

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 15 May 2023
7.30pm

Takács Quartet

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

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in F Op. 77 No. 2 (1799)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Menuetto. Presto - Trio •
III. Andante • IV. Finale. Vivace assai*

Fanny Mendelssohn (1805-1847)

String Quartet in E flat (1834)

*I. Adagio ma non troppo • II. Allegretto •
III. Romanze • IV. Allegro molto vivace*

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quartet in G D887 (1826)

*I. Allegro molto moderato • II. Andante un poco moto •
III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace - Trio. Allegretto •
IV. Allegro assai*



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In the spring of 1799 **Haydn** began work on a new series of string quartets commissioned by one of Beethoven's principal patrons, Prince Lobkowitz. He completed the first two quartets within a few months, but then found himself having to produce not only his annual Mass for Princess Esterházy's name-day, but also a new oratorio. *The Seasons* occupied him until the end of March 1801, and it sapped most of Haydn's remaining energy. Although he attempted to carry on with Prince Lobkowitz's commission, he managed to compose only the two middle movements of a further quartet.

Despite the difficult circumstances in which they were composed, Haydn's last two string quartets, Op. 77, are among the most visionary of all his works of the kind, and at the centre of the opening movement in the second of the pair stands one of the most arresting of all the composer's key changes. Here, the cello's repeated notes of E flat and F flat find themselves transmuted in midstream into their aural equivalents, D sharp and E natural, enabling the music to effect a startling switch from E flat minor to E minor. The moment is so unusual that Haydn specifically instructed the cellist that the pitch was to remain the same despite the change in notation, from 'flat' to 'sharp'.

Haydn's minuet, placed, unusually at this stage of his career, before the slow movement, is to all intents and purposes a scherzo: the *Presto* tempo, combined with a pervasive two-note motif tapped out in drum-like fashion by the cellist, cutting across the music's triple metre, takes the music far away from the better-behaved world of the traditional minuet. The trio, in strong contrast, has the music unfolding in smooth phrases, and played *pianissimo* throughout. The trio's coda uniquely offers a pre-echo of the reprise of the minuet, whose material is heard as though from afar.

The slow movement provides one of the last and greatest instances of Haydn's lifelong fondness for the lean sonority of bare two-part writing. The entire first half of its theme is scored for violin and cello alone, and when the inner parts eventually steal in during the course of the second half, they cast a glow of warmth over the music.

The *Finale* is one of Haydn's folk-inspired pieces – notably so in the 'stamping' rhythm that sets in towards the end of its exposition, with syncopated inner parts further enlivening the music. No one listening to this exuberant, life-affirming piece could suspect that it was the work of a man in his late 60s.

Fanny Mendelssohn composed her only string quartet in the summer of 1834, though its opening two movements were transcriptions of pieces from an unfinished piano sonata she had written some five years earlier. The first of them is a free fantasia in which the music becomes increasingly agitated. The second,

labelled an intermezzo in the piano sonata though not in the quartet, has delicate outer sections enclosing an ebullient *fugato* in the major. At the end, a telescoped reprise of the opening section disappears into thin air.

The *Romanze* slow movement begins as though in midstream, with a repeated-note melody that sets off on a discord, and with any attempt to establish the music's home key deliberately thwarted. The more forceful middle section takes the music at a stroke from B flat major into the distant realm of B minor, and the atmosphere thereafter remains constantly unsettled. The approach to the reprise of the opening melody is a highly effective moment, with the texture of repeated notes progressively building up to recreate the movement's initial discord, and the melody getting underway before the listener can register its return.

The irrepressibly energetic finale has its scurrying lines surmounted at times by an ecstatic high-lying violin part. This time there is no tonal ambiguity, and the work comes to a firm close with a blaze of E flat major.

Schubert wrote only two large-scale instrumental works in the key of G major, and both are products of the same year of 1826. But while the piano sonata D894 is among his most serene works, the string quartet D887 is one of his most restless. It is characterised by a constant vacillation between major and minor, and its opening bars, with a quiet G major triad out of which a full-blooded chord of G minor emerges, set the tone for what is to follow. So unstable is this beginning that when the same material returns much later on, at the start of the recapitulation, Schubert dissipates its tension by radically altering the music's nature. Indeed, so far does the recapitulation depart from the pattern of the exposition that the one may be heard as a variation on the other.

As if the preponderance of the minor in the opening movement were not enough, Schubert casts both middle movements in minor keys. The simplicity of the expansive cello theme which begins the slow movement serves to offset an episode of startling vehemence whose outbursts of almost manic violence seem to anticipate the quartet writing of Bartók. The *Scherzo*, on the other hand, is a fleeting piece of Mendelssohnian lightness, with a much slower trio in *Ländler* style beginning with another broad cello melody.

The finale renews the first movement's conflict between major and minor – so much so that the main rondo theme, which lurches continually between the two opposing modes, this time actually sets out in the minor. Not even the intermittent moments of Rossinian delicacy elsewhere can more than fleetingly lighten the atmosphere of this disturbingly uneasy piece.

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