

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 15 October 2021 7.30pm

## Quatuor Ebène

Pierre Colombet violin

Gabriel Le Magadure violin

Marie Chilemme viola

Raphaël Merlin cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in D Op. 20 No. 4 (1772)

*I. Allegro di molto • II. Un poco adagio affetuoso •  
III. Menuetto. Allegretto alla zingarese - Trio •  
IV. Presto scherzando*

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

String Quartet No. 1 'Kreutzer Sonata' (1923)

*I. Adagio - Con moto • II. Con moto •  
III. Con moto - Vivace - Andante - Tempo I •  
IV. Con moto - Adagio*

Interval

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

String Quartet in F Op. 41 No. 2 (1842)

*I. Allegro vivace • II. Andante quasi Variazioni •  
III. Scherzo. Presto - Trio • IV. Allegro molto vivace*

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With Haydn's Op. 20 set of 1772 the string quartet came of age. From every standpoint – formal, technical, expressive – these six works reach new heights. Where the first violin had dominated in Haydn's earlier quartets, he now creates a free exchange of ideas, with each player assuming a vital, distinct identity. Much of the writing suggests 'a conversation between four intelligent people', as Goethe pithily characterised the string quartet – a reminder that the art of civilised conversation was avidly cultivated in 18th-century salons.

The expansive opening *Allegro di molto* of the D major Quartet, Op. 20 No. 4, makes dramatic capital of its initial 'drum' motif, always likely to pivot the music to an unexpected tonal area. Haydn often pairs the instruments in thirds and sixths, as in the mellifluous – and to our ears Mozartian – dialogues of the second theme.

The piercingly beautiful *Un poco adagio affettuoso* (= 'tenderly') is Haydn's only variation movement cast entirely in the minor key. The second half of the theme, with each instrument rising by step, reaches an almost excruciating pitch of intensity. After three variations (the first a duet between second violin and viola, the second led by the cello) and a reprise of the theme, Haydn expands the scale in an astonishing fantasia-cum-coda that stresses the theme's dissonant shapes before fragmenting into silence.

After this tragic disintegration the *Menuetto 'alla zingarese'* and finale mine Haydn's favourite Hungarian 'gypsy' vein with irresistible wit and élan. In the former a riot of offbeat accents keep the listener guessing as to whether this is a minuet or a gavotte. In sly contrast, the trio, led by the cello, deals in perfectly regular four-bar phrases. The finale lives up to its *scherzando* billing in music of controlled waywardness, treating its impish opening motif in the informal conversational textures that are among the chief delights of Haydn's quartet style.

Like virtually everything Janáček composed in his torrential final decade, his two string quartets enshrine his love for Kamila Stösslová, an antique dealer's wife whom he met on holiday in 1917. Although her feelings did not go beyond friendship, Kamila became his muse and confidante. His passion was expressed, overtly or implicitly, in his operas, the song cycle *The Diary of One Who Disappeared* and his string quartets, 'Kreutzer Sonata' and 'Intimate Letters'.

In 1908 Janáček had composed a string trio, now lost, in honour of Leo Tolstoy's 80th birthday. After a request from the Czech Quartet, he incorporated ideas from the trio in a string quartet 'inspired by Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*', composed in just two weeks in October 1923. Tolstoy's novella had in turn been inspired by Beethoven's 'Kreutzer' Sonata for violin and piano. In the story, recounted by a narrator who has murdered his apparently adulterous wife, Tolstoy inveighs against the destructive force of carnal love. The tone is aggressively misogynist, with no compassion for the wife. Sublimating his feelings for Kamila, Janáček takes the wife's side. As he told Kamila: 'I was imagining a poor woman, tormented, beaten and eventually killed, just like the one Tolstoy describes in his *Kreutzer Sonata*.'

While Janáček broadly follows the story's trajectory, the quartet is not so much programme music as an exploration of extreme emotional states. All four movements are built on the obsessive repetition of short rhythmic cells. The first movement opens with the quartet's 'motto': a yearning figure for muted violins and viola that recalls the sighs of the Volga in Janáček's opera *Kát'a Kabanová*.

Next comes a polka – the Czech national dance – that never quite gets going. The polka morphs into a tender theme that passes between first violin, viola and cello, and is then then invaded by a eerie passage of *sul ponticello* – a harsh, rattling sonority created by the bow playing close to the bridge.

Janáček also exploits *sul ponticello* in the third movement, where second violin and viola brutally disrupt the plaintive duet for first violin and cello. The duet – an evocation of the woman and her lover – echoes a theme in the first movement of Beethoven's 'Kreutzer' Sonata.

Opening with a reminiscence of the first movement's motto, the finale continues with a violin solo marked *tristemente* – 'as if in tears'. An inexorably built climax reaches an excruciating pitch of violence before subsiding in the final bars, with the second violin bleakly intoning a variant of the motto.

In 1838 Robert Schumann confessed to his fiancée Clara Wieck that 'the piano has become too limiting for me...', and revealed that he was planning 'three violin quartets'. Yet it was not until 1842, after he had composed his 'Spring' and D minor symphonies, that Schumann felt ready to engage seriously with the medium. 'Constant quartet thoughts' ran a diary entry that February. After making an intensive study of quartets by Beethoven, Haydn and Mozart, he composed his three Op. 41 quartets rapidly in June and July, dedicating them 'in deepest admiration' to his friend Mendelssohn.

The opening *Allegro vivace* of the F major Quartet, No. 2, combines a spirit of surging elation with concentrated motivic development. Everything derives ingeniously from the waltzing opening theme. The *Andante*, in the mellow contrasting key of A flat, is a set of free variations on a gently lilting melody in 12/8 that pays distant homage to the *Adagio* of Beethoven's E flat Quartet Op. 127 – a particular favourite of Schumann's.

The third movement, with its mercurial key shifts and musette drones, is Schumann's own take on Mendelssohn's quicksilver 'fairy scherzos'. At the start of the trio the cello's attempts at gravity are dismissed by chuckles from the upper instruments. The finale veers between skittering *moto perpetuo* violin figuration, like a Baroque toccata, and *dolce* theme that recalls the last song of Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* ('To the Distant Beloved'): a melody that Schumann had associated with Clara since the days when she was indeed his 'distant beloved'.

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