

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 16 February 2022 7.30pm

Jerusalem Quartet

Alexander Pavlovsky violin

Sergei Bresler violin

Jonathan Brown viola

Kyril Zlotnikov cello

Supported by The Dorset Foundation - in memory of Harry M Weinrebe

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 2 in G Op. 18 No. 2 (1798-1800)

I. Allegro • II. Adagio cantabile •

III. Scherzo. Allegro • IV. Allegro molto, quasi presto

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

Interval

String Quartet No. 13 in B flat Op. 130 with Grosse Fuge Op. 133 (1825-6)

I. Adagio ma non troppo - Allegro • II. Presto •

III. Andante con moto ma non troppo •

IV. Alla danza tedesca. Allegro assai •

V. Cavatina. Adagio molto espressivo • VI. Overtura. Allegro - Fuga



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

We are grateful to Jonathan Brown for stepping in at short notice to replace Ori Kam, who is unable to perform this evening due to illness.

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From **Beethoven's** first quartets to his last, counterpoint – passages of music in which each part or 'voice' pursues an independent line – plays an important role. On the one hand, Beethoven's recourse to contrapuntal devices, such as canons and fugues, indicates his respect for and incorporation of archaic techniques, associated most often now with the music of JS Bach. On the other hand, Beethoven's use of counterpoint seems in keeping with Goethe's oft-quoted comparison of the string quartet to a conversation between four intelligent people. Each instrument is equal, and through the imitation and development of each other's ideas grows a rich musical argument.

The more conventional, classical arrangement for the string quartet was for the first violin to preside over the other instruments, who primarily served as accompaniment to its melodies and ornamental display. Beethoven used those textures too, indicating his indebtedness to his friend and colleague violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, who first performed Op. 18 (1798), Op. 59 (1806), Op. 130 and Op. 133 (1825). In Beethoven's String Quartet in G Op. 18 No. 2, the first violin takes the melodic lead throughout the majority of the piece. However, there are moments when the other parts prompt a new idea or blur structural boundaries, such as in the first movement, when the pre-emptive return of the main theme is challenged by a repeated note insisting on modulation to the home key; the theme's full recapitulation is chased in contrapuntal imitation.

The second movement of Op. 18 No. 2 has an unusual form, slipping away from the blandishments of the *Adagio cantabile* to suddenly pursue an *Allegro* that, as Joseph Kerman points out, is a dance-parody of a kind Beethoven would include in his later quartets, including the last two movements of Op. 59 No. 2 and the *Alla danza tedesca* of Op. 130. While the *Adagio* section returns, its final bars recall the melody of the *Allegro*. Beethoven forges thematic connections within and between the four movements of Op. 18 No. 2. After the Trio section of the *Scherzo*, for instance, he inserts a transitional passage that prepares the ground for the return of the opening theme rather than simply jumping back to the start. Yet at the same time, Beethoven uses dynamic accents to unsettle the flow of the music. Contrast and cohesion are constantly being kept in check.

Op. 59 No. 2 throws down two ideas at its start that jostle for precedence throughout the opening *Allegro*. First, two loud chords. Second, a brief arabesque, playing softly. A third idea might be acknowledged here: the silence between them. While the arabesque figure is extended to become the main theme, the loud chords and the silence that follows them interject at significant moments as Beethoven pushes the music to new harmonic areas. After the hymn-like *Adagio*, the *Maggiore* section of the *Allegretto* introduces what is marked on the score as a 'Thème russe', probably a nod to the Russian diplomat Count Razumovsky, who commissioned the

quartets. However, Beethoven presents the melody not as the expected folkish dance or emotional outpouring, but as a rather crudely textbook fugue. Counterpoint here is used to sardonic effect. The massive *Presto* finale of Op. 59 No. 2 returns, time and again, to its rumbustious opening theme. Repetition is important throughout, from small-scale recurrences of melodic ideas to large-scale structures. Op. 59 No. 2 is the last quartet in which Beethoven instructs the players to repeat both the exposition and development of the first movement; an old-fashioned practice being used for rhetorical effect.

Contrast and cohesion, old and new techniques, continued to preoccupy Beethoven in his final quartets. Another Russian, Prince Galitzin, had provided the commission, which was liberatingly open – Beethoven was asked for one, two, or three quartets, for whatever price he thought proper. The first sketches for Op. 130 suggest he already had an ambitious conception for the quartet; it was to have a 'serious and heavy-going introduction' and end with a fugue. It ended up with six movements and, in its first iteration, concluded with the *Grosse Fuge*, a huge fugal movement that lasted almost as long as the rest of the piece.

As in Op. 59 No. 2, Beethoven begins Op. 130 with contrasting ideas, now conceived on a grander scale. A 'serious and heavy-going' introduction is followed by an *Allegro* that pursues two motifs: a scurrying figure heard initially played by the first violin, and a simple fanfare. *Adagio* and *Allegro* materials are in dialogue right up to the coda. The *Presto* movement is in constant motion, barely interrupted by an outburst from the first violin. The *Andante* is mysteriously two-faced: it has all the dynamic markings and phrasing of a serene slow movement but Beethoven marks it to be played *poco scherzoso*, a little playfully. The 'parody dance' *Alla danza tedesca* starts sweetly but then flails. The expressive heart of the piece is the *Cavatina*, in which the first violin begins as if to sing, yet its full voice proves hard to find. Violinist Karl Holz recalled Beethoven listening tearfully to this movement. Originally it was to lead straight into the finale, which begins with the presentation of four themes that become the material for the following multi-part fugue, a compendium of contrapuntal techniques interleaved with lyrical or dance-like episodes.

The *Grosse Fuge* was received with incomprehension at the first performance of Op. 130, on 21 March 1826. On the advice of the publisher, Beethoven provided an alternative, shorter and lighter, finale, and the *Grosse Fuge* was published separately, as Op. 133. During the 20th Century, quartets began reinstating it as the finale of Op. 130, fulfilling Beethoven's laconic prophecy that 'It will please them some day'.

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