

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 10 July 2025  
7.30pm

## Chiaroscuro Quartet

Alina Ibragimova violin

Charlotte Saluste-Bridoux violin

Emilie Hörnlund viola

Claire Thirion cello

Cédric Tiberghien piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 13 in B flat Op. 130 with Grosse Fuge Op. 133 (1825-6)

*I. Adagio ma non troppo - Allegro • II. Presto •  
III. Andante con moto, ma non troppo • IV. Alla danza  
tedesca. Allegro assai • V. Cavatina. Adagio molto  
espressivo • VI. Grosse Fuge*

*Interval*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Quintet in F minor Op. 34 (1862, rev. 1864)

*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Andante, un poco adagio •  
III. Scherzo. Allegro • IV. Finale. Poco sostenuto –  
Allegro non troppo*



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On 21 March 1826, Ignaz Schuppanzigh and his renowned ensemble gave the première of **Beethoven's** String Quartet in B flat at the Vienna Musikverein. The critic of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* provided a vivid description of his first impressions: 'The first, third and fifth movements are serious, dark, mystic, sometimes well and truly bizarre, craggy and capricious; the second and fourth are full of mischief, joy and roguishness.' But then came Beethoven's grand finale – and the critic found himself so thoroughly baffled by what he heard that he floundered to describe it. Instead, he gestured to languages and cultures he found completely incomprehensible: the outlandish fugue was 'like Chinese', a 'Babylonian confusion'. Perhaps, he ventured, if Beethoven could have heard his own creation properly, he wouldn't actually have written it thus. And yet! And yet, he contended, 'perhaps the time will still come when, what at first glance seems muddy and convoluted, will be understood clearly as a pleasurable construction.'

The Quartet was the last of three such works commissioned by the Russian nobleman and keen amateur cellist Prince Nikolas Borisowitsch Galitzin. Completed in late 1825 (and then lost by the postal system for so long that Beethoven had to write and enquire to rescue his manuscript and set it back on its journey to St Petersburg), the piece is in a mighty six movements, unified by a tiny musical motto – a pair of semitones – which recur throughout. A warmly energetic first movement is followed by a tiny, anxious presto; an expansive andante; a lilting 'Alla danza tedesca' (written initially for inclusion in the A minor Quartet Op. 132); and a heart-twisting adagio Cavatina.

And then – much to the confusion of many – came the movement we now know as the *Grosse Fuge*. But such was the head-scratching and perplexity that followed the première, Beethoven allowed himself to be persuaded by friends and colleagues to replace the fugue with a new, undoubtedly idiosyncratic, but rather less aurally confrontational *Allegro*. It was not the first time that he had been successfully encouraged to rework a structure in this way: the original slow movement of the 'Waldstein' Piano Sonata Op. 53 was almost as long as its first movement and was subsequently replaced by a single page of music, with the jettisoned material published under the title 'Andante favori' WoO. 57.

Tonight, the Chiaroscuro Quartet reinstates the original line-up of movements, closing the piece with what Beethoven described as a 'Grande fugue, tantôt libre, tantôt recherchée': a great fugue that was in part 'free', and in part 'studied' (that is, strictly adhering to contrapuntal rules and regulations). After journeying through the high dramas and tender intimacies of the previous movements, we are confronted with this wall of forceful, forbidding counterpoint. It begins with a section marked 'Overtura', moving disconcertingly between emphatic grandeur, mournful quiet, and skittering acceleration. This is followed by an impressive double fugue – indeed, getting his two

subjects correctly contoured to meet in perfect alignment took the composer over 50 attempts. Variations, a march, free writing and strict polyphony follow these opening gambits, eventually resolving – almost against the odds – into the bright sunshine of B flat major. It's easy to hear, even 200 years later, why early audiences found it such a tricky proposition. Even Igor Stravinsky, writing in 1962, observed that the *Grosse Fuge* was still 'the most absolutely contemporary piece of music I know.'

The history of **Brahms's** Piano Quintet, premièred 40 years after Beethoven's String Quartet, is also somewhat convoluted. In 1862, Brahms composed three movements of a new *string* quintet and sent the score to his two closest musical advisors for inspection: Clara Schumann and Joseph Joachim. It was Joachim, as a virtuoso string player, who was quick to identify problems with Brahms's densely-written textures and, hearing his piece in a live play-through, Brahms and Schumann were forced to agree with Joachim's assessment that there was still work to do.

An attempt to 'fix' the immediate problems led the composer to a complete reconfiguration of the music, and by April 1864 it had become a ferociously virtuosic Sonata for Two Pianos, which he premièred with the Polish virtuoso Carl Tausig. Joachim was impressed. But this time, it was Clara Schumann who expressed doubts, remarking that the musical ideas really amounted not just to a piano sonata, 'but a work whose thoughts... reach across an entire orchestra.' Brahms once again returned to the drawing board, and by late 1864 had come up with a different solution: not an orchestral work, but a Piano Quintet. This time, his friends unanimously agreed that he had found the right medium at last.

Following its quietly ominous introduction, the Quintet explodes into life in a violent unison statement of the theme, from which Brahms sends melodies soaring and driving across a highly varied first movement. (As with Beethoven, so with Brahms: early commentators found the sheer diversity of moods and tempi of this fiery *Allegro* to be deeply confusing.) A tender *Andante* follows – but it is increasingly destabilised by unexpected modulations and interruptions. The *Scherzo* is designed to have the audience on the edge of their seats, the repeated plucked cello notes with which it opens providing the foundation for a mounting sense of tension. And the nebulous opening bars of the finale seem directly modelled on Beethoven's late quartet writing – the shapes unexpected, the lines drooping and awkward. We are thrown at last into an *Allegro*, still laced with harmonic uncertainty. Ultimately, the first theme returns transformed with a distinctly Hungarian stamp and kick, which comes to drive the vigorous coda, a whirlwind of bows and fingers with a thrillingly off-kilter tread right to the final few notes of the score.

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