

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 22 January 2024  
1.00pm

## Brentano String Quartet

Mark Steinberg violin  
Serena Canin violin  
Misha Amory viola  
Nina Maria Lee cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in C Op. 33 No. 3 'The Bird' (1781)  
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Scherzo. Allegretto •  
III. Adagio ma non troppo • IV. Rondo. Presto*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet No. 20 in D K499 'Hoffmeister' (1786)  
*I. Allegretto • II. Menuetto. Allegretto •  
III. Adagio • IV. Molto allegro*



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**Haydn** always had a good head for business, and when he introduced his Op. 33 to the world, he knew exactly what he was doing.

I am issuing, by subscription, for the price of 6 ducats, a work consisting of 6 Quartets for 2 violins, viola and violoncello *concertante*, correctly copied and WRITTEN IN AN ENTIRELY NEW AND SPECIAL WAY (FOR I HAVE NOT COMPOSED ANY FOR TEN YEARS).

This was the letter that Haydn's regular patrons and subscribers received early in 1782 – standard fare for an 18th-century chamber music composer. What's special about this one is the claim that Haydn puts in capitals. It's true that he'd written no string quartets since Op. 20 of 1772 – but were these new quartets really written in an 'Entirely New and Special Way'?

Well, to take just one example, consider the scherzando ('joking') second movement of Op. 33 No. 3. The Op. 33 quartets are generally reckoned to be a decisive moment in the evolution of the string quartet and Haydn's readiness to joke was the key to that transformation. With the admission of humour – that great leveller – true musical conversation becomes possible. 'This new conception of musical art', writes Charles Rosen, 'changed all that followed it'.

And from its earliest days 'The Bird' seems to have been a special favourite. A long-established nickname is always significant: birdsong was a popular musical motif in the 18th Century, when caged linnets or skylarks were popular pets (Mozart's pet starling, famously, could whistle a theme from his piano concerto K453). The chirruping opening theme of Op. 33 No. 3 - and the avian duet of the *Scherzo's* central section – were designed to charm listeners, as well as players. Haydn looked outward even as he looked inward; a gimmick can still form part of a sublime discourse.

So characterful is the opening subject that you barely notice its originality – the weightless, bass-free texture and the unprecedented first bar of (in Hans Keller's words) 'accompaniment to nothing'. The *Scherzo* is as muted and hushed ('sotto voce', with all four instruments playing on their lowest strings) as its twittering central section is brilliant. The dignified warmth of the *Adagio's* opening phrases gives way to an unexpected playfulness as well as delicacy, and the *Rondo* finale is all the more brilliant for being both so quiet and so crisp. But Haydn's fantasy never allows its wings to be clipped. There are some delightful surprises along the way – and the best might just be the last...

Another composer follows – and another letter:

My dearest Hoffmeister!

I turn to you in my hour of need, begging you to help me out with some money, which I need urgently at this moment – Furthermore I am asking you to give our best efforts to the matter we talked about. Forgive me for bothering you so often, but since you know me, and therefore

also know that I am very interested in the welfare of your business, I know you won't take this amiss, but will want to help me, just as I want to be helpful to you.

Mzt.

Franz Anton Hoffmeister was a Viennese music publisher and small-time composer; 'Mzt.' – well, it's hardly necessary to say more. **Mozart** regularly did business with Hoffmeister; he'd composed variations on Hoffmeister's song *An die Natur*, and in 1786 Hoffmeister published this string quartet in D K499; whether in settlement of a debt or genuine hope of profit, we simply don't know.

The origins of this quartet are a puzzle. There's no record of any commission, and 18th-century composers traditionally sold string quartets by the half-dozen (like Haydn's Op. 33). But this one stands alone. Of course, it's possible that we attach too much significance to money. It's often said that Mozart and his contemporaries composed to pay the bills, rather than to serve the Muse. Yet Mozart himself worked constantly to develop his skills, with no thought of profit; his six 'Haydn' quartets (1785) had taken him three years of what he described as 'long and arduous labour', as he studied and assimilated the entirely new musical style defined by Haydn's Op. 33.

K499 takes that process a step further: it's arguably the richest, most ambitious and most consistently inspired string quartet he ever wrote. (His three final quartets of 1790 take the form in a completely different direction). The deceptively foursquare theme that begins the first *Allegretto* is just a starting point. Having mastered Haydn's 'conversational' style of quartet writing, Mozart gets the four-way musical discussion started without delay. Themes are exchanged and developed almost as soon as they're stated, and by the time the development proper gets under way, even basic accompaniment motifs have assumed a powerful role in the debate.

Mozart never wrote a warmer or more sonorous *Menuetto*, and its tense minor-key trio matches it for sincerity. The lyrical beauty of the *Adagio*, meanwhile, is such that you can easily miss Mozart's blossoming, intensely-worked counterpoint: inspiration conceals art to glorious effect, and the ending is serene. And then Mozart out-Haydn Haydn in an exuberant and masterful sonata-rondo finale. Craftsmanship is worn lightly, affectionately, and with a generous lacing of wit.

It's a terrific intellectual and (for the players) physical work-out, and a magnificent farewell to one particular phase in Mozart's creative development. Mozart's next step in this direction would be into a larger form: two string quintets K515 and K516 that rank amongst the supreme achievements in all chamber music. And as for Hoffmeister, this superb quartet has carried his name down the centuries. Whatever Mozart might once have owed him, it's fair to say that it's been handsomely repaid.

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