

"Echoes Across Time: Piano Quartets of Passion and Contrast"

PROGRAMME NOTES

Mozart - Quartet No.2 in Eb major K.493
Anthony Ritchie - Oppositions for Piano Quartet Op.116

INTERVAL

Brahms - Quartet No.1 in C minor Op.60

Mozart – Piano Quartet No. 2 in E-flat major, K. 493

Mozart's Piano Quartet No. 2 in E-flat major, K. 493, is the second of two piano quartets composed at the request of the publisher Franz Anton Hoffmeister. Written in 1786, during a particularly fruitful period of Mozart's career, this work stands out as a brilliant example of his chamber music writing, blending the piano with strings in a novel and conversational way. Mozart's E-flat major Piano Quartet may not have received immediate success at its premiere, but over time it has become a cornerstone of the piano quartet repertoire. Its combination of elegance, emotional depth, and structural clarity is a testament to Mozart's extraordinary genius.

The quartet opens with a spacious Allegro, where the lively and joyful spirit of the music is immediately apparent. Here, Mozart establishes an interplay between the piano and strings, with each instrument contributing to the dialogue, though the piano often assumes a leadership role. The music exhibits a playful balance between lyricism and classical elegance, with frequent shifts between major and minor, a characteristic feature of Mozart's mature style.

The second movement, Larghetto, is a tender and lyrical contrast to the first. In this serene and intimate movement, Mozart creates a peaceful atmosphere, allowing the instruments to sing individually and as a unified ensemble. The piano offers delicate and expressive lines, accompanied by the strings in a way that highlights Mozart's mastery of texture and nuance.

The quartet concludes with a Rondo (Allegretto), a lively and charming movement that showcases Mozart's gift for creating captivating melodies. The rondo theme alternates with contrasting episodes, each full of energy and invention. The movement brings the work to an ebullient close, with light-hearted brilliance and effervescence.

Oppositions for piano quartet (2005)

Oppositions was composed for The New Zealand Piano Quartet, for inclusion on a CD of the composer's chamber music, released by Kiwi-Pacific Records (2006). It has been performed in Hong Kong at the Asia Composers League Festival and has had several other performances in New Zealand. It is in one movement, and is based around the idea of opposing forces,

whether they be literal or imaginative. In musical terms, the piano is frequently pitted against the strings, while musical themes seem to jostle for supremacy.

After a short and ominous introduction, the strident first theme is played on violin, accompanied by hammered chords. A second theme has all three stringed instruments playing in 'cluster' harmonies. The cello announces a lyrical but turbulent idea, and this is played in counterpoint with the first theme. The piano is to the fore in a third theme, which is stealthy and marked by sudden outbursts.

These themes are discussed in a middle section that gradually winds down to very soft, thudding chords, before building up to a vigorous return of the opening. In this final section themes are fragmented and tossed around violently, before a brief Coda in which the first theme appears dominant.

Johannes Brahms – Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor, Op. 60 (1875)

Brahms' Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor, Op. 60, is a work of immense emotional depth, often described as a reflection of Brahms' inner turmoil. Though Brahms began sketches of this quartet in 1855, shortly after the death of Robert Schumann, it was only completed two decades later in 1875. This piece encapsulates a range of intense emotions—grief, passion, and yearning—that may be tied to Brahms' complex relationship with Schumann's wife, Clara. Brahms' Piano Quartet in C minor is often seen as a window into his emotional world, filled with unspoken anguish and passion. It stands as a powerful, dramatic work within the chamber music repertoire, balancing intellectual rigor with profound emotional depth.

The quartet begins with a dramatic *Allegro non troppo*, which plunges the listener into a world of urgency and tension. The opening theme, introduced by the piano and strings, is restless and stormy, and the movement builds with dark intensity. The music explores a wide emotional range, from despair to fleeting moments of hope, all while maintaining a sense of unresolved conflict.

The second movement, *Scherzo: Allegro*, is striking in its relentless energy and rhythmic drive. Brahms' use of syncopation and abrupt dynamic shifts gives the movement a turbulent, almost explosive character. In contrast to the emotional outpouring of the first movement, the *scherzo* is more biting and aggressive, yet it maintains the underlying mood of anxiety.

The *Andante* offers a brief respite from the storm. In this introspective and heartfelt movement, Brahms gives the cello a poignant melody, which is taken up by the violin and piano in turn. The mood is one of quiet reflection, tinged with melancholy, as the instruments engage in an intimate dialogue. This movement hints at a more tender, personal aspect of Brahms' emotional landscape.

The quartet concludes with a *Finale: Allegro comodo*, where the sense of turmoil resurfaces. The movement begins with a subdued theme, but soon escalates into a complex interplay of themes that reflect Brahms' mastery of development and variation. The movement's fluctuating moods—sometimes tragic, sometimes defiant—ultimately lead to a powerful and emphatic conclusion.