

Haydneum 2025: Spirit, are you there?

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REPORT – As part of the Haydneum Festival at the Esterházy Palace in Fertőd, violinist Rachel Podger, cellist Alex Rolton and Kristian Bezuidenhout on fortepiano performed in a program featuring trios by Joseph Haydn and Franz Schubert.

The Esterházy Palace in Fertőd in Hungary has obviously built its reputation on its architectural riches and the great personalities who lived or visited it, but also on the presence of Joseph Haydn who, by the extent of his musical production for the Esterházy Princes, still seems to haunt its walls – and his successors.



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Spirit of the times

Often referred to as the ‘Hungarian Versailles’, the Esterházy Palace shares with its French counterpart the fact that it was a hunting lodge before having been deployed to its current dimensions. The hostilities of the years, but also of history, have left indelible marks on the building; and yet, with its secret compartments, its cherubs with strange faces, its huge mirrors and its rococo decorations, it reminds us somehow of times past. Thus, it is with a

slightly different ear that we listen to violinist Rachel Podger, cellist Alex Rolton and pianist Kristian Bezuidenhout taking on the Trio in D major (Hob. XV:24) by Haydn: listening to it in the very places where the composer could perform, one is undoubtedly more sensitive to the melancholy that emanates from the Andante, and also to the manner in which the colours of the strings come to blend. The very particular sound of the pianoforte, an instrument capable of great meekness as well as brilliance, has a great deal to do with it; and the final movement, indicated 'Allegro, ma dolce' resembles a conversation, where the participants hardly dare to interrupt each other. A pure salon spirit, as one would imagine it in the eighteenth century, under the gilding of the concert hall.

Great minds meet

The Trio in G major (Hob. XV:25) offers even more opportunity to hear the specificities of each instrument and performer: Rachel Podger's bright sound and expressive energy; the lyricism of Kristian Bezuidenhout, and his superb legato in the gruppetti of the second movement; the density of Alex Rolton's cello which, if he rarely has the main voice in this piece, colours it and gives it the right amount of roughness – right down to the 'Hungarian Rondo' which closes the work and requires great virtuosity from all the musicians, in the pure lively and ingenious spirit of the composer. When Schubert's Trio No. 1 in B flat major follows, one might expect a temporal and aesthetic leap; but in reality, Haydn's shadow hovers completely over the work: it possesses his expressive intelligence, but also echoes of that rhetoric characteristic of eighteenth-century music. Schubert, evidently imbued with the legacy of his predecessor, merely unfolded the conversation, lengthening its sentences, loading it with affections, and giving its speakers a more intense identity.



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Spiritual visions

The longest piece on the programme, this trio shows a sense of sound on the part of Rachel Podger, Alex Rolton and Kristian Bezuidenhout: sometimes the sounds mix their colours, sometimes they relentlessly keep their own texture. It is difficult to resist this virtuosity and this flow of music, and the audience enthusiastically applauds the performers, who have made these almost forty minutes pass in a flash. But at the end of this concert, what remains in our memory is a shorter piece, inserted in the middle of the programme, the effect of which is not easily erased: for the Nocturne in E flat major, op. 148 by Schubert, through the magic of its performers, has become a suspended moment. First, there were the incredibly homogeneous strings, tinged with a soaring melancholy; then the infinite tenderness of the fortepiano, accompanied by the pizz of the violin and the cello, exploring all textures – from beaded playing to softer sound. The intonation is certainly perilous; but the listeners can easily let themselves be carried away by this romantic reverie.



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There was a lot of talk about spirit in this concert, where the ghosts of the past, the genius of the composers, and the musical intelligence of the performers rubbed shoulders, creating bridges from one century to the next, with no temporal flaw to separate them.



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