

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 19 February 2024
1.00pm

Leonkoro Quartet

Jonathan Schwarz violin
Amelie Wallner violin
Mayu Konoe viola
Lukas Schwarz cello

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

String Quartet No. 1 'Kreutzer Sonata' (1923)

*I. Adagio - Con moto • II. Con moto • III. Con moto - Vivo
- Andante • IV. Con moto - Adagio - Più mosso*

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

String Quartet in A Op. 41 No. 3 (1842)

*I. Andante espressivo - Allegro molto moderato •
II. Assai agitato • III. Adagio molto • IV. Finale. Allegro
molto vivace*



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At the time of writing his String Quartet No. 1 in 1923, **Janáček**'s private life was in turmoil. In 1917, at the age of 63, the Moravian composer had met the 26-year-old Kamila Stösslová in the resort town of Luhačovice, and fell passionately in love with her, despite the fact that they were both married. By 1923, Janáček and his wife were divorced in all but name, and although Stösslová did not return Janáček's feelings, he sent her some 600 letters in the intervening years, until his death in 1928. It may have been a one-sided affection, but Janáček's devotion to Stösslová inspired many of his later compositions, including the 'Kreutzer Sonata' Quartet, as well as his best-known opera, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, which dates from the same year.

Published in 1890 and immediately censored by the Tsarist authorities, Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* tells a tragic tale of an unhappy marriage. It is largely narrated in the first person, from the perspective of a husband who has been acquitted of his wife's murder. He describes how he and his wife, a pianist, had already fallen out of love with one another when he became suspicious that she was having an affair with a violinist. When the husband witnesses his wife and the violinist playing Beethoven's tempestuous 'Kreutzer' Sonata together, he flies into a jealous rage and kills her. With its often paradoxical themes of abstinence, sexual jealousy and equal rights, as well as its scepticism about the institution of marriage, the work was deemed too controversial by the censors – although a print run was subsequently permitted in 1900, thanks to which Janáček owned a copy.

Writing to Stösslová about this quartet, Janáček said: 'I was imagining a poor woman, tormented and run down, just like the one the Russian writer Tolstoy describes in his *Kreutzer Sonata*'. Torment and distress run through this dramatic quartet, which plumbs the murky psychological depths of Tolstoy's novella. Janáček's trademark short 'motifs' (or melodic 'cells') recur throughout, adding a fitful, restless quality to the music.

The opening movement begins with an anguished, soaring cry from the violins and viola, punctuated by a skittish, unsettled theme in the cello. It is immediately followed by a more lyrical, songlike theme – which, it has been suggested, reflects the wife's desire for love in the Tolstoy novella – and continues to oscillate between the two. The second movement opens with a polka-like folk dance, but this becomes increasingly disjointed. We then head into more sinister territory with a sinuous cello melody that moves beneath an eerie violin line, played 'sul ponticello' (near the bridge of the instrument), lending a harsh, ghostly quality to the sound. The third movement begins with a poignant lament, but the atmosphere becomes frenzied as excerpts from Beethoven's Sonata are

increasingly distorted. The final movement sees the return of the opening cry, beginning in the cello part and rippling through the other instruments. Moments of relative calm are punctuated by plucked strings and tremolo outbursts, creating a consuming, disturbing portrait of desire, jealousy and, above all, passion.

In 1842, the 31-year-old **Robert Schumann** was a moderately successful music critic, who was best known for being married to the concert pianist and composer, Clara Schumann. At that time, his compositions were mainly small-scale works, such as songs for voice and piano and piano miniatures. But returning alone to their Leipzig home while Clara continued her performance tour across Europe, Robert Schumann became interested in writing for string quartet. He embarked on a self-directed course of study, immersing himself in the quartets of Haydn, Beethoven and Mozart. In a flurry of inspiration, he began to compose the trio of quartets that would become his opus 41, and the published score is dedicated to the Schumanns' friend Felix Mendelssohn, who was present at early play-throughs of the works. Writing to his publisher about the quartets, Robert was quietly confident: 'It is not for me to say anything more...; but you may rest assured that I have spared no pains to produce something really respectable - indeed, I sometimes think my best.'

The first movement of Op. 41 No. 3 opens with a slow introduction, characterised by a drooping, sighing figure that returns throughout, often returning in bittersweet iterations and transformed by shifting harmonies. A searching melody rises and falls in the cello part, accompanied by off-beat quavers in the higher instruments – creating a sense of rhythmic instability and breathlessness. The second movement retains both the yearning and restless qualities of the first, with a series of variations that motor through an array of tempi, finishing with a muscular showcase of Schumann's harmonic and contrapuntal expertise. The third movement opens with a heart-rending theme of aching beauty, a poignant, songlike figure that ascends through different harmonic landscapes, and always leaving a note of uncertainty. Then, over a sombre, march-like accompaniment, melodic fragments are passed between different voices, building to an impassioned declaration, before the introspective mood of the opening section returns. After such intensity, Schumann's final movement comes as a surprise. As if banishing away the sorrows of the past, a skipping, foot-stomping tune begins, darkened only by the most fleeting of shadows. The quartet finishes with a splendid coda that elevates the bouncing opening theme to a dazzling finale.

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