

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 17 March 2025  
7.30pm

## Takács Quartet

Edward Dusing violin

Harumi Rhodes violin

Richard O'Neill viola

András Fejér cello

Adrian Brendel cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) String Quartet No. 1 in F Op. 18 No. 1 (1798-1800)  
*I. Allegro con brio •  
II. Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato •  
III. Scherzo. Allegro molto • IV. Allegro*

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928) String Quartet No. 1 'The Kreutzer Sonata' (1923)  
*I. Adagio - Con moto • II. Con moto •  
III. Con moto - Vivo - Andante •  
IV. Con moto - Adagio - Maestoso*

## Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) String Quintet in C D956 (1828)  
*I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Adagio •  
III. Scherzo. Presto - Trio. Andante sostenuto •  
IV. Allegretto*



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Momentum and good timing often played coincident roles in shaping **Beethoven's** creative process. He was moved to compose his first string quartets in 1798 by the happy conjunction of a commission for six works from Prince Franz Joseph Lobkowitz and the enthusiasm left after the recent completion of his three String Trios Op. 9, which Beethoven described as 'the best of my works'. The six Op. 18 quartets confirmed the composer's place among the most exciting and radical young musicians in Vienna, one blessed with a strong personality and fast-evolving sense of how to express equally strong ideas in a coherent musical fashion.

It seems likely that Beethoven completed the String Quartet in D major, published as Op. 18 No. 3, before starting work on Op. 18 No. 1. The String Quartet in F major clearly gained from the experience carried forward from writing the D-major work; indeed, he composed two versions of Op. 18 No. 1, shelving its original 1799 conception in favour of a heavily revised version. Having sent the violinist Karl Amenda a copy of the original score, 'as a small memorial of our friendship', Beethoven wrote to him with a clear request: 'Be sure not to hand on to anybody your quartet, in which I have made some drastic alterations. For only now have I learnt to write quartets; and this you will notice, I fancy, when you receive them.'

Beethoven's education in quartet writing was enhanced by the business of revising his Op. 18 No. 1. The work's sketches reveal that he made nine attempts to fashion its opening motif, an effort that delivered a compact thematic idea heard throughout the first movement both as a unifying device and springboard for development. According to Amenda, the quartet's slow movement was inspired by the tomb scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. The Adagio, marked to be played 'with affection and strong feeling', captures the mood of despair surrounding the deaths of Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers, expressed in the first violin's singing lines and intensified by the dramatic contrasts of the movement's turbulent development section. Beethoven's radical streak surfaces in the subversive asymmetry of the phrase lengths and frequent modulations embedded in the Scherzo and the confrontational melodic leaps and dynamic extremes of the Trio. The finale, cast in sonata-rondo form, grows from an impish theme that recurs like a florid signature throughout the movement, offset by a second theme saturated with charm and contrasting episodes and a coda rich in counterpoint.

In response to a commission from the *Vossische Zeitung* for an article to mark the centenary of Beethoven's death in March 1927, **Leoš Janáček** wrote of his childhood battles with the composer's piano sonatas. Beethoven, he confessed, was not much to his liking. A tenuous connection links Janáček's First String Quartet, written at lightning speed in October 1923, to Beethoven's 'Kreutzer' Sonata, although the work's inspiration came from Leo Tolstoy's eponymous novella and its harrowing first-person depiction of raging jealousy. Tolstoy's tale relates the story of a married

woman who has an affair with a violinist with whom she is preparing a performance of Beethoven 'Kreutzer' Sonata, and of how she is murdered by her jealous husband. Janáček had already based a piano trio on the subject, which he later destroyed; a surviving sketch, however, shows that the work incorporated a quote from the opening movement of Beethoven's sonata, which he subsequently recycled in his First String Quartet. Yet, it was the novella's dramatic mood swings and portrayal of extreme violence that left the deepest mark on each of the four movements of Janáček's score. 'I had in mind a poor woman,' he observed in a letter to his muse Kamila Stösslová, 'tormented, beaten, battered to death, as the Russian author Tolstoy wrote in his work *The Kreutzer Sonata*.'

**Schubert** studied the slow movement of Beethoven's Op. 18 No. 1, especially its fiery development section, before writing the Adagio of his String Quintet in C major. The idea for the work's instrumentation, meanwhile, most likely came from Luigi Boccherini's substantial output of quintets for two violins, viola and two cellos, a combination pregnant with the potential for tonal warmth, timbral nuance and expressive contrasts; unlike Boccherini, however, Schubert treats the two cellos as equals, which either work together in harness or form independent partnerships with other members of the ensemble. The piece, offspring of an extraordinary creative eruption that also gave birth to the composer's three last piano sonatas and the songs published posthumously as his *Schwanengesang*, came into being in the early autumn of 1828 while Schubert was living with his brother in a suburb of Vienna.

Given that Schubert died within weeks of completing the String Quintet, it is unsurprising that the work's emotional register, shot through with abrupt fluctuations between profound serenity and disquieting anxiety, has been interpreted as a projection of the spiritual insights and existential dread that seized the composer as death drew near. Ernst Rinna, physician to the imperial court in Vienna, perhaps confirmed in August 1828 that Schubert's recurrent illness had reached its terminal stage; whatever Rinna's diagnosis, the String Quintet is infused with the spirit of a work written against death, to confront the terror of the grave with a transcendent sense of sublime wonder.

Schubert juxtaposes the all too familiar feeling of life's churning unsatisfactoriness, most clearly expressed in the slow movement's minor-mode central section, with that state of mind which William Wordsworth called a 'wise passiveness'. The latter is expressed by the two cellos in the opening movement's lyrical second theme, for instance, and rises again in the third movement's Trio, with its arresting change of mood and tempo. At the last, Schubert offers an unsettling union of *gemütlich* charm and heartfelt discontent, as if hoping that life's party will last forever while knowing that it will end, like the quintet itself, with a final exhalation.

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