

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 12 November 2024
7.30pm

Takács Quartet

Edward Dusinberre violin
Harumi Rhodes violin
Richard O'Neill viola
András Fejér cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in C Op. 54 No. 2 (1788)
*I. Vivace • II. Adagio • III. Menuetto. Allegretto •
IV. Finale. Adagio - Presto - Adagio*

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

String Quartet No. 2 in C Op. 36 (1945)
*I. Allegro calmo, senza rigore • II. Vivace •
III. Chacony. Sostenuto*

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 16 in F Op. 135 (1826)
*I. Allegretto • II. Vivace • III. Lento assai, cantante
e tranquillo • IV. Grave, ma non troppo tratto –
Allegro*



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Haydn is justly famed for his trips to London in the 1790s, though he already made his mark in Paris – at least in musical form. In 1785, Haydn was commissioned to write six symphonies for the masonic Concert de la Loge Olympique. They earned him both significant income and considerable praise, including from Marie Antoinette – an Austrian, after all. In the wake of his triumph, Haydn entrusted the pioneering violinist Johann Tost to deliver two further symphonies to the French capital, along with fresh sets of string quartets: Opp. 54 and 55.

Like the orchestral works, these quartets were intended to dazzle, with virtuoso first violin parts written with Tost in mind. Op. 54 No. 2 is a case in point, a boldly tenacious four-movement composition. The harmonic language alone speaks of the will to impress, with the opening passages of the *Vivace* suddenly plunging from C major into A flat. What follows is a movement of vivid rhetoric, not least in the recapitulation.

The *Adagio* begins as a contrastingly elegiac hymn, as if delivered by a graveside. But there is something more wilful here too, subverting both formal conventions and those initial impressions. It also features the style *hongrois* that Haydn found so beguiling. And there are equally surprising sidesteps in the courtly *Menuetto*, as well as darker thoughts in the trio.

Sobriety returns at the opening of the *Finale*, with what would appear to be an introductory *Adagio*. It is followed by a riotous *Presto*, bringing all the strands together. But it is actually the soothing *Adagio* which will hold sway in this eccentric, innovative conclusion. Given the questions posed by Haydn's student in the final work on tonight's programme, we might wonder whether Beethoven found something of a model in this quartet of 38 years earlier.

The concert continues in the same key, with **Benjamin Britten's** Second String Quartet. Work was completed on the score on 14 October 1945, just a few months after the première of *Peter Grimes*, and the premiè was given at Wigmore Hall on 21 November. The following day, Britten turned 32, though the date was chosen to mark a more significant milestone: the 250th anniversary of the death of Purcell.

The influence of the English Baroque composer is apparent throughout, though so too is the Viennese quartet tradition, not least Haydn, whose works often sat on Britten's bedside table. There are also hints of Schubert in the harmonic palette. Yet the viola's opening drone, first passed to the second violin and then to the cello, is clearly modelled on Purcell's *Fantasia upon One Note*. Reduced means, perhaps, but there is no limit to Britten's imagination, with gruff triple-stopped chords and energetic string crossings in the exposition and a transparent development of glissandos and pizzicato, before an abbreviated recapitulation whispers back towards the tonic.

The string crossings of the first movement are also a prevailing feature in the C minor *Vivace*, which develops

motifs from the *Allegro* while preparing for the finale. That third movement takes the form of a chacony, one of Purcell's favoured ground-bass structures. The theme's predominant interval of a fourth would normally suggest stability, but here it disrupts more than it resolves. The variations that follow are grouped in three sets of six, each followed by a cadenza – 21 in all. And just as the material passes between the instrumentalists, so 'the sections may be said to review the theme from (a) harmonic, (b) rhythmic, (c) melodic, and (d) formal aspects', as Britten himself described. The sum effect, however, is much more dramatic than all that.

From a work of early maturity we move to the very end of **Beethoven's** life. When he wrote his String Quartet No. 16 in F Op. 135 in the autumn of 1826, he had but six months to live. At the time, the composer was based in Gneixendorf in Lower Austria, 60km northwest of Vienna. Working in a small room overlooking vineyards, he would have been highly aware of the hard work of harvest, which explains the sense of struggle in the score, as well as the mood of autumnal resignation.

The first movement begins in inquisitive terms. Yet even after initial uncertainty is answered by diatonic confidence, a unison passage denies such easy solutions. Throughout this sonata-form *Allegretto*, Beethoven nods towards Classical style, but nothing adheres to expectation – Haydn's Op. 54 quartets would surely have been in mind.

The second movement, at a daring *Vivace*, also evades the listener's grasp and features a large tonal range. Further surprises are in store in the *Lento*, the opening notes of which suggest the tonic minor, before landing in the warmer key of D flat major. This is music of 'mellow fruitfulness', though not without stuttering variations on the theme.

The prevailing sense of enquiry find its apotheosis in the finale. The composer even provided a subtitle: 'Der schwer gefasste Entschluss' ('the difficult decision'). According to further annotations, the introduction asks 'Muss es sein?' ('must it be?'), with the answer written under the main theme: 'Es muss sein!' ('it must be!'). There might be an element of self-parody, though a feeling of curiosity nonetheless haunts what follows, returning to both the cat-and-mouse games of the opening two movements and the seriousness of the *Lento*. Reconciliation is surely the goal, though the true answer to 'the difficult question' will only arrive once Beethoven has forged a new relationship with his home key. For all the written annotations, then, the solution is presented in purely musical terms. Or as Theodor Adorno described, 'an image, therefore, not of the world but of an interpretation of the world'.

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