

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 21 March 2023  
7.30pm

## Chiaroscuro Quartet

Alina Ibragimova violin  
Pablo Hernán Benedí violin  
Emilie Hörnlund viola  
Claire Thirion cello

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Quartettsatz in C minor D703 (1820)

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in B flat Op. 33 No. 4 (1781)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Scherzo. Allegretto •  
III. Largo • IV. Finale. Presto*

Interval

Franz Schubert

String Quartet in G D887 (1826)

*I. Allegro molto moderato • II. Andante un poco moto •  
III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace - Trio. Allegretto •  
IV. Allegro assai*



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During his teens **Schubert** wrote fluently in every genre he touched. Yet while he never lost his inspired facility in song, between 1818 and 1822 he began and abandoned far more instrumental works than he completed. Outgrowing the debonair charm of his youthful efforts, Schubert seems to have experienced something of a creative crisis as he strove to reconcile the mighty example of Beethoven's middle-period works with his own subjective, Romantic vision.

Greatest of these instrumental torsos are the 'Unfinished' Symphony, and the *Quartettsatz* ('Quartet movement') in C minor of December 1820. We can only speculate why Schubert downed tools after completing a magnificent *Allegro assai* and some 40 bars of an *Andante*. Perhaps he felt that, as with the 'Unfinished' two years later, he had set the bar so high that he could not for the moment find a worthy continuation. Or perhaps he simply became sidetracked by other projects that offered more immediate prospects of performance.

The whispering tremolos that open the *Quartettsatz* may have been distantly influenced by a passage in the scherzo of Beethoven's 'Harp' Quartet, Op. 74. But the voice is uniquely Schubert's, not least in the way the music quickly builds to a volcanic, quasi-orchestral climax and then dissolves in lyrical pathos, with a variant of the tremolo theme. The whole, epic, movement oscillates between extremes of storm-swept anguish and, in the soaring second theme, aching tenderness, unified by fragmentary recurrences of the opening. In it we seem to meet for the first time the isolated, confessional figure of so many later Schubert masterpieces.

**Haydn** famously proclaimed to potential subscribers that his Op. 33 quartets of 1781 were written 'in a completely new and special way, for I haven't composed any for ten years'. It's easy to dismiss Haydn's 'new and special way' as sales talk. But there *are* new features in Op. 33, as one would expect given the decade that had elapsed since the epoch-making Op. 20 set of 1772. Compared with Op. 20, Op. 33 is more popular in tone, less self-consciously 'learned', with a livelier sense of rhythm that Haydn had honed in his comic operas of the 1770s. Ideas grow inevitably out of each other, with the instruments moving fluidly between background and foreground, theme and accompaniment. The Op. 33 quartets perfectly illustrate Goethe's famous description of the string quartet as 'a conversation between four intelligent people'.

Beginning as if in the middle of a phrase, the puckish first movement of No. 4 is full of Haydnesque wit and élan, not least when the moment of recapitulation takes the listener completely unawares. Placed second, the *Scherzo* – a minuet in all but name – is the most courtly of the dance movements in Op. 33. Its enigmatic B flat minor trio hints at the melody of the main section in shadowy outline.

The jewel of the quartet is the rapt *Largo*, with its soaring violin cantilena and gorgeous remote modulations. More than any other slow movement in Op. 33, this music foreshadows the profound meditations in Haydn's Op. 76 quartets. Sentiment is gleefully banished in the *Finale*, a whirlwind rondo that varies its catchy *contredanse* theme on each return. In the second episode Haydn mines his favourite Hungarian 'gypsy' vein, before the movement disintegrates into slapstick. After a distended, spidery version of the theme and a failed attempt to normalise it, Haydn cuts his losses with an absurd simplification of the tune, played *pizzicato*. Back in the 1760s, po-faced German critics had taken Haydn to task for 'debasing the art with comic fooling'. Two decades later he was still at it.

The year 1826 has a claim to being the greatest ever for string quartets. It saw not only Beethoven's final two string quartets, Opp. 131 and 135, but also what was destined to be Schubert's last quartet, composed in just 11 days in June. Vast in scale and emotional reach, this G major Quartet is Schubert's most ambitious work in the genre. Although it never sounds less than utterly Schubertian, there is something Beethovenian in the way so much of the huge first movement grows from the energy of its initial motifs: a blunt opposition of G major and G minor, and a laconic, four-note motif in dotted rhythm. At the opening of the recapitulation the major-minor juxtaposition is reversed, the rhythm is smoothed, and the former flaring energy yields to a mysterious tranquillity. Meanwhile the development has climaxed in a passage of rhythmic counterpoint as ferocious as anything in Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*.

The *Andante's* main theme, in the cello's plangent tenor register, has the melancholy trudge of many songs in *Winterreise*. Schubert sets this melody against frenzied, quasi-orchestral episodes that strain the quartet medium with their seething scales, tremolos and steeping dynamic contrasts. There is even a suggestion of bitonality here when a jerky two-note figure is stubbornly repeated by first violin and viola against alien, contradictory harmonies.

The darting B minor *Scherzo*, with its thistledown imitative textures, is a more edgy relative of Mendelssohn's 'fairy' movements. In extreme contrast, the easy-paced trio is an etherealised *Ländler*, beginning *pianissimo* as a cello solo, then flowering into a cello-violin duet.

As in Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' Quartet, the finale is an obsessive tarantella. Yet with its weird, lightning shifts between major and minor – like a demonic parody of those in the first movement – it is somehow even more disturbing. In it Schubert uses the rhythms and patterns of Italian comic opera (shades at one point of the 'Largo al factotum' from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*) to strange, almost nightmarish ends.

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