

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 13 February 2023
7.30pm

Supported by The Dorset Foundation - in memory of Harry M Weinrebe

Jerusalem Quartet

Alexander Pavlovsky violin
Sergei Bresler violin
Ori Kam viola
Kyril Zlotnikov cello

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

String Quartet No. 4 in E minor Op. 44 No. 2 (1837)

*I. Allegro assai appassionato •
II. Scherzo. Allegro di molto •
III. Andante • IV. Presto agitato*

Anton Webern (1883-1945)

Langsamer Satz (1905)

Interval

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

String Quartet No. 1 in D Op. 11 (1871)

*I. Moderato e semplice • II. Andante cantabile •
III. Scherzo. Allegro non tanto e con fuoco •
IV. Finale. Allegro giusto*



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After his two teenage string quartets, **Mendelssohn** gave chamber music a rest for almost a decade. Then, in the summer of 1837, soon after his marriage, he began the work with which this programme opens, the first quartet of what turned out to be a set of three. The music is more settled than in his earlier quartets; post-adolescent passion was being exchanged for marital contentment.

Right away comes a melody launched by a rising E minor arpeggio and continuing in secure four-bar phrases, though there is a fair bit of skirmishing on the way to a gentle-voiced second subject in G major. The exposition repeat goes into a development section where we may sense that elements of the main theme are being put to the test, before their reassembly in the abbreviated recapitulation.

The second movement is a humorous-fantastical dance that touches on the fairyland of the composer's *Midsummer Night's Dream* music, though with some alarm signals coming up to a plaintive viola tune that returns near the end.

A songful slow movement, a quiet pool of more G major, comes next, followed by a finale whose wildness is fully grounded, as well as balanced by melodic warmth.

Mendelssohn had moved to Leipzig in 1835 and wrote these Op. 44 quartets for the outstanding violinist there, Ferdinand David, to be followed by the concerto he began around the same time, also in E minor.

David, who was born in the same house in Hamburg as Mendelssohn, just two years later, did not think it beneath his dignity to take part in quartet performances, and many composers have been of the same mind.

'Quartet playing is the most glorious music-making there is': so **Webern** wrote to his brother-in-law in 1910, reminiscing about the recent time when, as Schoenberg's pupil, he had played cello under his teacher's coaching. For Schoenberg, chamber music was central, and so it became for Webern. His esteem for the string quartet, in particular, is shown by how he hesitated to use the term as a title. Between 1909 and 1913 he wrote a number of movements he put together as *5 Movements* and *6 Bagatelles*; not until 1938 did he complete a work he was content to call 'String Quartet'.

The posthumously published *Langsamer Satz* ('Slow movement'), dating from June 1905, was the first of three movements for quartet he wrote during his first two years with Schoenberg. The piece comes to a climax on its second theme, then winds down towards a reprise and coda. While suggesting how much Webern admired his teacher's *Verklärte Nacht*, some characteristics of his own music are already present, including the importance given to a small

motif – a four-note shape that is the essence of the second theme – and to silence.

Tchaikovsky – like Webern in this respect, if not so many others – also felt he was putting himself on his mettle when it came to writing for string quartet. In his mid-20s he composed two movements he abandoned; then in February 1871 came the full-scale work with which this programme ends. The original occasion was a benefit concert for the composer that was presented in Moscow the following month. Tchaikovsky dedicated the piece to Sergey Rachinsky, a writer and botany professor who admired him and would have dearly loved to work with him on an opera.

At this point in his life Tchaikovsky was close to Mily Balakirev and so to the circle of Russian nationalist composers. He was at work on an opera treating an episode in the reign of Ivan the Terrible, *The Oprichnik*, and the next year was to compose his Second Symphony – which, rather than the diminutive 'Little Russian', we should perhaps start calling the 'Ukrainian'. His sister Aleksandra and her husband had a summer home at Kamianka in Ukraine, and the place had a part in the history of the quartet as well as the symphony.

We are in that quarter of the world from the quartet's opening, which comes with phrases in pulsing rhythm somewhere between chant and folksong, richly harmonized in five or six parts. Development of this material is allayed in time for the arrival of another gorgeous theme, appropriately in the dominant key, A major, and soon decorated by the first violin. The exposition moves on to a playful close and into a development section that starts out from the initial idea. That idea remains to underpin everything, and so can come forward to start the ornamented recapitulation.

Tchaikovsky based his slow movement, in B flat, on a Russian folksong he heard a carpenter (or house painter: sources differ) singing (or whistling) at Kamianka in 1869, a song whose words – 'Vanya sat on the divan, pouring out a glass of rum' – hardly equal the serenity of their setting. The movement was played at a concert honouring Tolstoy, who wrote to the composer that he had been moved to tears. Some years later Tchaikovsky made an arrangement for string orchestra.

The *Scherzo* is a Russian dance in D minor, with a spinning trio.

If there may be some feeling that Tchaikovsky has underplayed the conversational aspects of the medium and given short shrift to the lower members of his team, the *Finale* makes amends. Busy and joyful, it easily sounds like a house painter (or carpenter) whistling (or singing).

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