

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 10 June 2022 7.30pm

## Jerusalem Quartet

Alexander Pavlovsky violin

Sergei Bresler violin

Ori Kam viola

Kyril Zlotnikov cello

Supported by The Dorset Foundation - in memory of Harry M Weinrebe

**Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 4 in C minor Op. 18 No. 4 (1798-1800)

*I. Allegro ma non tanto • II. Scherzo. Andante scherzoso quasi allegretto • III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Allegro*

String Quartet No. 10 in E flat Op. 74 'Harp' (1809)

*I. Poco adagio - Allegro • II. Adagio ma non troppo • III. Presto - Più presto quasi prestissimo • IV. Allegretto con variazioni*

Interval

String Quartet No. 15 in A minor Op. 132 (1825)

*I. Assai sostenuto - Allegro • II. Allegro ma non tanto • III. Molto adagio • IV. Alla marcia, assai vivace - Più allegro • V. Allegro appassionato - Presto*



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Much more is said about **Beethoven's** deafness than about his short-sightedness. Unlike Franz Schubert, he was rarely depicted wearing spectacles, yet he did so throughout his adult life. In autumn 1796, he even composed an 'Eyeglass Duo' (*Duet mit zwei obligaten Augengläsern* ('Duet with two obbligato eyeglasses') WoO. 32), to be played by his similarly bespectacled friend, amateur cellist Baron Nikolaus Zmeskall von Domanowecz, with Beethoven on the viola. A melody from this playful piece found its way into the first movement of Op. 18 No. 4, composed shortly afterwards. Its presence in the string quartet is a reminder that there is levity in Beethoven's chamber music as well as seriousness; that he composed music for his immediate friends as well as for posterity.

Op. 18 No. 4 stands apart from the rest of the set by being in a minor key and by no further sketches seeming to have survived. Although the opening theme promises concentrated drama, as the sonata-form first movement progresses it is tempered by the gentle lilt of the secondary theme – derived from the 'Eyeglass Duo' – and the more transparent textures of imitative part-writing.

A C major *Scherzo* comes next, instead of the expected slow movement. Marked, equivocally, *Andante scherzoso quasi allegretto*, it begins as if a fugue but is not strictly worked out; instead, the entries are irregular, with Beethoven using accents and dynamic contrast to further destabilise the phrasing. The ensuing minuet and trio plunges back into C minor; the A flat major of the trio, with its slow-moving bassline and casual exchange of melodic ideas between instruments, provides bucolic contrast. The rondo theme of the *Allegro* finale is a furious dance, abutted by episodes that, again, seem more pastoral in affect. The concluding prestissimo promises to whirl towards a thundering climax but Beethoven allows a softer C major to break through; the final *fortissimo* chords almost protest too much.

Like Op. 18 No. 4, Beethoven's tenth String Quartet, Op. 74 (composed in 1809), has been interpreted as both 'light' and 'serious'. Known since the mid-19th Century as the *Harfenquartett* ('Harp Quartet'), in recognition of the prominent use of plucked string-writing (*pizzicato*) in the first movement, Beethoven dedicated Op. 74 to Prince Lobkowitz, who had also been the dedicatee of the six Op. 18 quartets. The Prince had continued to support Beethoven, despite occasional spats, and in 1809 was one of the three patrons persuaded to provide the composer with a life-long annuity to dissuade him from leaving Vienna for a post in Cassel.

Op. 74 was one of several works Beethoven composed in E flat major around this time (others included the Fifth Piano Concerto, the 'Lebewohl' Piano Sonata Op. 81a, and parts of the music for Goethe's *Egmont*). Key associations are notoriously unstable and E flat in particular seems to have no clear identity, encompassing everything from love, devotion, or shadowy gloom (*ombra*), to the Holy Trinity (prompted by the three flats of the key signature).

Beethoven's Op. 74 spans songfulness and fantasia in its first two movements, before moving to a tumultuous *Presto* that was immediately recognised to be in the vein of the Fifth Symphony's C minor mood and motivic compression. The finale is an expansive set of variations on an *Allegretto* theme, which gradually accelerates towards what promises to be a clattering climax but Beethoven suddenly steps back, and the quartet ends quietly, almost perfunctorily, with a simple E flat major cadence.

The year 1809 is often said to be a turning point for Beethoven. The annuity he was granted did not offer the financial security he hoped for: the economic instability and rapid inflation caused by the recent French invasion of Vienna delayed payments and heightened the cost of living. Moreover, that year two giants of Viennese musical life died, both of whom had taught Beethoven: Joseph Haydn and Johann Georg Albrechtsberger. As he approached his 40th birthday, Beethoven looked set to assume their mantle.

By 1825, the year in which Beethoven composed his String Quartet in A minor Op. 132 (numbered 15, but the 13th to be composed), his career had taken some unexpected turns. The composer was, indeed, deeply respected in Vienna, but over the past decade politics, artistic trends, family strife and ill health had limited his social and musical activities. The combination of lightness and seriousness that had been found problematic in Op. 18 No. 4 and Op. 74 is intensified in Op. 132, which from the outset presents fragmentary, contrasting ideas: dance forms, counterpoint, lyricism, harmonic discord and virtuosic instrumental writing jostle against each other in the first movement. The lilting tunes and drones of the second movement might owe something to the fiddlers and hurdy-gurdies heard on the streets of early 19th-century Vienna.

Beethoven had recently recovered from a period of illness. He described the central slow movement as a '*Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lyrischen Tonart*'; a 'Song of Holy Thanksgiving of a Convalescent to the Deity, in the Lydian mode', interweaving variations on a modal hymn with D major sections marked *Neue Kraft fühlend*; 'with new strength'. The fourth movement of Op. 132 is an *Alla marcia*, which runs straight into the next, a long, multi-sectional finale, which begins *Allegro appassionato*. By expanding the quartet to five movements, some so brief they can barely stand alone and others huge, and against such fragmentation and expansion emphasising tonal and motivic coherence, Beethoven once again overturned formal conventions. TS Eliot, just over a century later, described Op. 132 as 'inexhaustible to study', with 'a sort of heavenly, or at least more than human gaiety ... which one imagines might come to oneself as the fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering.'

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