Chamber Notes

with Marianne Thorsen

guest director and violin

Programme
Programme

Part One
35 mins approx.

Felix Mendelssohn
String Octet in E-flat major

1 Allegro moderato ma
con fuoco
2 Andante
3 Scherzo: Allegro leggierissimo
4 Presto

Interval

Part Two
45 mins approx.

George Enescu
Octet for Strings in C major

1 Très modéré
2 Très fougueux
3 Lentement
4 Mouvement de valse
bien rythmé

Performers

Guest Director & Violin
Marianne Thorsen

Scottish Ensemble

Violin
Tristan Gurney
Cheryl Crockett
Liza Johnson

Viola
Jane Atkins
Andrew Berridge

Cello
Alison Lawrance
Naomi Pavri

Thu 29 August 2019
Crear Studio

Sat 31 August 2019
Mull Theatre

Sun 1 September 2019
Eden Court, Inverness

Tue 3 September 2019
Marryat Hall, Dundee

welcome to
Chamber Notes

All timings are approximate.
Programme order correct at time of printing; any changes will be announced from the stage.
Hello

I’m delighted to be playing with the wonderful Scottish Ensemble for the first time, celebrating the chamber music of Mendelssohn and Enescu.

Described as “the music of friends” by Richard Walthew in 1909, chamber music can inspire our deepest emotions, reflections and thoughts – and no better explored than through these two magnificent works – the exotic and expansive soundscape of Enescu’s String Octet, set against the ever-popular Mendelssohn Octet which is packed full of rich melodies, and brimming with youthful exuberance and flair.

The universal language of music can contribute so much to bringing people closer together.

Today, more than ever, it is good to be reminded just how much we all have in common and how invaluable music is to mankind.

I hope our performances will stimulate, refresh and invigorate all who share and participate, both audiences and musicians alike – all of us brought together as ‘friends’ through this most intimate form of musical expression. Enjoy!

Marianne Thorsen
Guest director
Felix Mendelssohn  
(1809 – 1847)  

String Octet in E-flat major  
Opus 20 | Composed 1825  

It’s nice to know, when listening to this octet, that Mendelssohn had “a lovely time writing it”.

He was just 16 years old, a fact that will always remain impressive considering the part it plays in his legacy: it’s now considered to be amongst his most accomplished pieces, and a clear, enduring favourite in the chamber music repertoire.

The Mendelssohn family were a known entity in the intellectual and cultural circles of Berlin, hosting dinners for those involved in the city’s artistic and philosophical life. There were also their regular Sunday ‘musicales’, cosy gatherings in their front room at which their young son would be encouraged to premiere his compositions, amongst other performances. It’s thought this piece would have been first heard at one of these parties in front of – speculation, of course – a seriously impressed crowd.

But, age aside, why is Mendelssohn’s octet so celebrated? There’s the fact that not many previous examples existed. Schubert’s Octet in F major, published the previous year, was the main precursor, although it was written for strings and wind instruments.

Then there’s the sheer inventiveness with which the young composer blended eight instrumental lines to create a whole that feels more like a mini symphony than a work for a small group of players.

He did outline this intention explicitly in a written note on the score: “it is to be played in symphonic style by all the instruments; the pianos and fortés must be very precisely differentiated and be more strongly emphasised than usual”.

Performed as the composer directed, the whole thing does seem to have the energy of something larger than it is.

The first movement, which lasts almost as long as the others combined, is marked to be played ‘with fire’ – and it brims with a barely-contained, building energy from those eager opening bars.

The song-like sway of the second movement acts as a contrasting, slightly mournful, diversion, before the beautifully light, lightning-quick chase of the third (which his sister claimed to be inspired by a scene from Goethe’s play, Faust, and does seem to have an element of impish fantasy to it).

The final movement, starting as if a continuation of the chase, shows off the composer’s compositional studies of the fugues of Handel and Bach, but with an accessible lightness. As the busy, bustling lines combine in an explosion of exuberance to end the piece, we’re reminded of perhaps the simplest reason why this piece is so popular: it’s joyful, fun, and utterly enjoyable.

Programme note by Rosie Davies
George Enescu
(1881 – 1955)

Octet for Strings in C major
Opus 7 | Composed 1900

This octet is another work of youthful genius – though by the time he came to write it at the age of 19, George Enescu was a veteran.

He was born in Romania, but began studying violin at the Vienna Conservatoire at the age of seven. By his late teens he had revealed notable gifts including formidable technical powers as performer and composer and an astonishing musical memory. Later, the cellist Pablo Casals would claim that he was the most phenomenal genius since Mozart.

As he was born in 1881, Enescu’s formative years fell at the transition between two strongly defined eras: the waning of the Romantic age and the birth of the Modern.

In Vienna in the 1880s and 1890s he crossed paths with composers whose work defined the later 19th century: Brahms (whose influence is plain and strong in his early work) and Mahler, as well such new radicals as Arnold Schoenberg (also a strikingly audible influence here) and Otmar Schoeck.

He was also formed at the time that Nationalist fascination with the folk music of different nations was taking diverse directions in concert music – from the kitsch of a thousand gypsy dance encores, to serious efforts both to preserve endangered oral traditions and draw deep inspiration from them. Enescu was not an ethnomusicological collector of the ardour of a Bartók, Kodaly or Vaughan Williams. If anything, he suffered all his life from having created too successful a pair of picturesque Romanian Rhapsodies: “I am absolutely fed up with them,” he said late in life, “especially the first”.

Instead, this octet reflects the musical elements of his home country in a more oblique way, through its modal harmonies and the angular, asymmetric cast of some of its melodies.

Apparently, this octet was hard won. The longest movement comes in around 13 minutes, and the musical conception of the whole is imagined on a grand scale. It took four years to complete, and Enescu wrote that “no engineer putting his first suspension bridge across a river can have agonized more than I did as I gradually filled my manuscript paper with notes.”

For a young composer, it is a bold and ambitious undertaking. The engineering metaphor is very apt, because while each movement in this piece is conceived in its own right, they also join together to form an organic whole. You can hear this in the great care Enescu takes with the junctions between movements, especially the third and fourth movements, but also in the way that he structures his material. The last movement draws themes from all the previous movements into its ‘valse bien rythmé’ and develops them for a last time.

Programme note by Einar Andersen
Marianne Thorsen

One of Norway’s leading soloists and chamber musicians.

Hailing from Trondheim, Marianne enjoys a varied musical life as a performer. As a soloist, she has performed with the Philharmonia Orchestra, BBC Symphony Orchestra, City of Birmingham Symphony, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, all the Norwegian orchestras and many of the major orchestras in Scandinavia.

With a particular passion for chamber music, Marianne was leader of London’s internationally-renowned Nash Ensemble from 2000–2015 and a founder member of the Leopold String Trio from 1991–2006, touring extensively and appearing at BBC Proms as well as numerous festivals. She has also performed with a range of eminent artists, from pianists Håvard Gimse and Leif Ove Andsnes to violinist Lawrence Power.

Other notable projects include regular collaborations with Norway’s renowned string orchestra Trondheim Soloists, with whom she recorded Mozart’s third, fourth and fifth Violin Concertos to great critical acclaim, winning the Norwegian Spellemann prize in 2006. 2011–2014 also saw the release of five CDs of music by Halvorsen and Svendsen on the Chandos label, with Thorsen as soloist alongside the Bergen Philharmonic and Neeme Järvi.

Scottish Ensemble

Scotland’s pioneering string orchestra.

Scottish Ensemble (SE) is a collective of outstanding musicians, championing music for strings across Scotland, the UK and the world. Through curious, adventurous collaborations with musicians, artists, theatre-makers, scientists, and our audiences, we create and present exhilarating live music experiences. Our projects regularly cross genres, styles, musical periods and art forms to open up ideas on how classical music can be performed, shared and enjoyed, and on how it can help to navigate the world around us.
Across our 2019/20 season, we’re celebrating a significant anniversary. Whilst each event in the series contains a subtle nod to an element from our past, each one is also a celebration of what we’re all about today: the personality of the group, the music that we make, and the connections music has to our contemporary lives and experiences.

There’s something about the nature of chamber music that has always struck a chord with SE. Sitting – or, rather, standing – as we do at the crossroads between a chamber group and a full orchestra, whether there are four or twelve people on stage, each musician always occupies a double role, somehow band member and soloist at the same time. Given that this is what chamber music so directly allows, it’s easy to see why it appeals so deeply.

This opportunity to strike up an intimate and direct conversation, musically, with the people we’re playing with as well as those listening; the quite amazing feeling of trust and unspoken understanding that occurs during this more exposed and exposing type of performance... It’s not only enjoyable, but useful. Everything we learn from playing with four, or eight, players then infuses how we play as a larger group; how we interpret the music, how we connect with audience, and how we connect with each other.

We were founded in 1969 when Kinross-shire multi-arts festival Ledlanet Nights needed a small string ensemble to perform in their Baroque operas. Our performances very quickly grew to include chamber music of all kinds, with a particularly memorable night of Beethoven’s Razumovsky quartets with our founder Leonard Friedman dressed in full 19th-century Viennese garb...
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