WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 16 November 2021 7.30pm

Brentano String Quartet

Mark Steinberg violin
Serena Canin violin
Misha Amory viola
Nina Maria Lee cello

CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust www.cavatina.net

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Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)	String Quartet in D Op. 71 No. 2 (1793) *I. Adagio - Allegro • II. Adagio cantabile •* *III. Menuetto. Allegro • IV. Finale. Allegretto*
Bruce Adolphe (b.1955)	ContraDiction - a reaction to Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, Contrapunctus No. 2 (2002)
Steven Mackey (b.1956)	'Lude (2002)
	Interval
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)	String Quartet in G D887 (1826) *I. Allegro molto moderato • II. Andante un poco moto •* *III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace - Trio. Allegretto • IV. Allegro assai*

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In February 1794 **Haydn** returned to London with six new string quartets (Opp. 71 and 74) in his luggage. He'd written them in Vienna earlier the previous year, and dedicated them to his friend (and brother Freemason) the Hungarian nobleman Count Anton Georg Apponyi. But there's no doubt about the listeners he really had in mind: the London public. With Op. 71 and Op. 74, Haydn's string quartet writing made yet another evolutionary leap. These are the first significant string quartets written specifically to be played by professional musicians at a public concert.

Haydn makes his intentions clear from the outset - almost never, before Op. 71, had he begun a quartet with a slow introduction. A public discussion, after all, requires more of a preamble than a private conversation, and in Op. 71 No. 2 an arresting chord and a coaxing *Adagio* prepare the listeners for an *Allegro* of symphonic breadth, opening with a brilliant, ricocheting octave upbeat bounced across the whole ensemble. But Haydn has no intention of sacrificing either the confiding intimacy of his mature quartet style (the lovely *Adagio* is set in a glowing A major) or the tight-knit integrity of his argument (the staccato opening of the *Menuetto* echoes the virtuosity of the first movement). And if the *Finale* begins at a lilting *Allegretto*, the action soon heats up – music to leave an audience breathless and wanting more.

Since 1990, the unprecedented worldwide explosion in string quartet playing has had its own effects on the quartet repertoire. The classical masters left gaps, and where there are gaps, there are opportunities - opportunities for shorter works, for encores, for compositions that behave in new and surprising ways. And opportunities to bring the quartet, with its extraordinary heritage and infinite sonic possibilities, into dialogue with musical cultures from the *terra incognita* BH (Before Haydn) as well as the sounds that have emerged (often far from the classical concert hall) AB (After Bartók).

The American composer **Bruce Adolphe** has enjoyed a long and fruitful relationship with the Brentano Quartet. *ContraDiction – a reaction to Bach's Art of the Fugue, Contrapunctus No. 2* dates from the Bach Perspectives Project of 2002-3, in which the Brentano asked 10 composers to create short, personal responses to Bach: possibly the composer whose absence from the quartet repertoire is felt most keenly. **Steven Mackey**'s *'Lude* (2002) responds, in turn, to Bach's *Contrapunctus XI*. At nearly double the length of *ContraDiction*, its title evokes its status both within and beyond the classical canon – as well as inviting (appropriately enough for a composer who found his voice as a rock guitarist in California) counter-cultural musings of an altogether more contemporary nature…

On 31st March 1824 **Schubert** wrote to his friend Leo Kupelweiser: 'I have tried my hand at several instrumental things, and have composed two quartets…and want to write another *quartetto*, really wanting in this manner to pave the way to a big symphony'. Those two quartets appeared in due course; the Quartet in D minor known as 'Death and the Maiden' and the A minor quartet D804 (the only one to be published in Schubert's lifetime). Two years passed before Schubert finally tackled the third of his planned quartets. The G major Quartet appears to have been written, incredibly, in just 10 days (20-30 June 1826), at Schubert's apartment in the Wieden, the future 4th District of Vienna. Its first movement may or may not have been the movement of a 'new quartet' that was played by Ignaz Schuppanzigh's quartet in Schubert's one and only public benefit concert, on 26 March 1828.

The G major Quartet is significantly bigger than the biggest symphony that Schubert ever wrote (the 'Great' C major symphony was composed between 1825 and 1828, with the Quartet falling roughly in the middle), and Schubert uses that scale to create a new and deeply expressive Romantic language for the string quartet medium. But the Quartet's basic forms are classical; and its melodic inspiration is…well, it's Schubert (did he ever write a lovelier melody than the one he gives to the cello in the *Scherzo*'s central *Trio*?) If signposts are wanted, though, Schubert provides them in abundance. The opening chord, with its sudden darkening from major to minor, is crucial: the whole quartet is coloured by this tension. And as the jagged outpourings of the first subject loom up through the *tremolando*, think Bruckner to get a sense of the piece's pulse. This is an epic journey, but also a deeply emotional one.

And think *Winterreise* in the *Andante*; this desolate walking-song, with its two violent central outbursts, tells its own story. *'My feet demanded no rest/it was too cold for standing still'*. Another minor/major shift falls like a blessing on the very final bar. The hushed, racing *Scherzo* is a vortex of controlled energy, with the irresistible swing familiar from the equivalent movement in the 'Great' C major symphony. And the model for the finale is clear enough: it's a huge, freewheeling country dance of the kind that closes Mozart's Divertimento K563 for string trio and (more to the point) Mozart's G minor string Quintet.

Or is it? Every note of this Olympian G-major jig is coloured by the minor-key shadow that falls over its very first bar. That knowledge gives this great movement an ominous undercurrent, even at its most exhilarating, and like the *Finale* of the Symphony in C, its very scale and relentlessness can start to feel terrifying. But terror, of course, is the essence of the Sublime. Schubert could have given us a more conventional *finale*, though after what has gone before, it's hard to see how. And so, (in the words of Donald Tovey) 'instead of a weak facility, we have the momentum of a planet in its orbit'.