

# WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 16 November 2022  
7.30pm

## Takács Quartet

Edward Dusinberre violin  
Harumi Rhodes violin  
Richard O'Neill viola  
András Fejér cello

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

String Quartet No. 1 in D Op. 25 (1941)

*I. Andante sostenuto - Allegro vivo •  
II. Allegretto con slancio • III. Andante calmo •  
IV. Molto vivace*

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

String Quartet No. 6 BB119 (1939)

*I. Mesto - Vivace • II. Mesto - Marcia •  
III. Mesto - Burletta • IV. Mesto*

Interval

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet No. 13 in G Op. 106 (1895)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Adagio ma non troppo •  
III. Molto vivace • IV. Finale. Andante sostenuto - Allegro  
con fuoco*



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Two days ago the Takács Quartet gave us a wonderfully compendious survey of Beethoven's string quartets in just three works, one from each of the famous 'three periods' of Beethoven's career. Tonight they give us a similar survey of what's happened to the string quartet since Beethoven.

**Bartók's** six quartets span his whole career in much the same way as Beethoven's quartets span his. Unlike Beethoven, Bartók was not a string player, and so for him the string quartet was a genre removed from professional performing necessity. This may have influenced the reflective, confessional quality of the six quartets, which form a real key to understanding the whole of Bartók's life and music, and indeed of 20th-century music as a whole. Bartók's compatriot, the composer Mátyás Seiber, wrote: 'I believe that for generations to come the string quartets of Bartók will be looked upon as the most outstanding and significant works of our time'.

But rather than plunge us straight into that milieu, the Takács Quartet begins its concert with a work by a composer not much associated with the string quartet, though he maintained his viola skills well enough to record with the Zorian Quartet – admittedly, providing the One Note in Purcell's *Fantasia upon One Note*. **Britten's** viola belonged to his teacher, Frank Bridge, the violist of the English String Quartet. Bridge gave it to Britten as he saw him off to America at the Southampton quayside in May 1939. It was the last time they were together – Bridge died in 1941. The works completed by Britten in America include *Les Illuminations*, the Violin Concerto, the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, the Michelangelo Sonnets and the First String Quartet. The quartet was commissioned by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, was premièred in Los Angeles in 1941 by the Coolidge Quartet, and won the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Medal of the Library of Congress for Services to Chamber Music. Britten was always fortunate in the supporters he attracted.

At this stage in his career, no-one knew whether this would be the first of a long Beethovenian or Bartókian series of quartets. In the event, the Second Quartet followed in 1945, while the Third was first performed after Britten's death in December 1976. (There was also a 1931 quartet, which was not performed until 1974.) Paul Hamburger, writing in 1952, thought Op. 25 'the work of a nature poet ... yet it owes little to the pastoral tradition of the modern English school. For, with all its atmosphere, this music is too near the great tradition of quartet writing to allow folkloristic influences.'

Bartók's Sixth Quartet is strongly related to his devotion to his mother, who gave him his first piano lesson on his fifth birthday, and who, even before Bartók's father's death when the boy was seven, was

responsible for all her child's mental and musical development. Bartók was a difficult and secretive man. His attitudes to Hungarian governments of various ideological colours are difficult to deduce. He often thought about emigrating, but held off until 1940, when, like Britten, he went to America. He was certainly a Hungarian patriot. His early tone-poem, *Kossuth*, about a Hungarian hero of 1848, alienated all the Austrians both in his audience and his orchestra, and he turned down an Imperial scholarship to study in Vienna in favour of paying his own way as a student in Budapest.

His consideration for his mother wobbled on a few occasions, most noticeably the time he told her that his student, Márta, would be staying to dinner, since she was now his wife. Oddly, Márta became the dedicatee of his opera, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*; Bartók then divorced her, and married another pupil. The Sixth Quartet was his last major work before his emigration, and he wrote most of it in total seclusion, away from his mother, who was not well. As he explained in a guilt-ridden letter: 'Last summer I went to Saanen to be totally undisturbed, and to write two works as quickly as possible. I took three-and-a-half weeks away from my mother. I can never make amends for this'. His mother died in December. Meanwhile, Bartók had changed his initial concept for the piece. The viola solo that opens the work is revisited before each movement, and expands so much as to furnish the whole of the fourth movement – supplanting in the process the jolly *moto perpetuo* that Bartók had begun to compose. The piece as a whole breathes an atmosphere of regret.

Dvořák was no stranger to great poverty. He started off as, quite literally, a butcher's boy – and though he escaped his father's trade, the first two decades of his professional life saw little improvement in his material circumstances, as he played viola in opera bands, played the organ at a church, and gave private music lessons. In 1878, his Moravian Duets were noticed by Brahms. Simrock published them, and went on to commission the *Slavonic Dances*. Sudden fame, at the age of 37! Dvořák went on to compose operas, symphonic poems, and many other works, including the obligatory nine symphonies, and no fewer than 14 string quartets. This penultimate of his quartets was composed in an eventful year in his life: 1895 saw his return to Europe from America, as well as the passing of his sister-in-law (and first love) in May. The quartet was composed in a month in the autumn of 1895, and premièred in Prague by the Bohemian Quartet ten months later.

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