

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 16 January 2024  
7.30pm

## Castalian String Quartet

Sini Simonen violin  
Daniel Roberts violin  
Edgar Francis viola  
Steffan Morris cello

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

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

*I. Adagio - Con moto • II. Con moto • III. Con moto -  
Vivo - Andante • IV. Con moto - Adagio - Più mosso*

Mark-Anthony Turnage (b.1960)

Awake (2020)

*I. Bridgetower 23 • II. Shut out*

Interval

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

String Quartet No. 5 BB110 (1934)

*I. Allegro • II. Adagio molto • III. Scherzo. Alla bulgarese •  
IV. Andante • V. Finale. Allegro vivace*

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Many of the threads in the rich tapestry of this evening's concert ultimately lead back to Beethoven. The Janáček and the Turnage quartets were both inspired by literary works that owe their origin to the same work by Beethoven: the Violin Sonata in A Op. 47. This piece, for more than two centuries popularly known as the 'Kreutzer' Sonata, occupies a special place in the composer's output – both for the power and intensity of its musical expression and for the circumstances in which it was written. For Tolstoy, whose 1889 novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* outlines a chain of tragic events sparked off by a performance of the work, the elemental emotions it embodies made the writer question music's power to uplift and to ask whether it is more likely to propel susceptible individuals into committing acts of violence. In our own time, the former US Poet Laureate Rita Dove has been drawn to the fascinating story of the sonata's genesis and in her collection of poems *Sonata Mulattica* (2009) she explores the relationship between the composer and George Bridgetower (1778-1860), the mixed-race violinist for whom the work was written.

There can be little doubt that what attracted **Janáček** to Tolstoy's novella was the writer's conviction that music has 'a terrible power'. Tolstoy himself had clearly fallen under the spell of the Beethoven sonata's emotional intensity and felt it necessary to warn others to approach such music with extreme caution. Janáček's annotated copy of the novella shows that the passage in which the first-person narrator, the abusive husband Pozdnyshev, rails at the 'awful effect' of the music and its ability to corrupt both performers and listeners, made a particularly strong impression on him.

It's hardly surprising that Janáček, the author of several operas that portray the sufferings of women trapped in a humiliatingly subordinate role, responded to this tale of passion and destructive possessiveness with music of searing power and beauty. His Quartet No. 1 is undeniably programmatic, and even contains a veiled reference (in the third movement) to the tender second theme from the first movement of Beethoven's sonata. But his message was very different from Tolstoy's: far from warning that listening to such music could lead those receptive to it astray, Janáček intended his own work to highlight the destructive effects of male despotism.

Questions of what constitutes moral behaviour also arise in connection with Beethoven's treatment of Bridgetower, the dazzling young violinist with whom he struck up a friendship when the latter was passing through Vienna during the spring of 1803. Beethoven appreciated the passion and flamboyance of Bridgetower's playing, and wrote a sonata for the two of them to play together. So taken was he with his new friend that he wrote a characteristically jocular inscription on the autograph, affectionately describing Bridgetower as 'gran pazzo e compositore mulattico' ('crazy man and mixed-race composer'). But two years

later, when the sonata appeared in print, it carried a dedication to the French violinist Rodolphe Kreutzer. More than half a century later, the English violinist JW Thirlwall suggested an explanation for Beethoven's failure to give Bridgetower the credit he was due for his role in the creation of the work. Thirlwall claimed that Bridgetower himself had told him that he and the composer had fallen out over a woman, but this account contains several serious inaccuracies and it's possible that the truth was much more mundane: that Beethoven, who was then considering a move to France, felt that dedicating his sonata to someone who was a professor at the Paris Conservatoire and had important aristocratic connections would make much more sense as a career move than dedicating it to a violinist – no matter how brilliant – who had not achieved a position of comparable influence.

Whatever the truth of the matter, it's undeniable that Bridgetower was dealt a serious injustice when his association with the sonata was not publicly acknowledged by Beethoven, and it's this injustice – the fact of being effectively written out of musical history – that Dove's *Sonata Mulattica* collection and **Turnage's** *Awake*, inspired by Dove's poems, seek to redress. The Castalian Quartet commissioned Turnage to write a work to mark the centenary of Janáček's 'Kreutzer Sonata' quartet, and although *Awake* contains no thematic references to either Janáček or Beethoven, the composer has said that their music means a great deal to him. As hinted at by the movement titles, *Awake* has a similar narrative quality to the Janáček, and its tender, elegiac mood is also reminiscent of many passages in that work. *Awake* received its first performance at last year's Edinburgh International Festival.

Unlike the Janáček and Turnage works, **Bartók's** String Quartet No. 5 can't claim a direct line of descent from Beethoven's 'Kreutzer' Sonata, though it's worth noting that Bartók included the work in the first concert he gave in the United States after his arrival there in 1940. He performed the 'Kreutzer' with his compatriot Joseph Szigeti at Washington's Library of Congress, under the auspices of the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Festival. Six years earlier, Coolidge had commissioned Bartók to write his fifth string quartet, which was consequently dedicated to her.

Bartók always acknowledged the influence of Beethoven – especially the Beethoven of the late quartets – and both the strict formal cohesion of the Quartet No. 5 and its deeply spiritual outlook testify to this influence. Indeed, the obvious concern for formal balance exhibited in this quartet – apparent both in the work's overall 'arch' form (ABCBA) and the underpinning of a more focused tonality than in its predecessor – may even hint at a desire for a return to the clear-cut forms of the Classical era.

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