

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 1 June 2024  
1.00pm

## Voices of Today: Francesco Antonioni

### Castalian String Quartet

Sini Simonen violin  
Daniel Roberts violin  
Natalie Loughran viola  
Steffan Morris cello

### Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 11 in F minor Op. 95 'Serioso' (1810)  
*I. Allegro con brio • II. Allegretto ma non troppo •  
III. Allegro assai vivace ma serioso – Più allegro •  
IV. Larghetto espressivo – Allegretto agitato*

### Francesco Antonioni (b.1971)

String Quartet No. 2 'Surfarara' (2024) *world première*  
Commissioned by Wigmore Hall (with the generous support of the  
Marchus Trust and the Wigmore Hall Endowment Fund)  
*I. Adagio tranquillo. Un poco agitato. • II. Furioso •  
III. Introduzione. Adagio sottovoce • IV. Surfarara.  
Allegro non troppo*

### Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

String Quartet No. 3 BB93 (1927)  
*I. Prima parte: Moderato • II. Seconda parte: Allegro •  
III. Recapitulazione della prima parte: Moderato •  
IV. Coda: Allegro molto*



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Folk influences have long permeated classical music. In Austro-German culture, where the string quartet flourished, Johann Gottfried Herder's collection of European folk poetry, *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern and Volkslieder*, first published in 1778, profoundly influenced generations of poets, writers and composers. The fascination and curiosity towards folk literature and music later broadened to encompass remote and exotic regions. Such an intricate mosaic has inspired the likes of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Dvořák, Liszt and even Sibelius. But the game-changer was **Béla Bartók**. Not only do melody, harmony and rhythm frequently draw from peasant songs of eastern Europe, but the playing style and technique change accordingly, to the point that Bartók's music can sound popular even when he does not explicitly reference folk sources. At the same time, his sophisticated musicianship imbues folk material with unprecedented depth and profoundness, giving it context and articulation that elevates it beyond mere imitation or appropriation.

The second movement of Bartók's String Quartet No. 3 showcases a dynamic interplay of contrasting gestures: sustained trills, pizzicato chords and abrupt dynamic fluctuations vie for attention while twirling around melodies derived from Hungarian peasant songs and rhythms influenced by Bulgarian dances. However, the quartet's opening four bars introduce all twelve tones combined, creating a sense of unpredictability that sets the tone for the whole piece. In his previous works, Bartók skillfully applied to folksongs the motivic development technique he had learned from the classical style, but in his third quartet, he raises the bet. Here, he experiments with juxtaposing and integrating divergent streams of sound, seamlessly transitioning between musical styles, from 12-tone chromaticism to modal diatonicism, from expressionist outbursts to meditative melodies, and from lively ostinatos to subdued sonorities.

Bartók's musical forms can also be considered explorations of styles that coexist in a polyphony of similarities and differences, and they have always inspired me to embrace freedom and diversity in my own music. But whereas Transylvanian villages were Bartók's goldmine, the core of my second string quartet, which Wigmore Hall commissioned within the 'lockdown commissions' scheme, was a sulphur mine in Sicily. For nearly a century, sulphur mines witnessed tragedies that still reclaim justice. In 1881, near Caltanissetta, a firedamp explosion took the lives of 65 people, including 19 'carusi', boys aged 6 to 14. Two years later, in a gallery nearby, 36 workers died of suffocation. It was in this fraught context that, in 1953, ethnomusicologists Alan Lomax and Diego Carpitella recorded an intense and heartbreaking song, titled 'Surfarara', from the wrought voice of a singer in a small Sicilian village, where another 23 miners were soon to die. 'I forget; I forgot; I've forgotten; I've forgotten my very own life', says the singer in a raw, piercing voice, without any hint of whining. It is a song of despair and solitude. The

miner has lost everything dear: family, friends, even the saints, and the recollection of his lover, the sole memory left, adds to his grief. And yet, he stands still and sings out loud, alongside a Jew's harp. That song of unfading sorrow and relentless courage resounded deeply throughout the pandemic and beyond, providing an enduring wellspring of inspiration. The Solfara song, unlike for Bartók, served not as the foundation of the compositional structure but rather as a backdrop for a dialogue infused with complicity with the vibrant, raucous voice of the singer – the bearer of the message. Every element of the composition – themes, timbres and rhythms – arises as a response to the singer's voice, its texture, its body, and the story he conveys. The song weaves itself into the fabric of the quartet, emerging fleetingly in the first movement and more extensively in the last one, and appears in sudden epiphanies, even if fairly clear, amidst a tapestry of heterogeneous materials. But it is the reverberation of that ancient song of sorrow and the voice that articulated it that give meaning and purpose to the abiding disquiet weaving throughout the piece. From the first notes, which reflect the way out of the cavern with open strings and transparent harmonics, to the backward descent down the shaft through micro-intervals, combination tones, white noise and *sul ponticello* sounds, every aspect of the composition reflects the organic, vital pulse of the popular music that inspired it. Through a kaleidoscope of musical gestures – from slow *glissandi* to repeated aggressive gestures – the quartet tries to bring back to life the unwavering song of sorrow with the timeless echoes of human resilience.

Bartók's third quartet and **Beethoven's** eleventh share striking conciseness and directness in expression. In Beethoven's 'Serioso' quartet, he boldly challenges stylistic norms by deftly navigating through contrasting moods and expressions with a radical questioning spirit that opens the way to his later works. The moniker 'Serioso' stems from the third movement, typically a playful scherzo, where, as his own remark tells us, Beethoven departs from frivolity and humour. While elements of animation and irony are present, they serve to suggest a more severe, even dramatic, expression – indeed, a scherzo, moulded to display unfamiliar feelings. The finale, likewise, starts off with an intimate, cantabile *Larghetto* before unexpectedly transitioning into an unresting and unsettling movement with sudden silences that evoke a sense of tragic foreboding that points in Schubert's direction.

Adding a wink of whimsy, it's worth noting that in current Italian, 'serioso' indeed carries connotations of seriousness, but in an ostentatiously pompous manner, and, referring to the title that Bartók gave to the third part of his quartet, the term 'ricapitulazione' with a 'u' instead of an 'o' may well make it sound Bulgarian, but it's just wrong.

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