

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 23 September 2022  
7.30pm

## Danish String Quartet

Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen violin  
Frederik Øland Olsen violin  
Asbjørn Nørgaard viola  
Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin cello

Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

Chacony in G minor ZT30 (c.1678) *arranged by Benjamin Britten*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet in E flat K428 (1783)  
*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Andante con moto • III. Menuetto. Allegro - Trio • IV. Allegro vivace*

Interval

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

String Quartet No. 2 in C Op. 36 (1945)  
*I. Allegro calmo, senza rigore • II. Vivace • III. Chacony. Sostenuto*

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In November 1945, Wigmore Hall presented two concerts to mark the 250th anniversary of **Henry Purcell**'s death. On the first programme was the *Chacony in G minor* ZT30. Purcell had included it in an autograph manuscript volume that he began compiling in 1678, probably his own selection of the best work he had written before his 21st birthday approached on 10 September 1680. Among the vocal and instrumental pieces carefully copied out were his viol fantasies, to which the *Chacony* was a close cousin. It is scored for four solo strings, and there is no indication that a keyboard continuo was required.

Included in the same concert was the Second String Quartet of **Benjamin Britten**, an enthusiastic champion of Purcell's music. A couple of years after the 1945 Wigmore event, Britten arranged Purcell's *Chacony* for string orchestra, revising the score in 1963. A chacony, chaconne or passacaglia is a movement built on multiple repetitions of a bass line, though in this case the repeated phrase sometimes moves to voices other than the cello or bass viol. Throughout the changes of mood this figure's constant presence anchors the work in a grave formality.

In September 1785, **Mozart** published a set of six string quartets dedicated to 'my dear friend Haydn'. He had composed them over a period of three years, taking immense care over each one, as befitted an offering to the man who had invented the genre.

The early 1780s were significant years in Mozart's life. In 1781, emboldened by the success of his opera *Idomeneo*, he set off for Vienna, leaving behind his native Salzburg, his employment as a virtual servant of the local archbishop, and his parents. His father, Leopold, considered this a rash move, and Wolfgang's marriage to Constanze Weber in August 1782 further angered Papa. In 1783, the year in which the E flat String Quartet K428 was written, Wolfgang and Constanze paid a summer visit to Salzburg in a not-entirely-successful bid to repair the family rift. They had already made a conciliatory gesture by naming their first-born Raimund Leopold; the little boy was left in the care of a nurse when they set off for Salzburg, but had died before they got home.

Exactly where and when the composition of K428 fits in to this sequence of events is not clear – the tragedy of Raimund's death was unknown to the couple until their return to Vienna. The Quartet is a subtle rather than dramatic work. The opening is particularly unworldly, with its awkward intervals disruptive of tonality, yet it finds a comfortable home in E flat soon enough. There are three clearly defined subjects rather than the conventional two.

That word 'conventional' has been applied to the *Andante*, since its structure is plain enough, but the term hardly does justice to a movement that takes us into a world of shadows, soft dissonance, melodies

that remain embryonic rather than fully formed. Haydn's influence is most obvious in the minuet, with its jocular sneezes, uneven phrases and stuck-in-the-groove effects. A gentler humour characterises the concluding rondo, though there are enough chromatic passages to remind us this is the same work that had begun so disconcertingly.

If 1945 was a momentous year for the world, it was also a personal turning point for Britten. His career breakthrough came in June, with the première of his opera *Peter Grimes* – a critical and box-office triumph. The next month he went through Europe on a tour of the newly liberated Nazi concentration camps, playing for the inmates in a duo with Yehudi Menuhin. Inevitably the experience had a profound effect on both men as artists and as people.

As he strove to reconcile this juxtaposition of euphoria and horror in such a short space of time, Britten tackled two important commissions: the song cycle *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne* and the Second String Quartet. They were performed on successive nights at Wigmore Hall as part of the commemoration of 250 years since the death of Purcell: the Quartet on the exact date of the anniversary, 21 November, the songs on Britten's 32nd birthday, 22 November.

The Quartet honours Purcell and the qualities Britten most admired in his predecessor: 'clarity, brilliance, tenderness and strangeness', as he put it. There is a direct reference to Purcell at the work's very beginning, a drone sounded by the viola while the other instruments spin out the first theme. If anyone was in doubt about the deliberate allusion to Purcell's *Fantasia upon One Note*, Britten spelt it out by placing that work as the eighth side of the 78rpm record set made by the Zorian Quartet, who had given the first performance of his Quartet; Britten himself played the viola drone in the Purcell work. As in Mozart's K428, a third subject grows out of the first two in this opening movement. That, at least, is one way to analyse a structure that combines elements of sonata and variation form.

A wiry, nervous scherzo is followed by a final movement longer than the other two put together. Britten labels this passacaglia '*Chacony*' in a further explicit nod to Purcell. The 'ground' (repeated theme) is first sounded in unison. The succeeding variations are organised into four groups, which Britten tells us examine in turn the theme's harmonic, rhythmic, melodic and formal properties. The first three groups are rounded off with cadenzas for individual players; the final restatement of the unison theme is punctuated by 21 tonic chords, one for each of the variations we have heard.

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