

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 11 January 2024  
7.30pm

## Skride Quartet

Natalia Lomeiko violin  
Lise Berthaud viola  
Gregory Walmsley cello  
Lauma Skride piano

- Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Quartet No. 1 in E flat WoO. 36 (1785)  
*I. Adagio assai • II. Allegro con spirito • III. Thema con variazioni. Cantabile*
- Helmut Lachenmann (b.1935) 5 Variations on a Theme of Schubert (1956)  
*Interval*
- Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Piano Quartet No. 2 in A Op. 26 (1861)  
*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Poco adagio • III. Scherzo. Poco allegro - Trio • IV. Finale. Allegro*

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*The programme has changed since these notes were written.*

**Beethoven** was no Mozart. Only a few compositions from his childhood have come down to us: various piano pieces, a couple of songs, and a set of three piano quartets he wrote when he was 14. These last he kept with him, as the years and the moves went on. After he died they were acquired with other manuscripts by the Viennese publisher Artaria, who brought them out the following year.

The piece in E flat came second in Beethoven's ordering, but Artaria placed it first, perhaps on account of its extraordinariness, how a chromatic and affecting slow opening movement is followed by a driving sonata *Allegro* in the extreme key of E flat. Only twice again was Beethoven to venture into the dark waters of this tonality, both times under the very different circumstances of a slow introduction: to the finale of his Septet and to his oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*. If unusual in this respect, the movement has punchy patches that look forward to the later composer.

Bonn was a bit of a backwater, but the archbishop elector had a music library well stocked with the latest publications, and one might imagine the young Beethoven based his piano quartets on Mozart's. Those, however, came later; Beethoven found his models rather in violin sonatas by Mozart. As for the scoring, he may have been led to that by his association with the court official Johann Gottfried Mastiaux, whose four children played the required instruments. The string players would surely have enjoyed their solo spots in the final variations.

In 1861 **Brahms** completed two piano quartets, in G minor and A major. At the time he was renting a garden flat in the Hamburg suburb of Hamm, and he dedicated the A major work to his landlady, Elisabeth Rössing. However, there is little doubt whose ears he was addressing. Clara Schumann visited him in

Hamm, tried out both quartets with local musicians, and approved. On 29 November of the following year, Brahms himself was the pianist in the first public performance of the A major, in Vienna, where he was making his solo debut. The concert's success may have affirmed him in his move to what was then the capital not only of the vast Habsburg empire but of Western music itself.

The work has a luxurious sprawl, playing for over three quarters of an hour, with all four movements on the same grand scale. Introduced by the piano alone, the sunny first subject comprises a triplet rocking motion and a hymn-like strain, both of which are immediately echoed by the strings and developed in dialogue with increasing drama. The outcome is swaying, passionate music from the strings, almost operatic, out of which the piano produces the second subject. There is also a neat closing idea. Almost everything in this exposition turns out to have thematic importance in the ensuing development, which rises to a storminess providing a foil for the return of the opening music.

As second movement Brahms offers a Romantic nocturne in E major with muted strings, and with the piano playing *una corda* much of the time. The principal melody, Donald Tovey said, is 'the kind of phrase that can occur to no composer who is not constantly in the practice of setting words to music.' There are two contrasting episodes.

The *Scherzo*, besides being not too fast, is no joke. Strings in bare octaves give a raw, folkish sound to its main subject, which the piano comes to answer with a dance. These ideas are spaciouly enlarged upon; the *Trio* is in the minor.

At the end comes a *Finale* having the tang, as so often with Brahms, of what for him represented Hungarian 'Gypsy' style.

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