

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 15 July 2024
7.30pm

Doric String Quartet

Pablo Hernán Benedí violin
Ying Xue violin
Hélène Clément viola
John Myerscough cello

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

String Quartet in A Op. 41 No. 3 (1842)

*I. Andante espressivo - Allegro molto moderato •
II. Assai agitato • III. Adagio molto • IV. Finale.
Allegro molto vivace*

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

3 Divertimenti for string quartet (1936)

*March. Allegro maestoso • Waltz. Allegretto •
Burlesque. Presto*

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 8 in E minor Op. 59 No. 2
'Razumovsky' (1806)

*I. Allegro • II. Molto adagio • III. Allegretto -
Maggiore, Thème russe • IV. Finale. Presto*

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In 1840, Richard Wagner pronounced that instrumental music was at the heart of German family life. It was certainly true when **Robert Schumann** married his beloved Clara Wieck later that year. Alongside busy careers, the two began to build a large family, which included friends such as Brahms as much as the Schumanns' own progeny.

Married life was far from easy, however, and it was during one of Robert's customary periods of depression during the late winter and early spring of 1842 – perhaps the result of envying Clara's success as a performer – that he returned from Hamburg to pore over string quartets by Haydn, Mozart and, later, Beethoven. By that summer, Robert was ready to embark on his own contributions to the genre: first, his quartets in A minor and F major, written in June and early July; and then the A major we hear this evening, composed between 8 and 22 July. Together, the works would be published as his Op. 41.

Domesticity and intimacy were crucial to the conception of the three quartets. Robert thought that chamber music should try to avoid what he termed 'symphonic furore', instead adopting a more conversational tone, in which 'everyone has something to say'. That included Ferdinand David, then leader of the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig. 'We have played them several times at David's house', Robert explained to his publishers, 'and they seemed to give pleasure to players and listeners, especially to Mendelssohn'.

Friendly works, then, though far from lacking in import. Indeed, the structure of the first movement of the A major, with its expressive introduction, strikes a particularly thoughtful note, imbued with Schumann's innate *Innigkeit* (poignant intimacy of feeling). The *Andante*'s falling figure soon becomes the principal motif of the ensuing *Allegro*, though the exposition's delicacy of scoring and its searching second subject, given to the cello, lends the whole movement a wistful character.

Bittersweetness likewise informs the feints and hesitations of the complex second movement, combining a theme-and-variation structure and a scherzo. The music finds firmer footing in the coda, though strength of feeling in the *Adagio* delays true freedom to the *Finale*. Here, the scherzo's syncopations find renewed tenacity. There are also contrasts and backward glances, but the energy proves more headlong, delivering an impressive conclusion.

Benjamin Britten's association with the string quartet formally began in 1941, with the world **première** in Los Angeles of his first catalogued work: Op. 25. The Second String Quartet followed in 1945, with a **première** here at Wigmore Hall, before Britten composed his third and final instalment alongside his opera *Death in Venice*. But the official triptych is only part of the story. Towards the end of Britten's life, and following his death, earlier works for string quartet began to appear from the archive, including the 3 *Divertimenti* of 1936. Although the work had been performed at Wigmore Hall at the time of its composition, the score was only published in 1983.

The *Divertimenti*, in turn, stem from a 1933 student composition entitled *Go play, boy, play*, with each piece representing a different childhood friend. The music was then plundered for later projects, though a trace of that original scheme remains in these three contrasting movements. The opening *March* is at turns cussed and capricious, offering an exuberant range of playing techniques, albeit kept at arm's length. The lilting *Waltz* is more open-hearted, even if its otherworldliness gives way to pugnacity, before the *March*'s mercurial energies return in the final *Burlesque*, dedicated to Francis Barton, a friend from prep school.

Count Andreas Razumovsky was the Russian ambassador to the Habsburg Empire. During his time in Vienna, he became a diplomatic lynchpin, not least during the Napoleonic Wars and the subsequent Congress of Vienna, though he is now largely remembered thanks to the three string quartets Op. 59 he commissioned from **Beethoven** in 1806, each of which was to include a 'Russian' theme. The second in the triptych is a minor-key work, though its opening gestures, pitting the tonic against the 'Neapolitan' (or flattened supertonic) of F major, hark back to the first of the group. The interruption prompts a series of silences, which become fundamental to the score, as does the restive energy, harmonic diversity and rhetorical force of the opening movement. Indeed, we quickly appreciate what an early critic meant when describing these quartets as 'profound' and brilliantly constructed, while suggesting that 'they are not easily comprehended'.

Beethoven conceived the ensuing *Adagio* 'while contemplating the starry sky and thinking about the music of the spheres', according to Carl Czerny. It certainly unfolds at an expansive pace, though the vitality is preserved thanks to the interaction of the slow melody and more animated counterpoint. There follows a somewhat uneven *Allegretto* in triple time, with the first violin placing the emphasis on the second crotchet in the bar, while the other three instruments maintain the prevailing metre. It is in this movement's major-key section that Razumovsky's 'Russian' theme makes a somewhat peevish appearance, as if Beethoven were not entirely thrilled at its inclusion.

If the F major statement in the opening *Allegro* looked back to the first of the Op. 59 quartets, the C major theme at the beginning of the *Finale* heralds the home key of the third in the group. It is dominated by a jaunty march, complete with 'Turkish' inflections – familiar from Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and Beethoven's (later) Ninth Symphony. Striding ahead, it constantly underlines the discrepancy between C major and the tonic of E minor. But that is essentially the nature of this Quartet, favouring dramatic pauses and sardonic humour over uniformity. In short, the work prefigures all the dialectal and philosophical brilliance of Beethoven's final quartets.

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