

WIGMORE HALL


Monday 14 November 2022
1.00pm

Calidore String Quartet

Jeffrey Myers violin
Ryan Meehan violin
Jeremy Berry viola
Estelle Choi cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) String Quartet No. 6 in B flat Op. 18 No. 6 (1798-1800)
*I. Allegro con brio • II. Adagio ma non troppo •
III. Scherzo. Allegro • IV. La Malinconia. Adagio – •
V. Allegretto quasi Allegro*

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884) String Quartet No. 1 in E minor 'From my life' (1876)
*I. Allegro vivo appassionato •
II. Allegro moderato alla polka •
III. Largo sostenuto • IV. Vivace*

 This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25

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The six quartets that **Beethoven** composed between 1798 and 1800 and published in 1801 as his Op. 18 stand at the juncture between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Mozart had left behind a body of chamber works that Beethoven would emulate, and Haydn was still very much at work, producing his six quartets Op. 76 in 1797-8, as well as a pair of quartets, Op. 77, in 1799. The fact that Haydn completed just two of a projected set of six works may have had something to do with the fact that Beethoven's new quartets were beginning to be played in Viennese salons, and the older composer seems to have felt directly challenged by his former pupil. Both groups – Beethoven's Op. 18 and Haydn's Op. 77 – were the result of commissions from the music-loving Count Lobkowitz, who must have been delighted by the perspicacity of his patronage.

Beethoven's innovations are rooted in a firm understanding of – and sympathy for – Haydn's achievements. The opening *Allegro con brio* of the Quartet in B flat Op. 18 No. 6 explodes with a bravura dialogue between the first violin and cello that brings to mind Goethe's description of listening to a string quartet as being akin to 'overhearing a conversation between four intelligent people.' Beethoven had clearly learnt from Haydn's ability to extract the maximum of formal interest from the minimum of musical means, just as he borrowed his teacher's fondness for abrupt pauses, dramatic changes of mood, and endings that announce themselves with the minimum of fuss. There is an understated tenderness about the second movement *Adagio* (tellingly marked *ma non troppo* – 'slow, but not too much so'), and its genteel lyricism conceals some delicately wrought counterpoint and thematic imitation. Then comes one of Beethoven's trademark scherzos – replacing Haydn's preference for the more decorous minuet. Short and compact, full of rhythmic syncopations and tumbling motivic patterns, it is not a movement to which anybody could conceivably dance.

The finale is perhaps the quartet's most striking invention. It opens with an extended *Adagio*, subtitled *La Malinconia*. Harmonically daring and complex, it ushers us into a strange and unexpected world of interior emotion. Beethoven's evocation of 'melancholy' draws on the early modern theory of the four humours (the others being the sanguine, the choleric and the phlegmatic); the 18th Century had gone on to elaborate an important theory of the passions (known as the *Affektenlehre* in German), but this slow introduction hints at the darker and more unruly emotions of the Romantic age. Eventually, the finale returns to the genial mood that had characterised the quartet's opening movement. Beethoven's use of the term *Allegretto* suggests amiability, and there is a lilting grace about its 3/8 meter. Yet the music of the preceding *Adagio* makes an unexpected reappearance, before a brief *prestissimo* sprint brings the finale to a brisk

conclusion. Whether we hear the movement's faster sections as dispelling its gloomier moments, or as a forced and temporary accommodation with social and musical conventions will very much depend on how it is performed – as well as on how we ourselves may be feeling.

Thanks to the advances of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven, the quartet had established itself as the leading vehicle for sophisticated musical argument. Yet Beethoven's appeal to the language of emotion in his depiction of melancholy suggests that he saw the quartet as an intimate human document too. He would do this again in his late quartets, especially the Quartet Op. 132 in A minor, with its hymn-like adagio, explicitly described as a 'Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der Lydischen Tonart' ('Holy Song of Thanksgiving of a Convalescent to the Deity, in the Lydian Mode'). This subjective impulse was picked up by **Smetana** in his Quartet No. 1, subtitled 'From my life'. In 1874, at the age of 50, Smetana began to suffer the effects of syphilis, one symptom of which was his increasing deafness. Obligated to give up his role as conductor at Prague's Provisional Theatre, he moved to the countryside. There, in the autumn of 1876, he poured his reflections and feelings into a work that was designed to convey important moments in his personal life and development as a creative artist.

The idea that music might convey some kind of programme or narrative was far from new, but tended to be confined to orchestral works, such as Smetana's own *Má vlast* ('My Fatherland'), composed in the second half of the 1870s. For a composer to use the string quartet for the same purpose was, however, a radical statement. As Smetana defiantly claimed: 'I had no intention of composing a quartet according to a formula or according to the usual conception of the form. With me, the form of each composition is determined by the subject. Consequently, this quartet created its own form. I wanted to depict in notes the course of my life.' The first movement expresses 'my youthful inclination to art', as well as 'a sort of warning of my future disaster', and we might wish to hear the dramatic opening viola theme as a kind of fate motif. A polka follows, evoking 'the happy life of my youth when, as a composer of dance music, I frequented the fashionable world.' In the third movement, Smetana looks back nostalgically on 'the happiness of my first love, the girl who later became my wife.' The finale begins heroically, yet ends with feelings of regret, and the ringing high E in the first violin is a vivid musical representation of his loss of hearing. Smetana was proud of his heroic reputation as Bohemia's leading national composer, but the quartet is the confession of a private and vulnerable individual.

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