

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 18 October 2024
7.30pm

Belcea Quartet

Corina Belcea violin
Suyeon Kang violin
Krzysztof Chorzelski viola
Antoine Lederlin cello

Tabea Zimmermann viola

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quintet in C minor K406 (1787)
*I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Menuetto in
canone • IV. Allegro*

Interval

String Quintet in C K515 (1787)
*I. Allegro • II. Menuetto. Allegretto •
III. Andante • IV. Allegro*



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Mozart first turned to the string quintet medium in the latter part of 1773, the year of his 17th birthday. The most celebrated examples of the genre at that time were probably the quintets of Luigi Boccherini (1743-1805). Boccherini augmented the standard string quartet (two fiddles, a viola and cello) by adding a second cello, the instrument he played himself; Mozart chose to make four into five by adding a second viola, which was the stringed instrument he preferred to play. After composing one string quintet, Mozart did not write another until 1787, when three were completed. A further two would appear in 1790 and 1791, the last two years of his short life.

The two we hear tonight are from the 1787 triptych, though the one in C minor is a fairly straightforward transcription of an earlier work, the Wind Serenade K388 from 1782. 'Straightforward', that is, in the sense that the melodies and harmonies remain virtually intact; transforming something written for eight wind instruments into a convincing piece for five strings requires knowledge and dexterity.

One of the reasons that Mozart undertook the task may have been commercial. His finances were not in a good state at that time, and he needed to move with his wife and young son into cheaper lodgings. His plan was to offer the quintets to private subscribers who would enjoy sole performance rights for a fixed period; a set of three might be a more attractive prospect than two. As it turned out there was insufficient interest, and he had to tout the works to publishers. But there were also purely artistic incentives to recasting the wind piece for strings. Wind serenades were traditionally for outdoor performance, not expected to have the gravitas of genuine chamber music. Yet K388 was a serious affair that deserved a more discerning audience.

For Mozart, C minor is usually a key denoting austerity and sternness, rather than pathos or tragedy. So it is in the opening movement, though there are protesting answers to the initial grim unisons, and the second subject brings a more smiling mood in the warm key of E flat. When that countersubject returns in the recapitulation, however, it has been subsumed in the darkness of the home key. The slow movement begins with a pastoral lilt; by the end, gentle murmurings that might be the soft words of lovers, the rustle of a warm breeze in a garden, or the play of light on water look forward to the sound world of *Così fan tutte* – though *Don Giovanni* was the opera Mozart was working on at the time.

The astringent minuet is the most 'learned' movement, in canon. The listener has little hope of working out where the first beat of the bar is until the very end of the first sentence. The deceptively innocent trio section is actually another canon in which each entry is answered by the same music played upside down. The finale is a theme and eight variations, leading us eventually to C major (after

revisiting E flat major along the way). In a couple of places the strings imitate hunting horns. Of course, in the original wind piece these passages were played by actual French horns, but 'horn harmonies' were already a standard effect in chamber music for strings. In fact, while the first movement occasionally portrays its wind-band origins, if we did not know of the existence of K.388, it is unlikely anyone would think that the remainder of K.406 had ever existed in other any form.

The subscription plan having failed, Mozart managed to sell the three String Quintets of 1787 to the Viennese publishing firm Artaria, who were enjoying a long and mutually beneficial relationship with Joseph Haydn, publishing most of his string quartets. They were not exactly eager to issue Mozart's new offering. The C major was published in 1789 and the G minor the following year, while the C minor Quintet had to wait until 1792, by which time the composer was dead. It is significant that he was still around to see the first two in print, since they reverse the more conventional order of the middle movements, placing the minuet before the slow movement. Presumably, therefore, this was his final intention, although study of the manuscript of K515 has led some performers to believe the *Andante* should precede the minuet.

The C major Quintet K515 is a majestic work that suggests a composer with the confident authority to take his melodies wherever they want to go, and with infinite time at his disposal. Phrases are unconstrained by regular numbers of bars, and the music wanders off to explore adjoining key centres and find its own way back only when it cares to. It is perhaps no coincidence that Schubert's equally expansive and discursive String Quintet is also in C major.

The first movement features one of the 18th Century's longest sonata-form structures, its exposition teeming with ideas. The quietly gliding minuet has a rustic tinge, and again features uneven phrase lengths and chromaticism. There are moments in the *Andante* when tonality seems to melt, and Mozart can, in harmonic terms, walk through walls – no wonder he was gaining a reputation as a 'difficult' composer. The first viola escapes from the instrument's traditional role in the heart of the harmony to duet with the first violin. Having established that anyone can have a share of the limelight, Mozart gives solo passages to all his players in the sonata-rondo finale. After some clever counterpoint for the connoisseurs, it rises to a climax of orchestral sonorities that will cheer high- and lowbrow temperaments alike.

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