

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 10 December 2023
7.30pm

Belcea Quartet

Corina Belcea violin
Suyeon Kang violin
Krzysztof Chorzelski viola
Antoine Lederlin cello

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) String Quartet in E flat D87 (1813)

I. Allegro moderato
II. Scherzo. Prestissimo
III. Adagio
IV. Allegro

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) String Quartet in E flat Op. 51 (1878-9)

I. Allegro ma non troppo
II. Dumka (Elegia). Andante con moto
III. Romanza. Andante con moto
IV. Finale. Allegro assai

Interval

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) String Quartet No. 5 BB110 (1934)

I. Allegro
II. Adagio molto
III. Scherzo. Alla bulgarese
IV. Andante
V. Finale. Allegro vivace

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In 1808, the 11-year-old **Franz Schubert** won a place as a court choirboy in Vienna's Imperial Chapel, thus guaranteeing him a superb musical training. In 1812 his voice broke, and by 1813 he was back at the family home and his father's school business. This happened at the same time as big changes in the world of the Viennese string quartet during the first decade of the 19th Century. Most significant of these was the death of the 'father' of the quartet genre, Joseph Haydn, in 1809, which coincided with Beethoven working on his Op. 74 'Harp' Quartet. The prevailing chamber-music tone, however, was aimed more at easy-listening fare and the amateur market rather than Beethoven's philosophical and technically demanding ambitions.

Schubert, 16 years old when he wrote tonight's D87 in 1813, played viola in the Schubert family quartet, with his two brothers on violins and his father on cello. There are several quartets and bits of quartet among Schubert's juvenilia, tailored to his players' capabilities as the boy-composer explored and experimented with form and technique. Ten years later, Schubert was rather dismissive of them in a letter to one of his brothers, yet despite any youthful awkwardnesses, only six years separate D87 (published posthumously in 1830 as Op. 125 No. 1) from the 'Trout' Quintet and the decisive assumption of maturity in the great fragment of the C minor 'Quartettsatz', leading on to chamber-music masterpieces such as the 'Death and the Maiden' and G major Quartets and the String Quintet.

The Quartet in E flat D87 is the most accomplished of the early works, tautly composed and full of Schubertian signatures of effortless lyricism and instinctive harmonic disturbance and resolution. The three longer movements keep to classically correct sonata form, the Beethovenian *Scherzo* providing comic potential in the first violin's braying acciacaturas. The *Scherzo's* C minor trio is the only main harmonic divergence from all four movements keeping to the same home key.

Antonín Dvořák's enduring popularity might rest with his symphonic output, but his 14 string quartets and a wealth of chamber music for other combinations are an equally eloquent and forward-looking legacy, at a time – the second half of the 19th Century – when chamber music was considered a bit old-hat by modernists such as Liszt and Wagner. This was also the period when nationalism in all the arts became increasingly valued throughout Europe. In his early 30s Dvořák had been a slave to Wagner mania – his opera *The King and the Coal Burner* was an extreme example, and as an orchestral viola player he had played in a concert of Wagner's music conducted by the great man himself – but he was also greatly influenced by Brahms, whose support was notably generous. It was Dvořák's ability to yoke together a powerful Czech identity with the weight of German tradition that let his music thrive then as it does now. In 1878 his first set of Slavonic Dances appeared, with the piano-duet version flying off

the shelves, and the following year his Op. 51 Quartet had its private première in Berlin, organised by Brahms in Joseph Joachim's home, with the celebrated violinist leading the Joachim Quartet.

The work had been commissioned specifically to be 'Slavonic', and Dvořák fulfilled his brief with music suffused in Czech melody and rhythm, lightly and unselfconsciously attached to classical process. The first movement opens with a guileless melody that extends with the sort of expressive repetitions that Janáček would explore even further. Dvořák calls the second movement *Dumka (Elegia)*, a dance contrasting very different types, here an opening elegy in G minor over guitar-like cello strummings, followed by a central *Vivace furiant* in G major. Formally it is a bit like a conventional minuet and trio, but with inimitable Czech flavour and bounce. The third movement, also marked *Andante con moto*, is a *Romanza* in B flat; among Dvořák's most memorable creations, with a lovely melody in a lilting triple rhythm and eloquent use of pizzicato in the cello. The rondo *Finale* fits the folk-style contrasts and repeats like a glove, based on the skočná, an energetic Czech dance. Throughout, Dvořák is generous with infectious melody, and the viola part sounds very rewarding to play.

The folk element becomes the *raison d'être* of **Béla Bartók's** six string quartets, written between 1908 and 1939. What an uncompromising figure Bartók was. He showed little interest in the prevailing aesthetic of the Second Viennese School, thus removing himself from the avant-garde 'establishment'. His exhaustive researches in Hungarian folk music led to its assimilation and distillation in his own 'art' music. He was a piano virtuoso (and Liszt specialist) who hugely expanded the possibilities of string playing. While he left no 'school', countless composers have been inspired by this great artist, and his six quartets have long been central repertoire, considered with the same awe as late Beethoven.

For all the quartets' perceived abstraction, Bartók took great pains in making his procedures as clear as possible to the listener, and this is very much the case in No. 5. Musical gestures derive from the most basic material, and there is a tonal plan unequivocally set out in repeated notes, but the most important aspect is its arch-like structure, with the five movements forming a carefully plotted palindrome. Here the key-stone of the arch is the *Scherzo Alla bulgarese* third movement; enclosed within two slow movements, both examples of Bartók's spectral 'Night music'; preceded by the *Allegro* sonata-form first movement, based on three themes presented in reverse in the recapitulation; that is, another palindrome. The *Finale* is a rondo based on two themes, furiously rhythmic and contrapuntal, with a brief moment of repose in the strange *Allegretto con indifferenza* near the close.

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