

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 19 May 2023
7.30pm

Esmé Quartet

Wonhee Bae violin
Yuna Ha violin
Dimitri Murrath viola
Yeeun Heo cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in D Op. 71 No. 2 (1793)
*I. Adagio - Allegro • II. Adagio cantabile •
III. Menuetto. Allegro • IV. Finale. Allegretto*

Aleksandr Porfirievich Borodin
(1833-1887)

String Quartet No. 2 in D (1881)
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Scherzo. Allegro •
III. Notturmo. Andante • IV. Finale. Andante - Vivace*

Interval

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet in G Op. 106 (1895)
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Adagio ma non troppo •
III. Molto vivace • IV. Finale. Andante sostenuto -
Allegro con fuoco*

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Having spent years in service with the Esterházy family, **Haydn** discovered newfound freedoms during the 1790s. Following the death of Prince Nikolaus, his heir, Anton, reduced the previously lavish music provision, and therefore needed *Kapellmeister* Haydn less than before. Such changes could have been destabilising, but they allowed the composer to answer impresario Johann Peter Salomon's invitation to come to London. Seizing the opportunity, Haydn was therefore resident in the British capital from 1791 to 1792, and again in 1794-5.

Shortly after his first trip, he began work on six new string quartets (eventually divided into two three-part opuses). They were dedicated to Count Anton Georg Apponyi, who had purchased the initial performing rights, before Haydn found a publisher in 1795 (Op. 71) and 1796 (Op. 74). The D major Quartet, published second in the first group, was written in autumn 1793 and, rare among Haydn's chamber output, has a slow introduction to the first movement. It is a structural feature more germane to the symphonic repertoire, a parallel Haydn may well have been keen to foster in the hope of future public performances, given that Salomon's London concerts programmed quartets as much as symphonies. Motivically, the initial *Adagio* also prepares for the bustling *Allegro*, with the return of its characteristic octave drop, before the direction of travel and the structure's predominant major mood find themselves inverted.

The slow movement is a wonderful mix of rapt, hymn-like melodies and more discursive, flicking motifs. The arpeggiated gestures of the ensuing *Menuetto*, on the other hand, offer a cheeky backward glance to the octaves in the first movement, with the courtly dance here framing a strangely pensive trio. The brief, outwardly blithe *Finale* contains even more surprises, with further forays into minor keys and a brilliant hurtle towards its last cadence.

Borodin loved Haydn's quartets, a passion he nurtured during the early 1860s, while working as a chemist in Heidelberg. During the day, he was a laboratory assistant, but in the evening, he would play chamber music by the Viennese masters. It was also in the German university city that Borodin met Ekaterina, the woman who would become his wife. She had even broader musical tastes and introduced Borodin to the works of Schumann and Chopin, as well as performances of Wagner's operas in Mannheim in 1861. The following year, the pair returned to Russia, where they married in 1863.

Borodin's Second String Quartet in D major dates from 1881. More personal in tone than its manifestly Beethovenian predecessor, the work was said to have been written to mark 20 years since the composer had met his beloved. An amorous atmosphere certainly pervades the work, with Borodin present in the prominent cello part (the composer's own instrument), not least when it is heard in dialogue with the violin.

Following the opening *Allegro*, the *Scherzo* owes more to Mendelssohn, while its waltzing middle section has a Schubertian mien, with phrases of surging candour. The famous *Notturmo* provides another showcase for the cello - heard, over a rocking accompaniment, in touching dialogue with the violin - before the lively last movement displays Borodin's contrapuntal skills, albeit proudly wearing its heart on its sleeve.

1895 was a difficult year for **Dvořák**. Returning from the United States, where the funding for his professorship at the National Conservatory of Music had dried up, the composer suffered the loss of his sister-in-law, Josefina Kounicová, who had been his first love. There was consolation, however, in his retreat at Vysoká. 'I am refreshed there', the composer had said while in New York, 'I rest, I am happy. Oh, if only I were home again!' Clearly, the place lived up to its promise, with Dvořák returning enthusiastically to work once he was back on his wife's family's estate, some 30 miles south-west of Prague.

Working simultaneously on his String Quartet in A flat Op. 105, which he had begun in the States, and a parallel work in G major, Dvořák was to finish the latter first. Op. 106 is a smiling but reflective creation; for despite its feelings of melancholy, no doubt prompted by Josefina's death, the Quartet points to the composer's sense of contentment back in Bohemia and his renewed interest in the Czech National Revival.

The work's poised opening, full of Vysoká birdsong, pits the sunny tonic against more shadowy harmonies, the first subject sounding ebullient but restless. Its counterpart then strikes a more autumnal mood, echoing the late music of Dvořák's friend Brahms (which was written at the same time). But if the exposition only hints at tensions, they are then fully released in the development section, where flashes of major-key music sound as remembrances of things past. In the wake of these turbulent passages, the recapitulation cannot quite reclaim the serenity of the opening.

Evoking the *Largo* from the 'New World' Symphony of 1893, the second movement suggests another haven, though it is one that will, once more, be troubled by the anxieties of the opening movement. The B minor scherzo begins rather dogmatically, if detached, in response. After embracing the more hurtling energies of Dvořák's most popular dances, the jig's equal phrases begin to break down, before petering out entirely. The ensuing trio is cast in the contemporaneous Quartet's home key of A flat major. Although sweet, even seraphic, its melody-in-dialogue never quite settles, thanks to a mix of duplet, triplet and quadruplet rhythms. Even the *Finale*, introduced by an otherworldly *Andante*, will allay what has gone before. There is clearly still much to be said, in other forms and by other figures. For surely Janáček's later, richly discursive quartets are prefigured in the chamber music of his hero.

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