

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 17 February 2023  
7.30pm

## Danish String Quartet

Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen violin  
Frederik Øland Olsen violin  
Asbjørn Nørgaard viola  
Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in G minor Op. 20 No. 3 (1772)

*I. Allegro con spirito • II. Menuetto. Allegretto •  
III. Poco adagio • IV. Finale. Allegro molto*

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 7 in F sharp minor Op. 108 (1960)

*I. Allegretto • II. Lento • III. Allegro - Allegretto*

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

3 Divertimenti for string quartet (1936)

*March. Allegro maestoso • Waltz. Allegretto •  
Burlesque. Presto*

Interval

A selection of folk music



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In 1772, the when the Opus 20 string quartets were written, **Haydn** was 12 years into his three-decade tenure as Kapellmeister to Prince Nikolaus Esterházy. Composer and court musicians had to spend most of the working year at the Eszterháza palace in Hungary, miles from Vienna. Isolated from their families, they frequently suffered from depression, and although the Op. 20 quartets abound with the composer's customary wit and energy, frivolity is somewhat tempered. Two of them are in a minor key, and three end with 'serious' fugues.

Taken as a whole, the six quartets convey a wider range of emotions than Haydn had previously entrusted to four string voices. It is also apparent from the beginning of Op. 20 No. 3 that the composer is advancing his technique. The first theme proceeds in seven-bar phrases (symmetrical eight-bar units were the norm). Whereas most of the melodic interest had previously been entrusted to the two fiddles, here Haydn gives each instrument its share of the limelight. But the most unusual feature of this movement is the way the bustling energy gets us nowhere, with violin solos chasing their tails and sudden pauses followed by quietly muttered complaints from all four strings in unison.

The G minor tonality persists in the minuet. Once again the phrase structure is unusual (five-bar units), and once again progress is halted by worrying over detail. The slow movement's lyrical first theme turns out to be more short-lived than it initially promises, and its background figuration soon rises to the foreground. The *Finale* brings back the sense of frustrated urgency, though the effect is more comic than tragic, like the accompaniment to a silent-movie chase sequence. Pursued and pursuers eventually disappear over the horizon.

In May 1929 an engagement was announced between the young composer **Dmitry Shostakovich** and Nina Varzar, a student at the Leningrad School of Physics. Their marriage took place three years later, in May 1932. And it was in May, again, that the couple's two children were born: their daughter Galina, in 1936, and son Maxim in 1938. So it was appropriate that the first performance of Shostakovich's Seventh Quartet, dedicated to Nina, took place on 15 May 1960.

That is far from the whole story, though. Three years into the marriage the relationship had broken down, and Nina and Dmitry divorced in 1935 – only to swiftly remarry when Nina discovered she was pregnant. This time they stayed together, though it was an open marriage, supposedly by mutual consent, and life at home was not always harmonious. Then, in 1954, Nina died after emergency surgery for a previously undetected cancer. The Seventh Quartet was therefore a memorial tribute, composed in what would have been the year of her 50th birthday. In the six years since her death Shostakovich had twice proposed unsuccessfully to a former pupil, and had

married an activist in the Soviet Youth League – this unhappy liaison would end after five years. Perhaps he now felt the loss of Nina more acutely than ever.

That the Seventh is an exception within the canon of string quartets is borne out by the choice of key. F sharp minor breaks the system of falling thirds that otherwise determined the home key of each new work in the sequence. It is the key of Mahler's unfinished Tenth Symphony, whose score is annotated with anguished cries of remorse over the broken relationship with that composer's own wife, Alma; and Shostakovich had studied Mahler's works in depth.

The Seventh Quartet is as tight-knit and introspective as its predecessor is confident and outgoing. It comprises three movements played without a break, the last having a clear division into two parts. The first movement perhaps expresses Nina's quirky, clever, mercurial personality. The mood becomes more melancholy until it naturally gives way to the desolate slow movement. The third movement springs abruptly to life when the *Lento* still has more to say; regardless, a furious fugue is launched. Material that was playful in the first movement takes on new forms with bitter vehemence. Suddenly the fugue falls to pieces and a ghostly dancer takes the stage. Her sad waltz reclaims the first movement's motifs in their original shapes, but now they sound remote and elusive as the light fades.

In 1933 the 20-year-old **Benjamin Britten**, then a student at the Royal College of Music, started work on a projected five-movement work for string quartet, titled 'Go play, boy, play'. The individual movements were portraits of particular friends from his schooldays. Over the next few years the first movement, *Alla marcia*, was replaced; material from it would find a circuitous way into the song cycle *Les Illuminations*. Two other movements were dropped.

The work finally arrived on the platform of Wigmore Hall on 25 February 1936 as *3 Divertimenti*, with the old title still appended, and the *Burlesque* explicitly dedicated to Francis Barton, a fellow pupil of Britten's in prep school days. The hyper-sensitive Britten thought that the London audience 'sniggered' at the première, and the music remained unpublished until after his death.

Tonight's ensemble has produced two successful albums bringing together the quartet medium and the traditional music of Scandinavia: 'We want to see what happens when we let Nordic folk music flow through the wooden instruments of the string quartet,' is the mission statement. The Danish String Quartet has also delighted audiences with concert performances in this line, announcing the discoveries, as tonight, from the stage.

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