

WIGMORE HALL 125

Thursday 14 May 2026
7.30pm

Quatuor Ébène

Pierre Colombet violin
Gabriel Le Magadure violin
Marie Chilleme viola
Yuya Okamoto cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 5 in A Op. 18 No. 5 (1798-1800)

*I. Allegro • II. Menuetto •
III. Andante cantabile • IV. Allegro*

String Quartet No. 4 in C minor Op. 18 No. 4 (1798-1800)

*I. Allegro ma non tanto • II. Scherzo. Andante scherzoso
quasi allegretto • III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Allegro*

Interval

String Quartet No. 12 in E flat Op. 127 (1824-5)

*I. Maestoso – Allegro • II. Adagio, ma non troppo e molto
cantabile • III. Scherzando vivace – Presto • IV. Finale.
Allegro*



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Between 1798 and 1799, Ludwig van Beethoven devoted over a year of almost singular focus to filling fresh sketchbooks of manuscript paper with a set of string quartets for Prince Joseph Franz von Lobkowitz. He tweaked the pieces further over the next months alongside other projects and was generally pleased when they were finally released as his Op. 18 in 1801. Still, he wasn't one to be without complaint; when the set was re-published in 1802, he expressed frustration that the parts were full of mistakes that 'swarm like little fishes in water'.

These quartets were beholden to the examples of WA Mozart and of Joseph Haydn, with whom Beethoven studied after arriving in Vienna in 1792. In the *Menuetto* of the **Quartet in A, Op. 18 No. 5**, the spare, two-voice texture at the start recalls the clean, isolated part writing that appears in many of Haydn's quartets. The work's finale is a fluttering number in which different voices constantly interrupt one another. The chorale-like contrasting theme has the purity and sincerity of second subjects found in Mozart's chamber works and symphonies. Beethoven brings a distinct sense of flair and articulation to the Classical models he uses in these quartets. For example, in the first movement, after a robust and playful opening gambit, he suddenly switches to a minor key and has the group play a lamenting line in unison, using texture to mark a moment of sudden change.

The bustling opening theme of the **Quartet in C minor Op. 18 No. 4** is quite fiery and turbulent. When it re-occurs later in the first movement, Beethoven rachets up the tension further by adding a theatrical, syncopated countermelody in the inner voices. The picky, bouncing bow strokes of the contrapuntal second movement have the character of an instrumental introduction to an opera aria, but in this case the singer never seems to arrive on stage. The *Menuetto* is full of emphatic accents that occur on the third beat of the bar. Beethoven accentuates the seasick quality of these swaying emphases by including a playful instruction to perform the final rendition of the minuet at a higher speed. The closing *Allegro* is a vigorous rondo that imitates Haydn's 'Hungarian' finales, which in turn imitated the fiddle playing of Romani violinists.

An early review of the Op. 18 set described it as 'excellent' and also 'not in the least popular'. Beethoven would have taken this as a serious compliment. He came to resent many of his works that achieved broad appeal, such as the jolly Septet for Winds and Strings that he wrote contemporaneously to these first string quartets. Today, we might challenge the notion of a strict dichotomy between popularity and artistic substance, but for Beethoven it felt like a very real trade-off and he spent much of his life trying to get it right.

By 1825, when the beguiling **String Quartet in E flat major Op. 127** was first performed, Beethoven was revered enough as a composer that if he wrote something the critics didn't understand, many would consider it their fault and not his. Nonetheless, the première of the piece was broadly acknowledged as a flop and Beethoven was not happy about it. The first violinist, Ignaz Schuppanzigh, reportedly struggled with the part, broke a string, and couldn't keep the ensemble together. Subsequent performances led by violinist Joseph Böhm went better, but listeners still found the music perplexing and so some presenters took the unprecedented step of programming the whole piece twice in the same concert.

In the short *Maestoso* that opens the Quartet in E flat, the musicians boldly announce their grand entrance. Over the course of the movement, Beethoven brings this muscular fanfare back at important structural junctures but in an inconsistent manner, getting us hooked on a strong formal cue only to leave us unmoored later in the movement. The *Scherzando vivace* opens with four plucked chords that simply disappear and features an insanely fast middle section in which impressionistic, windswept violin lines are regularly punctuated by aggressive, accented punches from the other voices. The *Finale* displays the robust energy of a folk dance, at times sounding as though somebody is stomping on the floor with an odd mix of elegance and violence. In the context of all this foot-tapping vitality, the fleet, whimsical coda is rather disarming. The meter changes to a lilting 6/8 time, breezy triplets wander carelessly along and the movement's main theme morphs into a light, skipping ditty.

The sprawling *Adagio* is the splendid, knotted heart of the work. Like the *Andante cantabile* of Op. 18 No. 5, it is organised as a variation set. In that earlier slow movement, the two sections of the theme are always repeated verbatim, each variation is formally contained, the sequence of first variations follows a predictable, accelerating trajectory and there are few harmonic diversions until the closing coda. In contrast, the slow movement of the E flat Quartet is expansive, developmental and sinuous, with each rendition of the theme melting into the next. Some variations occur in contrasting keys and time signatures. The penultimate rendition of the theme is almost not a variation at all, but a transporting episode full of pain and pathos. The movement has tremendous power, even if it takes a bit of time for its impact to settle in. Schuppanzigh was eventually allowed by Beethoven to perform this piece again and, according to his quartet-mate Karl Holz, at one rehearsal the violinist claimed that at last 'he truly understood the *Adagio* and that he will hardly be able to play it for sheer ecstasy'.

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