

WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 16 February 2026
1.00pm

Chiaroscuro Quartet

Alina Ibragimova violin
Charlotte Saluste-Bridoux violin
Emilie Hörnlund viola
Claire Thirion cello

Jan Sweelinck (1562-1621)

Fantasia Chromatica transcribed by Sasha Parker

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 12 in E flat Op. 127 (1823-4)

I. Maestoso – Allegro
II. Adagio, ma non troppo e molto cantabile
III. Scherzando vivace – Presto
IV. Finale – Allegro



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The Dutch composer **Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck** was a major figure in European music, marking both the high Renaissance style of the 16th Century and preparing the ground for the Baroque ascendancy of the 17th. He spent most of his life as organist of the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam, at a time when the city was enjoying its golden age as the centre of world trade. He was still in his teens when he was appointed after the death of his father, and handed it on to his own son – a family business that lasted for about a century.

Sweelinck's fame seemed to rest on his vocal music, serving both the new Calvinism of the north European Protestant reformation and the Roman Catholic church – the Oude Kerk converted to Calvinism in 1578 and the outgoing Catholic priest had taught (and influenced) the young Sweelinck – and much of it was published during his lifetime. Music played little part in the new faith, and his role as organist mostly involved pre- and post-service recitals for the edification rather than entertainment of the worshippers. The post was a civic appointment, and a fine organ was an important aspect of civic pride. At the time he was equally celebrated for his keyboard playing and improvisations, and he was in much demand as a teacher, but none of his keyboard music was printed and it made its way throughout Europe via copies. He was closely involved with organ building, and some of his students helped establish the North German organ school, which would in the course of time yield the glories of Buxtehude and Bach. Sweelinck did not travel, but the music world came to him, among them his contemporaries Peter Philips and John Bull from England. The so-called 'Orpheus of Amsterdam' was very well connected.

It is astonishing how many of Sweelinck's keyboard works – about 70 – have survived the course of four centuries, with manuscripts gathered into collections, a fact that indicates how much his music was valued during his lifetime: the two sets of variations on secular songs – 'Est-ce Mars?' and 'Mein jungen Leben hat ein End' (the first of his keyboard works to be published in 1894) – are now both familiar in recitals, and, unlike the more conventional vocal works, forward looking.

The *Fantasia Chromatica*, like many Renaissance and Baroque works with the same title, is a keyboard work in the Dorian mode (a version of the key D minor); it opens with a fugue subject descending by semitones from D to A, and combines contrapuntal rigour with virtuosic flourishes in semi- and demisemiquavers, which bring the work to a climactic close. Sasha Parker's transcription for the Chiaroscuro Quartet playing on gut strings with period bows may give us an idea of the tuning conventions of the time.

Beethoven returned to writing string quartets in 1822. The last of the piano sonatas had appeared in

1823, as did, after a long gestation, the *Diabelli Variations*; and the *Missa Solemnis* had its première in 1824, as did the Choral Symphony. He had also been working on a new quartet, in E flat, and a commission from the fine amateur Russian cellist Prince Nikolai Galitzin, who was a passionate supporter of Beethoven, for three quartets, sharpened the composer's focus on a medium that had not figured in his output since 1810 and the 'Serioso' Op. 95. It was the first of the five late quartets (plus the *Grosse Fuge*) that absorbed Beethoven in the last years of his life.

The other significant figure was the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh (1776-1830), who came into Beethoven's life with the latter's three Op. 59 'Razumovsky' quartets in 1808, as the leader of Count Razumovsky's private quartet. Schuppanzigh went on to form his professional quartet, probably the first in Europe, which played a crucial role in re-evaluating the amateur status of chamber music. His role in providing the means of realising Beethoven's expressive and technical ambitions in the quartet medium, especially the late quartets, was invaluable. He was probably more of a champion of Beethoven than a friend, although the composer teased him relentlessly about his fondness for food and drink, and plenty of it.

There is a strange dichotomy at work in Op. 127. Although the first movement opens with an attention-grabbing, *maestoso* gesture, which recurs twice and acts like a signpost alerting the listener to key structural points, Beethoven deliberately veils the unfolding sonata form so that, for example, the big moment of recapitulation would slide by almost unnoticed but for the reappearance of the *maestoso* figure. For such brilliantly crafted music, where all the components of key change, intricate counterpoint and melodic development fold into each other with ease, the first movement is brief, with no repeats of material, and half the length of the *Adagio* second movement.

The slow movement is in serene A flat and is a set of six variations, a point omitted in the score. The third variation, marked *Adagio molto espressivo*, switches without preparation to the key of E major, and is a sort of pre-variation that strips the theme back to its basics. The quartet's sixth variation is folded into the slow movement's coda. This sublime suspension of time is blown away by the *Scherzando vivace* which swerves between lively dance and tight counterpoint; the Trio in E flat minor goes by in a flash, over some startling modulation, and with a 'pretend' return at the end of the Scherzo repeat (as in the Symphony No. 9). The *Finale*, in lightly applied sonata form, combines lightness of mood and robust country dances. The slightly slower coda takes this remarkable work to a transcendent close.

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