

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 21 January 2023
7.30pm

Belcea Quartet

Corina Belcea violin
Ayako Tanaka violin
Krzysztof Chorzelski viola
Antoine Lederlin cello

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quartet in E flat D87 (1813)
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Scherzo. Prestissimo •
III. Adagio • IV. Allegro*

Guillaume Connesson (b.1970)

String Quartet No. 2 'Les instants retrouvés' (2022) *UK première*
*I. Molto lento e rubato • II. Presto leggiero •
III. Funèbre. Molto rubato • IV. Vivace*

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 7 in F Op. 59 No. 1 'Razumovsky' (1806)
*I. Allegro • II. Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando •
III. Adagio molto e mesto • IV. Thème russe. Allegro*

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Schubert was 16, living at home and studying at a teacher-training establishment when, in November 1813, he wrote the quartet with which this evening's concert begins.

The solid start opens up in stages to the point where the violins can sing a walking tune; there is then a mini-development before the second subject, which of course is even more tuneful. The development proper is short, the recapitulation full.

Next comes the *Scherzo*, playful, with a drone-based trio that provides a telling excursion into the relative minor. The slow movement, in regular ABA form, offers inwardness as a very effective contrast when tonal variety is excluded. Back in sonata form, the finale is full of dash and charm, and again does not need much of a development section.

Following performances in Vevey, Cologne and Vienna within the last eight days, the Belceas bring home the new work written for and dedicated to them by **Guillaume Connesson**, who has provided this note:

'I have always considered the string quartet as a composer's most intimate and autobiographical statement. I wanted the music of my Second String Quartet to give the impression of browsing through a personal diary, retracing moments of my life, fragrances, lights, music, voices and people I like.

'The first movement evokes long-gone summers. Clear diatonic harmonies and delicate micro-intervals, together with snippets of song (remembered or reinvented) and seaside colours characterise the poetic and musical texture of this movement.

'The second movement is a rather virtuosic *Presto leggiero* conjuring up (among other things) reminiscences of Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette* and Puccini's *Tosca* - in other words, memories of my first musical passions. But above all it evokes the memory of my very first composition, *Nautilus*, written when I was 14. The main theme of the earlier piece, now moving in contrary motion, becomes the movement's melodic material.

'The third movement is a lament, a sombre, chromatic adagio haunted by shadows and ghosts. In the middle section, the initial chordal theme gets more animated before relapsing into despondency.

'The fourth and last movement, with its juxtaposition of frenzied rhythms and post-Romantic impulses, is an attempt at drawing a musical self-portrait. In the middle of the movement, the reoccurrence of micro-intervals from the first movement induces an ecstatic moment, before the whirlwind of funk rhythms and lyrical impulses sweep up the whole thing.

'The following quotation accompanies my Second Quartet: "The memory of a certain image is but regret for a certain moment." (Marcel Proust).'

Beethoven, having put the finishing touches to his Op. 18 quartets in October 1800, began thinking about a new set only four years later. A lot, though, had changed in the interim - including the Second Symphony, Third Piano Concerto and 'Waldstein' Sonata. The quartet, too, was

shifting as a genre. In 1804-5 Ignaz Schuppanzigh led a series of quartet concerts in Vienna given not as princely entertainment but for a paying public, the programmes including selections from Beethoven's Op. 18. Perhaps the urge to write new quartets came from the potential of this wider forum. Still, however, the old system of aristocratic patronage survived, and when Beethoven got round to writing his next quartets - in 1806, after further revolutionary works, including the 'Eroica' Symphony and *Fidelio* - he dedicated them to Count Andrey Razumovsky.

Razumovsky was Russian ambassador to the Habsburg court and a man of great wealth; he was also related by marriage to two Viennese princes whose attachment to Beethoven he shared: Franz Joseph Maximilian von Lobkowitz, the dedicatee of Beethoven's Op. 18, and Karl Alois Lichnowsky. We do not know if Razumovsky specifically commissioned the three quartets that bear his name, but certainly they were written with him in mind, each of the first two including a movement based on what the composer marked as a 'thème russe'. No. 1, the earliest, was begun in May 1806 and finished in a few weeks, as Beethoven offered it to a publisher in early July.

Whether impelled by the new public nature of the quartet or by his own growing range, or both, Beethoven created works of conspicuously greater length, this first 'Razumovsky' playing for close on 40 minutes. Of course, the character of the material is relevant to the expansion. Unlike the other two F major quartets, this one has an opening sonata movement made not of motifs but of full-grown melodies - though, as so often in Beethoven, the elements within the melodies are of crucial importance. In this case those elements include a four-note scale-wise rise followed by a fall. Another significant feature of the beginning is the pulsation with which the second violin and viola accompany the cello's melody. A settled horizon at this point, the pulsing comes forward forcefully at later junctures. Restoring the cello melody and its horizon, the music makes a feint at an exposition repeat, but goes off instead into a lengthy development, which, however, generally keeps the basic melodies in flow.

Pulsation is to the fore again in the second movement, which opens with a purely rhythmic theme, reiterating a bass B flat, again on the cello. This subdominant duly becomes the movement's key, which is highly unusual for a scherzo. But then, this is a highly unusual scherzo, one with the developing energy of sonata form in its system.

The slow movement, in F minor, is again all melody, and lengthy, arriving finally at a cadenza for the first violin that leads into the finale. Here once more the cello starts (it was Razumovsky's instrument), with its Russian theme that Beethoven found in a published collection and cheerfully made into the first subject of an exuberant sonata-form finale.

Razumovsky, Schuppanzigh and the Viennese public were evidently delighted by Beethoven's new quartets, to go by a report published in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in May 1807, describing them as difficult but 'gediegen': solid, elemental. Indeed.

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