

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 15 November 2021 1.00pm

## Brentano String Quartet

Serena Canin violin

Mark Steinberg violin

Misha Amory viola

Nina Maria Lee cello

BBC  
RADIO



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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**Felix Mendelssohn** (1809-1847)

String Quartet No. 6 in F minor Op. 80 (1847)

*I. Allegro vivace assai • II. Allegro assai •  
III. Adagio • IV. Finale. Allegro molto*

**Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 16 in F Op. 135 (1826)

*I. Allegretto • II. Vivace • III. Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo •  
IV. Grave, ma non troppo tratto – Allegro*

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At the end of August 1847, the English writer Henry Chorley spent three days with **Felix Mendelssohn** and his family at Interlaken in Switzerland. In between rainstorms they walked together, discussing art and politics. Chorley admired Mendelssohn's watercolours and laughed at the wreck of a piano in Mendelssohn's lodgings. After a final day in the high Alps, admiring the waterfall of the Staubbach, they parted. 'My very last [memory] is the sight of him turning down the road to wend back to Interlaken alone,' wrote Chorley:

[...] I thought even then, as I followed his figure, looking none the younger for the loose dark coat and the wide-brimmed straw hat bound with black crepe which he wore, that he was much too depressed and worn, and walked too heavily!

11 weeks later Mendelssohn was dead at the age of 38 – exhausted by two decades of continual creative activity, and heartbroken by the sudden death on 14 May that year of his beloved sister Fanny Hensel. The black crepe on his hat was no coincidence. Mendelssohn had learned of Fanny's death upon returning from his final visit to the United Kingdom. On hearing the news, he fell unconscious to the ground. The summer in Interlaken was intended to help him convalesce. 'It has been very good for me to work', he told Chorley, 'and I wanted to make something sharp and close and strict'. Chorley recalled that he 'mentioned that stupendous *quartett* in F minor which we have since known as one of the most impassioned outpourings of sadness existing in instrumental music'.

It's no exaggeration. Mendelssohn wrote his final string quartet at high speed, amidst the rainstorms of Interlaken, and was said to have called it his 'Requiem für Fanny'. His lifelong experience with string chamber music gave him a strong starting point. F minor is the key of Beethoven's terse, emotionally-charged Quartet Op. 95, as well as the tragic key of *Egmont*. But it's also possible to hear Alpine storms echoing the artist's emotions (Mendelssohn was a Romantic, after all) in the torrential *Allegro vivace assai* first movement, as well as a 'close and strict' interplay of motifs and some of the most tender thoughts that even Mendelssohn ever committed to paper.

Restless cross-rhythms destabilize the second movement; the chromatic central section is sombre and spectral. And from its opening sigh onwards, the *Adagio* is explicitly a homage to Beethoven: an attempt, under deep emotion, to express something that may be inexpressible. The musicologist John Horton has detected thematic links to a short piano piece that Mendelssohn wrote as a private gift for Fanny in the summer of 1830. Be that as it may, the movement wanders into deep and strange harmonic regions before the *Finale* resumes the torrent of grief. As the end approaches, the first violin scrambles defiantly heavenwards as the closing chords assert an uncompromising F minor. This is music

written *in extremis* and no happy ending is possible here – either in art or in life.

Mozart died early and unexpectedly in mid-creation; Schubert was devouring best-selling novels days before he died. Haydn's imagination, meanwhile, seemed to grow younger as the man himself grew older. Very few creative lives end tidily and orderly with an inspiring Last Testament, for the good reason that very few of us, deep down, are in any rush to sign off and call it a day. Try telling that, though, to the musicologists who've pored over the words that accompany the final movement of **Beethoven's** Quartet in F Op. 135 – his final completed work, written in October 1826 some five months before his death.

Beethoven headed the movement 'DER SCHWER GEFASSTE ENTSCHLUSS' ('The hard-made decision' – Beethoven's capitals) and over the ominous three-note motif that introduces the movement (and returns, mock-heroically, at key points in its progress), he wrote the cryptic words 'Muss es sein? Es muss sein!' ('Must it be? It must be!'). Words like these, on the last movement of the last work that the Master ever finished – well, they're a red rag to the Romantic. The 19th Century's determination to hear a profound final message from Beethoven overlooks the simple fact that this is one of Beethoven's brightest and clearest finales. And it comes at the end of one of his shortest and wittiest quartets.

But then, Beethoven wasn't planning on dying at 57, and as ever, he was following his own creative path. After the epic profundities of the Quartets Opp. 131 and 132, that path takes him, in Op. 135, back to exactly the classical forms he was supposed to have transcended. The quizzical opening phrase, crisp little motifs, lucid two-part writing and throwaway *pizzicatos* of the first movement, the fizzing energy and dizzying rhythmic games of the second, and the deep, tender song of the luminous D-flat major *Lento* (a strong contender for the most heart-rending slow movement in all chamber music) all remind us that – far from transcending classical forms – Beethoven found in them an ever-fresh source of creative renewal. It's not too far-fetched to hear Op. 135 as Beethoven's tribute, from the peak of his mastery, to the Op. 77 of his old teacher Haydn (indeed, Haydn's Op. 77 No. 2 shared the same key of F major).

Op. 135 isn't a farewell to life; it's a mature Beethoven rediscovering the wellsprings of his creative energy. And they're showing no signs of drying up. That 'hard-made decision'? It turns out it was a tight-fisted patron of Beethoven's who, reminded that he owed the composer 50 florins, asked 'Muss es sein?' According to the violinist Karl Holz (who played in the première of Op. 135) Beethoven's response, 'Ja!Ja! Ja! Es muss sein!', came accompanied by gales of laughter. Exactly like the brilliant final notes of this quartet, then.

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