

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 10 March 2025
7.30pm

Schumann Quartet

Erik Schumann violin
Ken Schumann violin
Veit Benedikt Hertenstein viola
Mark Schumann cello

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quartet No. 10 in E flat D87 (1813)
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Scherzo. Prestissimo •
III. Adagio • IV. Allegro*

Alban Berg (1885-1935)

String Quartet Op. 3 (1910)
I. Langsam • II. Mässige Viertel

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 13 in B flat Op. 130 (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. Finale. Allegro*



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'Schubert, Franz, crowed for the last time, 26th July 1812'. The 15 year-old **Schubert** scribbled the line on the alto part of Peter Winter's Mass in C – marking forever the instant at which his voice broke and his career as a chorister at Vienna's Court Chapel came to a dissonant end. If he could no longer sing, the scholarship rules were clear: 'Singing and music are but a subsidiary matter, while good morals and diligence in study are of prime importance'. So in November 1813, aged 16, he left the Imperial Seminary to train as a teacher. At some point in that month he wrote this Quartet - to all intents and purposes, the work of a skilled professional composer who was already starting to speak with his own voice.

Schubert had finally broken his youthful habit of thinking of a quartet as a pocket-sized symphony. He wears his influences with pride: both Haydn and Mozart began quartets in E flat (Op. 64, No. 6 and K. 428) with solemn, chordal motifs, but the jaunty swing of the phrase with which Schubert rounds it off, and the way he propels the second group along with a cello *pizzicato* is something entirely his own. Haydn's *Joke Quartet* gets a nod in the exuberant Scherzo, with its hurdy-gurdy trio, but in the fading bars of his Adagio Schubert once again asserts a completely original ear for harmony. And as for the headlong finale: if Beethoven's energy was its inspiration, the miracle here is that after the first few bars, its spinning momentum suggests nothing so much as Schubert's own final symphony, 13 years in the future.

Alban Berg served a long apprenticeship; but then, his teacher was Arnold Schoenberg and between them, they were engaged in remaking the language of music. 'Two things emerged clearly even from Berg's earliest compositions' recalled Schoenberg years later. 'First, that music was to him a language, and he really expressed himself in that language – and secondly, the overflowing warmth of feeling.'

Berg's Opus One was a piano sonata. With the String Quartet Op. 3, completed in 1910, he effectively concluded his period of study. It coincided with a transformation in Berg's personal life. The father of his fiancée Helene Nahowski had finally (and grudgingly) given his consent to their marriage, and the wedding took place in Vienna in May 1911; barely a fortnight before the death of Gustav Mahler and a few days after the première of the Quartet, on 24th April 1911.

Critics grumbled that Berg had 'mishandled' the medium: they seemed particularly aggrieved that Berg's quartet has only two movements – which together add up to a single process of exposition and development. It had to wait until 1919 for publication, and in the 1920s its combination of passion, clarity and brilliantly controlled and paced musical drama would make it one of the most performed of Berg's works. Schoenberg grasped Berg's achievement from the outset. 'Alban had a burning desire to express himself not in the accustomed classical forms, but in accordance with his own times, and his own personality', he wrote: 'One thing is sure: his String

Quartet (Op. 3) astonished me in the most unbelievable way by the fulness [*sic*] and unconstraint of its musical language, the strength and sureness of its presentation, its careful working and significant originality'.

Beethoven was just 55 years old when he completed his String Quartet Op. 130, and wrestling with his ideas with the full force of his imagination. He began sketching the Quartet in B flat in May or June 1825 and it's clear that he intended it from the outset as something imposing – a grand finale to the set of three quartets that he'd been commissioned to write by Prince Nikolai Galitzin. In Beethoven's original conception, five strongly characterised movements (a sophisticated, expansive sonata-form first movement, a tiny, brilliant Scherzo, a measured Andante, a playful, allusive German Dance, and an expressive Cavatina) led to a massive, 15-minute introduction and fugue, of unprecedented size and technical difficulty.

By August 1825, he'd composed five movements and expected to have the Quartet completely finished within a matter of days. In fact, the fugal Finale took him a further four months of intensive work, and it was 3 January 1826 before the string quartet led by Ignaz Schuppanzigh finally tried it through at Beethoven's apartment. They were astonished by its difficulty: Holz, the second violinist, grumbled to Beethoven that it 'must be practiced at home', something he clearly saw as unprecedented. Schuppanzigh's group gave the first public performance of the finished work in Vienna on 21 March 1826, and the audience's qualified admiration quickly turned to bafflement. 'Incomprehensible... a sort of Chinese puzzle' wrote the critic of the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*.

The Beethoven of myth would at this point have smashed a violin over someone's head. The Beethoven of reality - at the request of his publisher Artaria – wrote an alternative finale (the very last piece of music he ever completed, in autumn 1826). Reinstated to its intended place as the Quartet's Finale, it transforms the whole meaning of the work. With the lighter alternative finale (it's been described, as Haydn-esque), proportion is restored – and the emotional weight of the Quartet is thrown onto the fifth movement, the heartrending Cavatina.

So even in Beethoven's own lifetime, this extraordinary music was capable of expressing multiple meanings. The composer himself threw the options open. Beethoven offered few fixed interpretations of his music, but speaking of this quartet's lovely slow movement, a private aside made to Holz tells us all we need to know. '[The Cavatina] cost the composer tears in the writing, and brought the confession that nothing he had written had so moved him; even to think about it brought tears to his eyes'.

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