

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 19 January 2025
3.00pm

The ECMA Showcase has been supported by a gift from the estates of the late Thomas and Betty Elton in memory of Sigmund Elton

NOVO Quartet

Kaya Kato Møller violin
Nikolai Vasili Nedergaard violin
Daniel Sledzinski viola
Signe Ebstrup Bitsch cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 4 in C minor Op. 18 No. 4 (1798-1800)
I. Allegro ma non tanto • II. Scherzo. Andante scherzoso quasi allegretto • III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Allegro

String Quartet No. 9 in C Op. 59 No. 3 'Razumovsky' (1806)

I. Introduzione. Andante con moto – Allegro vivace • II. Andante con moto quasi allegretto • III. Menuetto. Grazioso • IV. Allegro molto



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With the publication of his six Opus 18 string quartets in 1801, **Beethoven** set himself up as the heir to Haydn and Mozart. A 31 year-old completing his first ten years in Vienna, Europe's capital of music, he had been looking to make his name on several fronts – as a virtuoso keyboard performer and improviser, and as a composer and recital partner catering for other prominent instrumentalists of the day. With the string quartets, however, he was seeking the admiration of true connoisseurs. He was even aiming above the heads of some critics, one of whom described the set as 'very difficult to perform and not attuned to popular taste'.

The C minor Quartet, though placed fourth in the published order, was the last of the set to be composed. It underwent comparatively little revision. This is partly because Beethoven had become thoroughly familiar with the quartet idiom, and partly because it made use of material from earlier notebooks. This method of assembling vital new music from existing and unfulfilled ideas was one the composer returned to in his final quartets, particularly Op. 131.

In this work, for the first time, Beethoven invests C minor with the drama and seriousness that would become associated with many of his mature works in that key, notably the Fifth Symphony. The first movement has a driven, urgent quality, sped along further by the second subject having been fashioned out of the first. The development section follows roughly the same pattern as the exposition, but excursions to different keys make its course seem far from straightforward.

The middle movements are highly unconventional: a fugal Andante/Allegretto scherzo with the character of a minuet; and a nervously darting minuet with the character of a scherzo. Very unusually the composer asks for the minuet reprise to be a little quicker than first time round. For the rondo finale Beethoven adopts the 'Hungarian' or 'Gypsy' style that Haydn often favoured before him, and with which Brahms would become deeply enamoured in a later era. There is a more placid counter-subject, a stirring quickening of the pulse just before the end, and a last-minute, throwaway turn to the major.

In the mid-18th Century, the string quartet was established as a serious genre by Haydn, thanks to the ready availability of two fiddlers, a viola player and a cellist in the court of an early patron. What began as suite-like divertimentos soon developed into four-movement works of genuine musical substance. With his Op. 20 set of six quartets, written in 1772, Haydn took a significant leap forward, demonstrating that the medium could sustain music of contrasting moods and contrapuntal complexity, and that the four string voices could converse as equals.

At the very beginning of the 19th Century, Beethoven published his six Opus 18 Quartets. They increased the range and strength of expression that the ensemble could deliver – and, as we have just noted, challenged audiences of the time. But he too made a further great advance with his next group of quartets, the three Opus 59 works commissioned by Russia's Ambassador to the Habsburg Empire, Count Andrei Kirillovich Razumovsky (1752–1836). Like Haydn, Razumovsky had a house quartet at his disposal, in this case an ensemble led by Ignaz Schuppanzigh (1776–1830), a good friend of Beethoven's who had given him lessons in string technique shortly after the composer arrived in Vienna. The Schuppanzigh Ensemble is credited with being the first professional string quartet to exist.

By the time the *Razumovsky Quartets* were completed, in 1806, Beethoven had already transformed symphonic music with his revolutionary *Eroica* Symphony. Primed to expect something of equivalent originality, the Viennese public found plenty in the new quartets that was provocative and confrontational. Though all three proved highly controversial, the third in the set was the one best received by listeners on first hearing.

The first movement opens with a rootless chord that initiates a lengthy introduction, finding a dark, labyrinthine way to the home key. Having been achieved with some difficulty, the moment of arrival in C major is joyous, though the Allegro has already begun before the key is fully established.

Although not marked at a particularly slow tempo, the haunted, reticent second movement provides a still centre for the work. Razumovsky had requested that a traditional Russian theme be included in each of the three quartets he had commissioned. In No. 3 Beethoven did not specify where, if anywhere, he had inserted one, though the character of this Andante suggests it is the most likely place. As if reluctant to disturb the mood, the graceful minuet that follows is withdrawn in character, tracing the outlines of melodies rather than making bold thematic statements.

The coda of the minuet is a shadowy passage recalling the mysterious introduction to the first movement. Indeed, it proves to be a transition to the finale, which begins in fugal style but emerges as a contrapuntally enriched version of sonata form. This Allegro molto revisits some of the harmonic tensions of the first movement, but the unflagging ebullience means an affirmative conclusion is never in doubt.

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