

WIGMORE HALL 125

Wednesday 10 June 2026
7.30pm

Pacifica Quartet

Simin Ganatra violin
Austin Hartman violin
Mark Holloway viola
Brandon Vamos cello

Florence Price (1887-1953)

String Quartet in G (1929)

I. Allegro • II. Andante moderato

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

String Quartet No. 2 in F Op. 92 (1941)

I. Allegro sostenuto • II. Adagio • III. Allegro

Interval

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 (Op. 133)*



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After decades of virtual neglect, **Florence Price** is at last being recognised as a major creative figure, and a standard-bearer for African American women composers. Born in Little Rock, Arkansas to mixed-race parents, and trained at the New England Conservatory, in 1933 she became the first American woman composer of colour to have a symphony performed by a major orchestra. Yet she could never be accepted into the musical mainstream. Writing to the conductor Serge Koussevitsky, Price lamented her 'two handicaps, those of my sex and race'. After the imposition of the notorious Jim Crow segregation laws in the South, racism – including death threats – finally forced her and her family to move to Illinois in 1927.

Composed around 1929, Price's unfinished two-movement G major String Quartet was discovered in 2009 among a cache of manuscripts in her dilapidated summer home in St Anne, Illinois. The opening *Allegro* reveals Price's love of Brahms, Grieg and Dvořák, though the lyrical melodies and side-slipping harmonies have their own distinctive flavour. The second theme, an amorous waltz for viola and violin, is especially beguiling. Native American music colours the second movement. The soulful *Andante* that frames the movement sounds like a half-remembered plantation song, while the central allegretto episode has a melancholy whiff of the blues.

Whereas Price's quartet draws broadly on American folk and popular music, the second of **Sergey Prokofiev's** two string quartets incorporates actual folk songs and folk dances. After the Nazis' invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, the government evacuated many artists and intellectuals, Prokofiev and Shostakovich among them, from Moscow to the relative safety of the southern republics. Staying in the town of Nalchik, in the Kabardino-Balkar Republic, Prokofiev was encouraged by a local government official to compose a piece using Kabardino-Balkar folk themes. As he recalled: 'I settled on writing a string quartet, thinking that the combination of new, untouched Oriental folk-lore with the most classical of forms, the string quartet, ought to produce interesting and unexpected results.'

It did indeed, in a work that became an immediate success on its Moscow première in September 1942. The quartet is a flavoursome blend of tradition (the first movement is a clear-cut sonata form), folk exoticism, including evocations of folk instruments, and Prokofiev's trademark caustic humour. The level of dissonance in the outer movements would surely have tested the tolerance of Soviet officialdom. Propelled by energetic march rhythms, the themes of the opening movement are underpinned by acerbic, modal-flavoured harmonies and folk drones. The exuberant finale, which incorporates a cello cadenza, is in effect a folk-dance medley, set in motion by a stomping folk dance from the Kabardinian mountain region.

The jewel of the quartet is the *Adagio*, a nocturne whose wistful, floating melody, heard high on the cello, is based on a Kabardinian love song. In the central episode Prokofiev introduces a dance tune over a pizzicato accompaniment that simulates the sound of the *kamancheh*, an ancient three-stringed fiddle of Persian origin.

The impetus for **Beethoven's** mighty Quartet Op. 130 and its companions Op. 127 and Op. 132 was a lucrative commission from the Russian amateur cellist Prince

Nicholas Galitzin. Beethoven started work on Op. 130 in spring 1825, immediately after finishing Op. 132. He originally planned it in four movements before adding two extra pieces: a playful *Alla tedesca* dance, discarded from Op. 132, and an intensely personal *Cavatina*, the quartet's expressive heart.

In the first movement Beethoven closely integrates the slow introduction and the main *Allegro*. No sooner has the *Allegro* theme – a torrent of semiquavers counterpointed with violin and cello fanfares – got underway, than it breaks off for a few bars of the introductory *Adagio*. Twice more fragments of the introduction alternate with snatches of the *Allegro*, creating an air of strange uncertainty. Amid the tense contrasts of tempo and rhythmic pattern, the central development provides the calmest music in the whole movement.

Next come three lighter movements that suggest a sublimated divertimento: a reminder that Beethoven's late quartets at once explore uncharted territory and evoke a more innocent past. A furtive *Presto* in B flat minor – as epigrammatic as a late-Beethoven bagatelle – is followed by an *Andante* that trades on delicate scherzando textures and an *Alla danza tedesca* whose hairpin dynamics give its naïve dance tunes a slightly queasy feel. According to the violinist Karl Holz, the *Cavatina* – the apogee of Beethoven the melodist – 'cost the composer tears in the writing and provoked the confession that nothing he had written had so moved him'.

When the Quartet was premièred on 21 March 1826, Beethoven, now profoundly deaf, waited in a Viennese tavern for reactions. On learning that the *Presto* and the *Alla danza tedesca* had been encored, his gruff response was 'Why not the Fugue?' But the *Fuge*, the most rebarbative piece he ever composed, had daunted the audience. One critic famously pronounced it 'as incomprehensible as Chinese'. Beethoven usually stuck to his guns. Yet his agreement to provide an alternative finale suggests that he recognised the danger of the *Fuge* dwarfing the rest of the quartet.

More than any of Beethoven's other music, the *Grosse Fuge* creates a sense of titanic striving against near-impossible odds. In broad outline it consists of an introduction which announces the movement's 'motto' theme, followed by a ferocious double fugue, a lyrical, freer episode in the 'veiled' key of G flat, an airily dancing section, like a miniature scherzo, and another, even more rhythmically-violent fugue.

After a reminiscence of the lyrical episode and the scherzo, the coda transfigures earlier conflicts in half-playful, half-ethereal concord. The whole gargantuan movement thus combines fugue and variation – prime preoccupations of Beethoven in his late years – within a design that suggests a four-movement structure.

No quartet music remotely like the *Grosse Fuge* appeared until Bartók in the 20th Century. Stravinsky, not always Beethoven's greatest fan, called it 'the most perfect miracle in music...the most absolutely contemporary piece of music I know, and contemporary for ever'.

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