

Music at Woolmers 1

Saturday 13 April, 11am
Woolmers Estate, Longford

Julian Leslie horn
Christopher Nicholas violin
Ivan James cello
Karen Smithies piano

SCHUMANN Adagio and Allegro, Op 70 (10')
MENDELSSOHN Piano Trio No 1 in D minor, Op 49 (35')
Molto allegro ed agitato
Andante con moto tranquillo
Scherzo. Leggiero e vivace
Finale. Allegro assai appassionato

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) was one of the leading figures of the so-called 'Romantic Generation' – a group of composers born in the first decade of the 19th century (in addition to Schumann, it includes Chopin, Mendelssohn, Berlioz and Bellini). Schumann's imagination and inquiring mind led him to compose some of the most original music of his time. His songs and piano music are particularly outstanding, but he also made an important contribution to chamber music and the symphony. Schumann's Adagio and Allegro was composed in 1849. He wrote it for the combination of instruments heard in this concert – horn and piano – but authorised editions also exist for violin or cello and piano. The Adagio, which is marked 'mit innigem Ausdruck' (with heartfelt expression), is in the sentimental style. Listen out for how effortlessly the two instruments swap each other's ideas – the piano taking up a phrase introduced by the horn and vice versa. The music is tuneful and expressive, with subtly inflected chromatic notes (notes from outside the prevailing key) decorating a melodic line which frequently swoops between registers for maximum emotional effect. The Adagio, which is calm and reflective, gives way to a dazzling Allegro, marked 'Rasch und feurig' (quickly and fiery). The home key is A-flat major (as it is for the Adagio) but we leave it behind for a brief, introspective middle section in the remote key of B major which includes thematic references to the Adagio. Returning to A flat and the urgent theme from the start of the Allegro, the music builds to an impressive closing section where both players are pushed to extremes. Schumann's wife, Clara, who was a composer in her own right and a famous concert pianist, described the Adagio and Allegro as 'a magnificent piece, fresh and passionate.'

Schumann and Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) were contemporaries and friends. In fact, upon hearing Mendelssohn's Piano Trio No 1 in D minor, which was composed in 1839, Schumann labelled the composer 'the Mozart of the 19th century.' Which isn't to suggest that Mendelssohn imitates the style of Mozart but more that he writes with Mozartian transparency and refinement. The first movement commences with a serious and somewhat mournful theme (introduced by the cello) which soon takes on a far more tempestuous cast (note the word 'agitato' at the head of the movement) before a consoling secondary theme in A major emerges (marked 'espressivo' and, again, introduced by the cello). Both themes are rigorously worked out as the movement progresses with the mood see-sawing between 'agitato' and 'espressivo', with the former eclipsing the latter in the brilliant closing pages. The piano sets the scene in the tender second movement with a gentle melody floating above rippling middle voices. A contrasting section in the minor mode is built around a descending theme before the opening melody returns, this time with different piano textures. Mendelssohn had a gift for featherlight scherzos and the third movement is among his finest. The mood turns serious for the final movement where, as in the opening movement, two contrasting ideas – one tempestuous the other lyrical – are kept in play. The home key of D minor is abandoned in the final minutes with D major taking its place, bringing the trio to an exultant close.

Robert Gibson, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra,
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