

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 16 October 2023
7.30pm

Takács Quartet

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

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in C Op. 20 No. 2 (1772)

I. Moderato
II. Capriccio. Adagio - Cantabile
III. Menuetto. Allegretto - Trio
IV. Fuga a 4 soggetti. Allegro

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

Interval

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

String Quartet in F (1902-3)

I. Allegro moderato, très doux
II. Assez vif, très rythmé
III. Très lent
IV. Vif et agité



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Haydn wrote his six Op. 20 string quartets in 1772, having previously completed 22 works in the genre. This set as a whole marked a significant stage in the string quartet's development, moving away from the first violin having the starring role with the other instruments accompanying, to a more blended ensemble approach with other parts taking the starring role. Also, as Haydn had done with the larger symphonic form, he introduces the idea of thematic development to the string quartet in these works.

The first movement of the String Quartet in C Op. 20 No. 2 finds the initial theme assigned to the cello's upper register. Indeed, throughout the work the cello assumes a prominent role as opposed to contributing a much-needed bass line, which had been its traditional role. The bass line is now assigned to the viola as the cello continues to enjoy the limelight, joining the first violin in a duet throughout the development section. The second movement is just as innovative: all four instruments introduce the theme in unison, before the cello repeats it. Haydn then segments the theme and assigns it amongst the instruments, which then play variations upon their segments. The first violin augments these variations with further ornamentation. It is the first violin that leads the middle section of the movement against a backdrop of varied tonal colours. The third movement takes off almost from the slow movement's closing gestures, but is reluctant at first to find any impetus. The cello returns to prominence in the trio section. The quartet's fourth movement is a fugue that finds equilibrium amongst the parts, to be played *sotto voce* throughout.

Bartók devoted much time and energy to the collection and study of folk music from his native Hungary and surrounding countries. He would often draw upon this experience in his own compositions. The String Quartet No. 5 in B flat BB110, written in 1934, is a prime example of his using the vitality and expressiveness of folk music as the inspiration for an original composition in which no original or imitation folk melodies are heard. The quartet is written in five movements and is often referred to as having a bridge or arch-like structure. The first and last movements share thematic material and are fast in tempo. The second and fourth movements are slow and share a similar mood. At the quartet's heart is a *Scherzo*, which consists of a syncopated dance written in an asymmetrical Bulgarian rhythm.

The first movement begins with a series of lamenting notes before a second dissonant and angry theme emerges, which is characterised by large upward leaps on all instruments. The third theme, presented by the second violin, gently undulates before all three themes are developed and then presented again in reverse order and inverted in form. The second movement is a striking example of Bartók's so-called 'night music' in which he evokes

the nocturnal sounds of nature, including bird calls and murmured distant rustlings. The middle movement, marked *Alla bulgarese*, features a melody that flows easily over the asymmetrical rhythm in which the nine notes of each bar are divided into groups of four, two and three. The faster trio section carries great importance for the movement and the quartet as a whole, before a modified version of the *Scherzo* reappears. The fourth movement sees a return to the night music, but with a greater degree of coldness and aloofness in the writing. The fifth movement returns to the upbeat vitality that began the work, though this is interrupted towards the conclusion with a perplexing passage marked *con indifferenza*, before the peasant-like mood returns to win the day.

Ravel's only string quartet was written between late 1902 and April 1903 whilst he was still a student at the Paris Conservatoire in the composition class of Gabriel Fauré, the work's dedicatee. It contains several interests and influences that Ravel had acquired, most notably perhaps Debussy and his String Quartet in G minor, but there are also nods to Mozart, neoclassicism and the tonal effects of East Asia. Debussy offered Ravel support for his composition until an article in the Parisian press comparing the string quartets of the two composers caused them to fall out; Ravel is known to have commented sadly, 'It is better for us to be on frigid terms, if for illogical reasons.'

The first movement presents two initial and distinctive ideas, the first a rich melody written for the entire quartet and then a melody for the first violin accompanied rapidly by the second violin and viola. After reaching a climax, the second theme is presented by the first violin and viola, playing at a two octave interval. The constraints of sonata form hold sway for the rest of the movement, which demonstrates Ravel's mastery of form and tonal effects through writing of some precision. The second movement evokes the sound of a Javanese gamelan, with the first violin and cello playing in 3/4 time, whilst their colleagues play in 6/8 time. Eventually the cello transitions things to a slower middle section, before a short reprise of the opening material is presented. The third movement sounds almost improvised due to its constantly shifting tempi and episodic construction, but by skilfully utilising the quartet's possibilities Ravel achieves an imaginative range of tonal colours. The fourth movement is at once vigorous and unsettling. It begins with a snarl and long held note, twice repeated, before finding its full stride. The five beat time signature sits awkwardly, as lyrical thematic ideas appear alongside returning ideas from the first movement and the earlier snarling motif.

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