

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 19 June 2025
7.30pm

Ehnes Quartet

James Ehnes violin
Amy Schwartz Moretti violin
Che-Yen Chen viola
Edward Arron cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) String Quartet No. 6 in B flat Op. 18 No. 6 (1798-1800)
I. Allegro con brio • II. Adagio ma non troppo • III. Scherzo. Allegro • IV. La Malinconia. Adagio – Allegretto quasi Allegro

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928) String Quartet No. 2 'Intimate Letters' (1928)
I. Andante – Con moto • II. Adagio – Vivace • III. Moderato – Adagio • IV. Allegro – Andante

Interval

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) String Quartet in A minor Op. 51 No. 2 (?1865-73)
I. Allegro non troppo • II. Andante moderato • III. Quasi menuetto, moderato – Allegro vivace • IV. Allegro non assai



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The six quartets of Op. 18 were **Beethoven's** first works in the form that his teacher, Haydn, had so notably made his own. Composed between 1798 and 1800 to a commission from Prince Lobkowitz, they were published in Vienna in 1801. Although there are several differences between order of composition and order in the set, the work placed sixth was indeed the last to be composed: it is also the quartet that most clearly anticipates Beethoven's later music.

Its most obviously surprising movement is the finale, the only movement in the entire set with a descriptive subtitle. The epithet *La Malinconia* (Melancholy) initially seems applicable only to the slow introduction, which abounds in the adventurous modulations and sudden shifts of dynamic and texture that became hallmarks of mature Beethoven. A skittish *Allegretto quasi Allegro* follows, suggesting that the finale will follow the slow-fast pattern familiar from Haydn's first movements. But Beethoven doubles down on the surprise of appending a slow introduction to a finale by interrupting the *Allegretto* with a return of *Adagio* material. Two more such disturbances follow, increasingly brief, the last followed by a tempo change to *prestissimo*, providing an exhilarating ending and compounding the sense of a not always comfortable yoking together of musical extremes.

The preceding *Scherzo* must have seemed equally daring to Beethoven's first audiences. The *sforzandi* on weak beats are so frequent and insistent, and the patterns they establish so unpredictable, that the listener's sense of basic pulse is constantly undermined. The trio features a demanding first violin solo suggesting the influence of an accomplished player such as Ignaz Schuppanzigh, whom Beethoven encountered at Prince Lichnowsky's salon and who later founded the pioneering professional quartet that would premiere his later works.

The earlier two movements seem more conventional, an impression more apparent than real. The first's cheerfully uncomplicated opening makes way in the development for unexpected key changes and a disconcertingly long silence. The slow movement's seemingly innocuous beginning is similarly deceptive: much of what follows is in a minor key whose searching quality is enhanced by delicate instrumentation and *pianissimo* dynamics.

By contrast with Beethoven, **Janáček** did not begin a quartet until he was almost 70, but his two such works are among the 20th Century's most remarkable. They deploy the familiar line-up idiosyncratically, exploiting string instruments' ability not just to play lyrically but also to make coarse or disturbing sounds, for example by playing very close to the bridge. The musical syntax, too, is unique: each movement seems built up like a mosaic, juxtaposing short fragments, claustrophobically repeated, with impassioned melodies.

The sense of emotional torment in both works is inspired at least in part by Kamila Stösslova, a woman almost 40 years Janáček's junior whom he met in 1917 in the Moravian spa town of Luhačovice. Undeterred by

Kamila's refusal to leave her husband, Janáček professed his love for the rest of his life in more than 700 letters. Kamila was the model for at least two of his operatic heroines – Káťa in *Káťa Kabanová* and Emilia Marty in *The Makropulos Affair* – and Janáček's obsession also shaped his second string quartet, originally subtitled 'Milostné dopisy' ('Love letters'), later changed to 'Listy důvěrné' ('Intimate letters'). Janáček initially wanted to seal the work's association with 'love' by substituting a viola d'amore ('viola of love') for the usual viola, but reluctantly abandoned this plan as impractical.

He composed the work in a few weeks at the start of 1928, writing 'in fire', as he told Kamila. He confided that each of the movements represented stages in their relationship, albeit describing events more imagined than real. The first movement conveyed the impression she made when they first met; the second, he told her, would 'flare up in the Luhačovice heat'. The third movement embodied his fantasy that Kamila would bear his child: 'What fate in life would that little son have? ... It sounds just like you are, turning from tears to laughter.' The finale's emotional content is perhaps the most complex and ambivalent of all: before Janáček began it he told Kamila that it would express 'my fear about you', but once it was finished he wrote that it 'doesn't sound fearful about my nice little weasel but [sounds] with a great longing – and as if it were fulfilled'. 'Intimate Letters' was premiered by the Moravian Quartet in September 1928, a month after Janáček died.

Much has been written about how Beethoven's towering achievement as a symphonist deterred **Brahms** from completing his own First Symphony until his early 40s, but the same psychodynamics played out in the quartet genre: fearful that it could offer nothing new after the astonishing innovations of Beethoven's late works, Brahms discarded at least 20 early attempts at quartets before publishing Op. 51 in 1873, shortly after his 40th birthday. Its two works have never been among his most popular, and he only completed one further quartet thereafter.

Despite the tortuous history of Brahms's engagement with the genre and the mixed reception his quartets have received, Op. 51 No. 2 offers the sympathetic listener much to enjoy. The wistful first movement is pervaded by the motto F–A–E, signifying 'Frei Aber Einsam' ('free but lonely'), the personal slogan of the violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim, one of Brahms's closest friends for much of his life, though relations had recently cooled. The song-like slow movement and the nostalgically anachronistic minuet are followed by an energetic finale full of characteristically Brahmsian rhythmic devices such as combining melodies in one time signature with accompaniments seemingly in another. The discovery of such advanced rhythmic procedures in a work that elsewhere looks constantly backwards is just one measure of Brahms's paradoxical place in musical history.

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