

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 17 April 2025
7.30pm

Chiaroscuro Quartet

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

Zeb Soanes narrator

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

The Seven Last Words of Our Saviour on the Cross (1787)

Introduzione
Sonata I Pater, dimitte illis, quia nesciunt, quid faciunt
Sonata II Hodie mecum eris in Paradiso
Sonata III Mulier, ecce filius tuus
Sonata IV Deus meus, Deus meus, utquid dereliquisti me?
Sonata V Sitio
Sonata VI Consummatum est
Sonata VII In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum
II Terremoto



UNDER 35S

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The Seven Last Words of Our Saviour on the Cross

(Musica instrumentale sopra le 7 ultime parole del nostro Redentore in Croce, Hob. III:50-56, Op. 51)

In 1786, Haydn received a commission from a canon at the grotto church of Santa Cueva in Cadiz. 'It was customary at that time' Haydn explained, in the preface to the first published edition of 1801:

... to perform an Oratorio in the principal church in Cadiz during Lent, the effect of which must have been heightened by the following preparations: the walls, windows and columns of the church were covered in black cloth and only a single lamp in the middle of the church illumined the holy darkness. At midday all the doors were closed; the music then began. After a suitable introduction, the Bishop ascended the pulpit, pronounced one of the Seven Words and delivered a meditation upon it.

When this was finished he descended from the pulpit and fell on his knees before the altar. The interval was filled by music. The Bishop entered and left the pulpit for the second and third and subsequent times and each time the orchestra came in at the conclusion of his address. My composition had to fit in with these arrangements. The task of writing seven *Adagios*, one after the other, each lasting about ten minutes, without wearying the listeners, was by no means easy, and I soon found that I could not restrict myself to the required timing.

This unusual work was scored for full orchestra, but within three days of completing the score, in January 1787, Haydn prepared an alternative version for the medium with which he was most intimately associated: the string quartet. Immediately, a large-scale sacred work designed for a very particular place and occasion became accessible to the smallest of churches, and even the homes of amateur music lovers. The quartet version was first played in public on St. Cecilia's day – 22nd November 1787 – at the *Schlosskirche* in Vienna. Earlier that year, Haydn had described the new work to his publisher Artaria in London:

A completely new work, consisting entirely of instrumental music, divided into 7 sonatas, preceded by an introduction, and followed by a *Terremoto* or earthquake. The sonatas are designed to be appropriate for the words which Christ our Saviour uttered on the Cross. Each sonata or movement, is expressed by purely instrumental music in such a way that even the most uninitiated listener will be moved to the very depths of their soul. The whole work lasts a little over one hour, but there is somewhat of a pause after each sonata so that one may consider in advance the text which follows.

But he continued to revisit the *Seven Last Words*, preparing another new version, this time choral, as late as 1796. In each of its forms, this unique artistic challenge meant a great deal to him – indeed, he told his biographer Griesinger that he considered it his most successful artistic achievement.

That was no small statement. Haydn's religious faith was at the centre of his existence. He would pray each day for musical ideas, began each new manuscript with the words *In Nomine Domini* and signed off every completed score with *Laus Deo*. Faced with criticism that his sacred music was too similar in style to his secular works – even too lively – his response (at least according to Stendhal), was frank: 'When I think of God, I think of a being infinitely great and infinitely good, and the idea of this latter attribute of the divine nature fills me with such confidence, such joy, that I should set even a *miserere* to cheerful music'.

If that doesn't exactly describe the music of *The Seven Last Words*, it certainly explains much that is unusual – and successful – about this singular masterpiece. As well as being a devout Catholic, Haydn was also a man of the Enlightenment; familiar with the new philosophical ideas of his time. The opportunity to write a sacred work free of any of the conventional restraints on religious music (and intended to inspire intimate, private religious meditation) accorded perfectly with Haydn's religious and artistic principles.

So *The Seven Last Words* is written in Haydn's natural musical language – the most advanced and communicative idiom of its day – and it still has the capacity to surprise. In Sonatas II and VI, long, lyrical melodies unfurl over flowing accompaniments (Haydn fitted the opening melodies of each Sonata to the words they illustrate), and a radiant minor-major key change marks a sudden shift in meaning ('...in Paradise' – Sonata II). Searching harmonies and interweaving instrumental lines suggest a process of transformation in Sonata IV; and the music disintegrates into chromatic, broken solo phrases – 'forsaken' – in Sonata V.

Elsewhere, there is high seriousness (the *Introduzione*), awed solemnity (the opening of Sonata VI), and serene and hopeful tenderness (Sonata VII – played muted, a relative rarity in Haydn's mature quartets). And of course there are also simple but effective touches of instrumental colour – like the dry *pizzicato* accompaniment (also unusual in a string quartet of this era) in Sonata V ('I thirst'). At the last, after the seventh Sonata the work concludes with *Il Terremoto* – a short, programmatic moment of release, depicting the earthquake that shook the universe at the moment of Christ's death. No words are cited, and Haydn's miniature tone-picture only hints at the cosmic implications of the events described in the Gospel of Matthew:

At that moment the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth quaked and the rocks were split.

Christ's earthly life is over. The narrative has shifted from Earth to Heaven, and Haydn chooses to leave us with our own reflections. For a composer as reverent (and as modest) as Haydn, some subjects were simply too terrible – and too glorious – to be apprehended by human art.

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