

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 11 September 2023  
1.00pm

Paul Lewis piano

Vertavo String Quartet

Øyvør Volle violin

Annabelle Meare violin

Berit Cardas viola

Björg Lewis cello

Tim Gibbs double bass

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Grosse Fuge in B flat Op. 133 (1825-6)

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Op. 58 (1804-6) *arranged by  
Vinzenz Lachner*

*I. Allegro moderato*

*II. Andante con moto*

*III. Rondo. Vivace*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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In the autumn of 1782 Mozart began work on a series of three piano concertos, K413–5. They were his first works of the kind since he had settled in Vienna in the previous year, and in order to ensure their widest possible dissemination he wrote them in such a way that the wind parts were optional, and the pieces could thus be performed by amateur musicians at home in the form of piano quintets. Domestic music making of this kind was still popular in **Beethoven's** day, as we can see from an anonymous contemporary arrangement of his Fourth Piano Concerto in which the soloist is accompanied by a string quintet with two violas. Although the arrangement remained unpublished, several manuscript copies of the parts have come down to us.

Beethoven, needless to say, was not a composer to make compromises of the sort that Mozart did with his first Viennese concertos, but of all his piano concertos it is No. 4 that is the most intimate, and the one which lends itself most readily to arrangement for chamber ensemble. Its slow movement is in any case scored exclusively for piano and strings, so that virtually no transcribing is required, while elsewhere some of the concerto's most famous moments – the manner in which the soloist's magical opening bars are answered as if from afar by the orchestra, for instance; or the finale's quiet off-tonic beginning, with the orchestral statement of the rondo theme answered by the piano accompanied by no more than a solo cello – again involve only the strings.

In the late 19th Century chamber arrangements of all five Beethoven piano concertos were made by **Vincenz Lachner**. He came from a family of musicians, and his elder brother Franz had been a close friend of Schubert. Among Vincenz's compositions was a song cycle based on Adelbert von Chamisso's *Frauenliebe und -leben* poems, written in the year before Schumann's famous setting (but some three years after the cycle by Carl Loewe). Lachner was, however, more renowned as a conductor, and in 1836 he took over the famous court orchestra at Mannheim, where he remained for nearly 40 years. His transcriptions of the orchestral parts of the Beethoven concertos were intended for string quartet with the addition of a double bass.

On 21 March 1826 Beethoven's string quartet Op. 130, the third in his series of late quartets to be composed, was heard for the first time. The occasion was at best a mixed success: the two shortest movements were immediately encored, but the immense fugal finale proved a real stumbling-block, and the majority of those present (including, perhaps, the players, who were led by the famous violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh) would have found themselves in

agreement with the reviewer of the Leipzig *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* who in colourful language deemed it 'incomprehensible'. It is surely the most uncompromisingly challenging piece Beethoven ever composed, and if the colossal fugal finale of his 'Hammerklavier' piano sonata had carried with it a deliberate sense of straining against the medium, so, too, does the quartet fugue. At the beginning of January 1826 Karl Holz, the young second violinist of Schuppanzigh's quartet, who had befriended Beethoven, had already complained to him about difficulty of the rapid triplets, especially where they involved leaps from one string to another.

The engraving of the Op. 130 quartet was already underway, and Beethoven had sent a dedicatory copy to Prince Galitzin of St Petersburg, who had commissioned the work, when the publisher Artaria asked Karl Holz to intercede with the composer on his behalf by seeing if he could persuade him to replace the finale with a less demanding substitute, and to have the fugue issued separately. Beethoven acquiesced surprisingly quickly, and the original finale duly appeared on its own as his Op. 133, with a title page proclaiming it as a *Grande Fugue*. It goes without saying that Beethoven would hardly have agreed to the substitution had he not felt there was a viable alternative to the fugue, and the new finale he supplied in its place – the last piece of music he completed – is certainly more in keeping with the comparatively reduced dimensions of the preceding movements. The two alternative finales are, in fact, as different as could be imagined: the fugue granite-like and almost orchestral in the weight of its sonority; the new piece more delicate and transparent. What they have in common is that they both begin not in the home key, but on the note G – the upper note of the sustained chord with which the quartet's preceding *Cavatina* comes to a close.

Just as Beethoven described the fugue of the 'Hammerklavier' sonata as being *con alcune licenze* ('with some liberties'), so the string quartet fugue carries its own disclaimer: *Tantôt libre, tantôt recherchée* ('at times free, at times rigorous'). In both pieces the actual fugue is preceded by an introduction. In the quartet the opening page is described as an 'Overtura', and it presents in starkly dramatic form most of the material on which the fugue will be based. That material consists of one of the two themes which go to make up the main double fugue itself, and the smooth countersubject which appears much later, in a slower episode whose material returns towards the end.

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