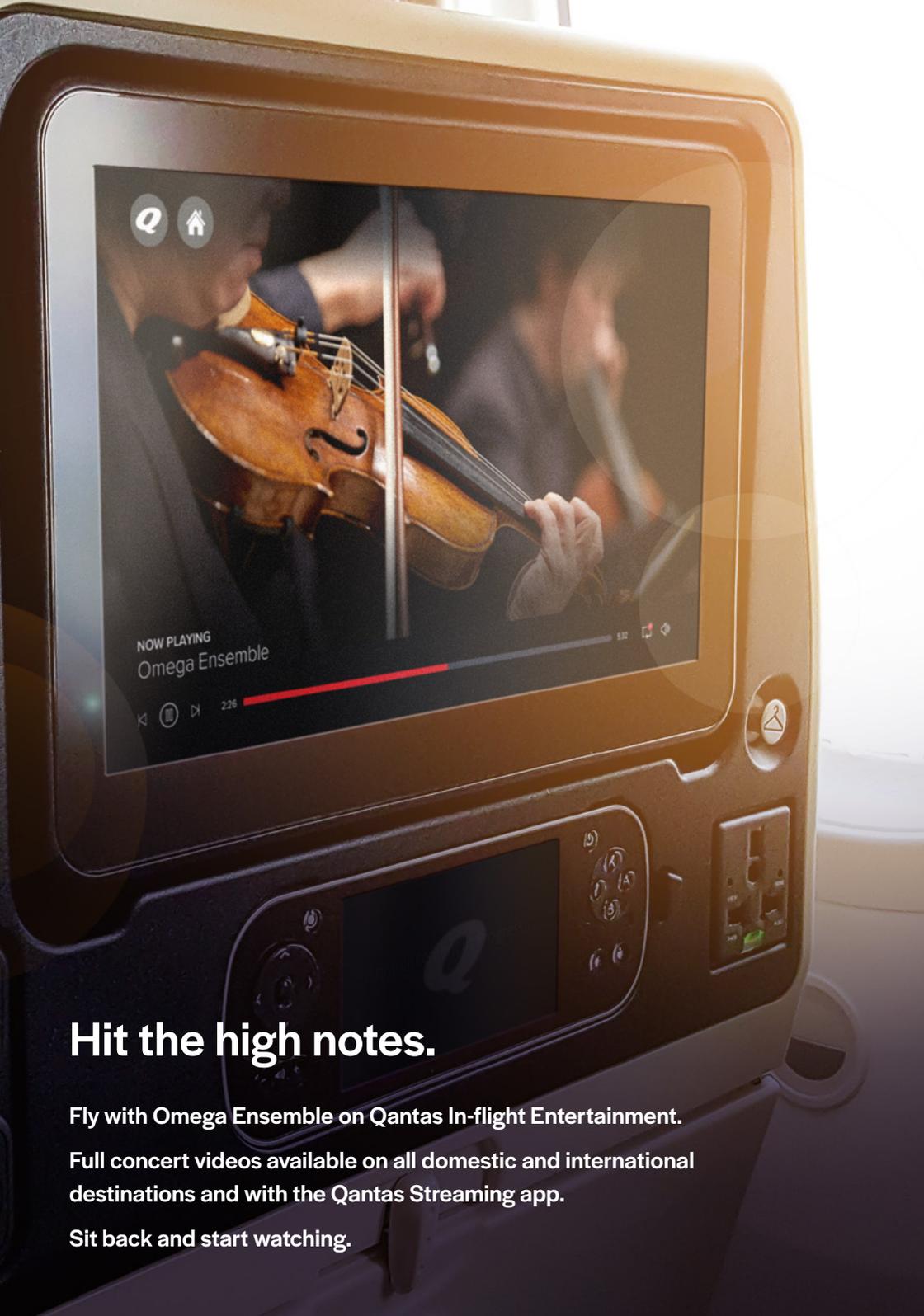


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