

>> LONDON

The 2007–08 season came to an end in a blaze of fine chamber music performances. **TIM HOMFRAY** reports

Tippett Quartet: grace and charm



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SCHUBERT WAS A RECURRING THEME IN JULY. ON 3 JULY

the **Florestan Trio** performed two works of his at the Wigmore Hall, the Notturmo in E flat major and his B flat major Piano Trio. The former was alluring, by turns contemplative and dramatic. In the latter there was muscular playing, particularly from the strings in the opening movement, while pianist Susan Tomes played with a delicious coquettish lightness at times. There was a determination to this movement, within which the occasional lingering and indulgence in a phrase was all the more effective. Some exquisite playing followed, with a gentle give and take between violinist Anthony Marwood and cellist Richard Lester in the second movement and the Mendelssohnian approach to the Scherzo. They even found a childlike innocence in the finale, countering the obsessive overbearance of its recurrent theme.

In the second half they were joined by violinist Laura Samuel and violist Krzysztof Chorzelski for a performance of Fauré's First Piano Quintet. Here there was both narrative drive and sensuous enjoyment, with beautiful extended singing lines in the slow movement and a captivating simplicity to the finale.

The **Tippett Quartet** brought grace and charm to its Wigmore Hall concert on 6 July. The performance of Tippett's Second Quartet was noteworthy for its lightness of touch. The complex cross-rhythms of the opening movement were played with limpid clarity, and the third and fourth movements, while full of energy and drive, maintained a sense of space and airiness. The quartet was joined by soprano Grace Davidson for the UK premiere of David Braid's *Morning*, a setting of a Pablo Neruda poem characterised by long-drawn lines and shifting tonality, in which the performers created a sense of both movement and stasis. There was again a luminous quality in the performance of Beethoven's C sharp minor Quartet op.131, particularly in the tone and texture of the opening fugue, and the insouciance of the Andante theme. The players found many vivid characters in the work, from the grotesque to the muscular, but it was a good-natured performance overall.

On the blisteringly hot evening of 7 July violinist **Nicola Benedetti** and pianist Steven Osborne appeared in Plaisterer's Hall as part of the City of London Festival. It was a concert with many good things, but most apparent of all was the extraordinary degree of rapport and shared music-making between these two players. They opened with

a muscular performance of Debussy's Violin Sonata, combining the fractured elements of this multicoloured piece into a compelling whole. To Prokofiev's First Sonata they brought several varieties of bleakness, with increasing ferocity in the second movement and rich melodic playing both here and in the third movement, before a surge of emotional power was unleashed in the last. The understanding between the players was most evident in the more genial milieu of Brahms's Second Sonata. In an acoustic both rewarding and almost cruel in its clarity they produced a performance of lightness and warmth.

Schubert's other great piano trio, the one in E flat major, featured in the **Gould Piano Trio's** concert at the Wigmore Hall on 17 July. The players opened with Mozart's B flat major Trio K502, which received crisp playing, full of charm, with an easy humour in the second movement. It was followed by James MacMillan's *14 Little Pictures* from 1997, a set of miniatures run together into a work of often haunting eloquence, here from cellist Alice Neary in particular. Violinist Lucy Gould had moments of birdlike twittering, and indeed there were times when both string players sounded like a couple of mournful tenor seagulls. Their performance of the Schubert was monumental. The first movement built up to a coda of tremendous grandeur, and Neary was notable again in the second, with her playing beautifully simple at the opening. The second theme here was played with a captivating, slightly exaggerated lilt, and the climaxes had huge power and majesty.

The following night, the **Chilingirian Quartet** came to the Wigmore. It began with a jaunty performance of Haydn's D major Quartet op.50 no.6 'Frog', with leader Levon Chilingirian tackling his filigree passagework with relish. Peter Fribbins's Second Quartet 'After Cromer' followed. This is a conversational sort of work, four people talking sometimes in turn and sometimes all at once. It has beguiling moments, sounding faintly like late Fauré, interrupted by aggressive unison statements, and was given a colourful and convincing performance.

Beethoven's Quartet in E flat major op.127 received a performance attractive on the surface and emotionally complex beneath, marked by clarity of texture and ensemble. There was both a beguiling naivety and a richness in the playing, particularly in the first movement. The great drive of the third movement was offset by a kind of uncertainty. The last movement, however, seemed a little mannered in its changes of speed and overemphasis on leading parts.

Erwin Schulhoff wrote the first of his five string quartets in 1924. In the hands of the **Henschel Quartet**, performing at the Wigmore Hall on 23 July, it emerged as an engaging and ultimately unsettling work. The second movement has an edge of sardonic comedy in its lyrical, eccentric melodies, wonderfully characterised by violist Monica Henschel-Schwind and cellist Mathias Beyer-Karlshøj in particular. The last movement is grimmer fare, with insistent, oscillating minor thirds and sustained, discordant lines – beautifully controlled here – fading to nothing.

Violist **Kazuki Sawa** joined the quartet for the belated world premiere of Max Bruch's String Quintet in E flat major, which the players tackled splendidly, steadily building up passion in long lines over undulating textures in the slow movement and maintaining clarity in what could easily have become a textural fog. Leader Christoph Henschel scurried about brilliantly in the virtuosic writing of the finale. Their subsequent performance of Schubert's late G major Quartet was highly coloured and very powerful, but it had 'interpretation' written all over it and never really settled down. The first movement was virtually an operatic scena, but the finale was a blazing, white-knuckle ride. ■