

The Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble

Wednesday, October 3, 2018 at 8:00pm

Pre-concert Talk at 7:00pm

This is the 863rd concert in Koerner Hall

The Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble

Tomo Keller, violin & leader

Harvey De Souza, violin

Robert Smissen, viola

Stephen Orton, cello

Lynda Houghton, bass

James Burke, clarinet

Julie Price, bassoon

Stephen Stirling, horn

PROGRAM

Carl Nielsen: Serenata in vano, FS. 68

Allegro non troppo ma brioso – Un poco adagio – Tempo di marcia

Jean Françaix: Octet

- I. Moderato – Allegressimo
- II. Scherzo
- III. Andante, Adagio
- IV. Movement de valse

INTERMISSION

Ludwig van Beethoven: Septet in E flat Major, op. 20

- I. Adagio – Allegro con brio
- II. Adagio cantabile
- III. Tempo di menuetto
- IV. Tema con variazioni: Andante
- V. Scherzo: Allegro molto e vivace
- VI. Andante con moto alla marcia – Presto

Carl Nielsen

Born in Sortelung, Funen, Denmark, June 9, 1865; died in Copenhagen, Denmark, October 3, 1931

Serenata in vano, for clarinet, bassoon, horn, cello and double bass, FS. 68 (1914)

“It’s an odd little work ... more curious than amusing or beautiful,” were the most probing thoughts offered by the Danish press after the earliest performances of Nielsen’s *Serenata in vano*. But the Danish composer’s ‘odd little work’, first heard in Copenhagen’s Odd Fellows Mansion (Palaeet) after a preparatory two-week tour through regional Denmark in 1915, has remained Nielsen’s most popular chamber work, together with a more ambitious wind quintet. It is a whimsical, humorous piece in the time-honoured tradition of the nocturnal serenade in pursuit of love – here, clearly, in vain (in vano). Its ‘odd’ instrumentation came about in May 1914, after the bass player of a group of orchestral musicians asked his composer-friend for a companion piece to the Beethoven Septet for a short tour. Nielsen, recently turned freelance composer after 25 years as orchestral violinist and conductor, obliged within a week, with a short single-movement serenade, which he described as “a humorous trifle.” The first of its three clearly defined sections introduces a folk-like theme with a few modal twists, which encourages both winds and strings to short, showy rhapsodies, as though warming up for a serenade to come. This comes in the form of slower,

expressive night music, ranging from the languorous to the ardent, representing Nielsen at his lyrical finest. But their efforts are in vain. Mission unaccomplished, the band shrug their shoulders and, in the composer's words, "shuffle off home to the strains of a little final march, which they play for their own amusement." The short serenade reveals Nielsen's characteristic blend of down-to-earth straightforwardness and sophisticated understanding of the character of each instrument.

Jean Françaix

Born in Le Mans, France, May 23, 1912; died in Paris, France, September 25, 1997

Octet for clarinet, bassoon, horn, two violins, viola, cello, and bass (1972)

French composer Jean Françaix wrote his first piece at the age of six and the fluency remained with him to the end of his life at the age of 85. His avowed life motto as a composer was 'to give pleasure' (writing 'musique pour faire plaisir') and this he did in more than 200 works. They range through five operas, 13 ballets, 30 concerto-type works for an impressive variety of instruments, three symphonies, and volumes of chamber, solo, and vocal music. During the Second World War, his colleague Francis Poulenc, expressed his appreciation of Françaix's music for leaving a distinctively French fingerprint on an elegant neoclassicism. It was an idiom that was to remain with him for the rest of his life. "Between my earlier and more recent years," Françaix said in his legendary self-deprecating manner, "I have gained in experience, but the foundation of my way of thinking has always remained the same. If it is only fools who do not change, then I must be a fool, because I do not change."

The Octet, written in 1972 at the age of 60, is dedicated to the Octuor de Paris and composed "to the revered memory of Franz Schubert" – whose Octet of 1824 gives Françaix the instrumentation he uses, if not the number of movements (six, as opposed to the French composer's four). It opens in a restrained, appealingly wistful vein with a short, four-measure theme, which the clarinet, echoed by bassoon, continues to extend, in a lazy Sunday afternoon sort of way. The strings soon stir from their slumber, taking a more active role in the dialogue, pushing it towards a mock fanfare, as though to announce something important to come. But the clarinet has other ideas, cheekily riffing on the opening theme in a quintessentially Françaix sort of way, egging on the violin to compete. The horn offers a variant, which everyone explores until the bassoon puts its stamp on the cheeky theme. Violin and clarinet amiably continue to see where the theme will take them, until memories of the opening theme help the movement unwind to a calm close.

The tempo changes to triple time for the Scherzo second movement. The starting point of its deft, gratefully written progression can be traced back to that cheeky first movement theme whose first few notes appear throughout, with the frequency of tourists climbing the Eiffel Tower, only, in Françaix, they do not overstay their welcome and crowd out the place. The central trio section's texture is a joy, with chattering winds over a smooth-as-silk string trio melody, supported by a bass line pizzicato. In the slow movement, a brief introduction and coda frame three variations on a sentimental theme. It derives from the wistful melody which opened the Octet. It is heard initially on radiant, muted strings, then from the fluidly moving wind trio and, finally, from everyone together, with the sonorous strings now accompanied by the most delicate of wind arabesques. In the finale, Françaix pays his clearest homage to Schubert (and to the commissioning Vienna Octet, who gave the first performance November 7, 1972) by taking that most Viennese of dances, the waltz, and through subtle and ingenious orchestration, dressing it in the most elegant French attire.

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born in Bonn, Germany, December 15 or 16, 1770; died in Vienna, Austria, March 26, 1827

Septet in E flat Major, for violin, viola, cello, bass, clarinet, bassoon, and horn, op. 20 (1799-1800)

Although it provided an early boost to his popularity at a time he most needed it, Beethoven grew to resent the success that his Septet generated following its public premiere in Vienna, April 2, 1800. He had worked hard for the concert, his first benefit concert – organizing, promoting, conducting, and playing piano in a typically huge program, with the Septet as its centerpiece. It paid off, and Beethoven is estimated to have been able to live off the proceeds for two years. A piano duo version of the Septet quickly appeared. Then Beethoven encouraged his publisher to issue arrangements for strings alone, for flute quintet, and he even made a transcription himself (his op. 38) for the very marketable, and comfortably domestic, combination of piano trio. The benefit concert at the Burgtheater

presented the young Beethoven (Septet, First Symphony, a piano concerto, and piano improvisations) alongside the venerated Mozart (a symphony) and Haydn (excerpts from the newly written oratorio, *The Creation*). Here was Beethoven standing tall, out of the shadow of his mentors and, by implication, every bit their equal. But the very success of the genial Septet would soon raise expectations that Beethoven was unwilling to meet as his composition evolved. Conservative critics would use it as a barometer against which they would measure the challenges that his more progressive, more demanding later music would pose. Beethoven grew to despise the Septet, whose popularity has never waned. "That damned thing!" the composer told an English visitor a dozen or so years later: "I wish it were burned!"

The Septet is highly original in its one-to-a-part combination of a trio of winds and quartet of strings. Its six movements are rooted in the serenade/divertimento tradition where the winds customarily play in pairs. Here, however, there is just one clarinet, oboe, and bassoon playing individual lines with violin, viola, cello, and bass. Beethoven's palette is similarly far from traditional, with both bassoon and cello climbing well beyond their habitual bass line support, while the bass itself has more of an orchestral rather than a doubling role. The winds generally either support the strings or work as a group and occasionally as soloists, providing contrast to the sonority of the strings. The stately introduction immediately gives notice of the importance of the violin. Its earliest performer was Ignaz Schuppanzigh, then the foremost violinist in Vienna, chosen to give the premieres of many more of Beethoven's works in the years to come. Beethoven probably had Schuppanzigh in mind when he turned the second variation (fourth movement) into a miniature concerto, wrote some virtuoso arpeggios in the scherzo movement, and even included a brilliant cadenza for the violin in the finale. The clarinet, too, has time in the limelight, notably in the first two movements. Beethoven draws the theme of the third movement from an earlier G Major Piano Sonata (later published as op. 49, no. 2), crisping up its rhythm and adding flamboyant little displays for horn and clarinet in its central trio section.

To this point, Beethoven follows the pattern of movements of a traditional classical chamber work, and a brisk finale would normally follow. Instead, in the spirit of the serenade, he introduces a fourth movement containing a sequence of five variations on what is believed to be a German folk song, choosing a different texture for each variation. The horn sets the mood of the jaunty Scherzo, which is then introduced to balance the earlier minuet, while the cello commands its lyrical trio section. The finale opens with an imposing, slow march in the minor key. It is a moment of tongue-in-cheek humour and the solemnity is short-lived since the Presto that follows positively exudes joie de vivre. The Septet, where shared enjoyment is a hallmark of the musical language, inspired many 19th century large-scale chamber works by Spohr, Kreutzer, Moscheles, Hummel, Onslow, Berwald, and others – none more celebrated than (with the addition of a second violin) Schubert's great Octet of 1824.

- Program notes © 2018 Keith Horner

The Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble

The Academy Chamber Ensemble was formed in 1967, drawing its membership from the world-renowned chamber orchestra the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, which was itself founded by Sir Neville Marriner in 1958 and is currently led by Music Director Joshua Bell. The purpose behind the formation of the Chamber Ensemble was to perform the larger scale chamber music repertoire with players who customarily worked together, instead of the usual string quartet with additional guests. Drawn from the principal players of the orchestra and play-directed by Academy Director/Leader Tomo Keller, the Chamber Ensemble now performs in multiple configurations from wind trios to string octets. Its touring commitments are extensive and include regular tours of Europe and North America, whilst recording contracts with Philips Classics, Hyperion, and Chandos have led to the release of over 30 CDs. The Academy Chamber Ensemble's October 2018 tour of the United States and Canada is supported by Maria Cardamone and Paul Matthews, together with the American Friends of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. The American Friends was founded in 1998 to support the work of the Academy around the world, particularly in the USA.

The Academy of St Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble made its Royal Conservatory debut on October 21, 2016.