

# WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 24 January 2024  
7.30pm

## Belcea Quartet

Corina Belcea violin  
Suyeon Kang violin  
Krzysztof Chorzelski viola  
Antoine Lederlin cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) String Quartet No. 4 in C minor Op. 18 No. 4 (1798-1800)  
*I. Allegro ma non tanto • II. Scherzo. Andante scherzoso quasi allegretto • III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Allegro*

Julian Anderson (b.1967) String Quartet No. 4 (2023) *UK première*  
*I. • II. • III.*

*Interval*

Ludwig van Beethoven String Quartet No. 12 in E flat Op. 127 (1823-4)  
*I. Maestoso - Allegro • II. Adagio, ma non troppo e molto cantabile • III. Scherzando vivace - Presto • IV. Finale. Allegro*



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In a perceptive essay first published 18 years ago, Robin Holloway portrays his fellow composer **Julian Anderson** as the fount of 'a virtual *lingua franca* of current [musical] usage, the pure clear sparkling mainstream between a right bank of galumphing minimalism and a grey left [bank] of deceptively monumental modernism.' He continues to outline the appeal of a composer whose music is 'fundamentally about felicity – bright, shining, colourful, dancing, impeccably made, *happy*'. While Anderson's output since then has proved open to the tragic, notably in the opera *Thebans*, his art remains hallmarked by its luminous contrasts of textures and tonalities and an irresistible rhythmic power. Those qualities, in part influenced by Eastern European traditional musics, in part by the infinite complexities of sound, stand proud in the latest of his four string quartets.

Anderson's String Quartet No. 4 opens with an arresting pizzicato chord, preface to a shimmering meditation on the ethereal, insubstantial, ever-changing nature of sound. The atmosphere intensifies as the quartet's members play *molto sul ponticello*, with half the bow placed on the bridge, half on the strings, and introduce an otherworldly quality to the timbral mix, the initial utterances of which fall into silent bars and gradually morph into a sequence of artificial harmonics and what the composer describes as a "'Morse Code" tremolo', characterised by abrupt and irregular changes of bow strokes. Anderson recalls an earlier theme, fashioned in triplet semiquavers, and uses it to introduce a taut rhythmic polylogue involving each player. The movement ends with a fluttering first fiddle solo, pitched high above sustained tremolos from its quartet companions.

Bright flecks of sound, erratic and increasingly urgent, pierce the silence of the second movement's opening bars. The stormy scherzo that follows recalls an episode from the composer's youth, when his school was visited by a Polish philosopher, a member of the country's anti-authoritarian trade union 'Solidarity'; soon after, in December 1981, Solidarity was forced underground following the imposition of martial law by Poland's communist government and the subsequent arrest of countless union activists. 'Later that month,' recalls Anderson, 'by chance I heard and recorded (off short-wave radio) a fragment of Polish folk music – "goral" fiddle music from the Tatra Mountains. It was a thrilling and wild "oberek", whose propulsive and defiant rhythmic freedoms left their impression on the middle movement of my Fourth Quartet. Something of the defiant, desperate atmosphere of those terrible months may be reflected especially in the second and third movements.'

The work's finale perhaps alludes to a state of fear in the vertiginous unison Gs of its opening and the tremolos, trills and glissandos that follow before introducing music of greater lyrical purity. Anderson here recalls a distinctive marking from his orchestral work *Eden: come una musica verginale* ('like a virginal music'). The delicate soundworld eventually coalesces around an extended passage of dense contrapuntal dialogue from

which emerges an expressive viola solo and final sustained 'song' for the full quartet, adamant in its slow progress towards an impassioned close.

The Belcea Quartet, for whom Anderson wrote his Fourth Quartet, has chosen to pair the new work with a significant landmark in **Beethoven's** artistic development, one in which the composer probes a striking variety of emotions and moods. Beethoven selected the String Quartet No. 4 in C minor to open the second and final set of his Op.18 quartets, a clear measure of his affection for it. The piece stirs the emotions with a first theme of tremendous intensity, its potential for development explored in the movement's central section, and a second theme of contrasting geniality. 'Beethoven seems here to have been deliberately writing music that is uncomfortable,' notes the musicologist Barry Cooper; if so, he emphasized the ploy by offsetting the opening *Allegro's* expressive turbulence with a charming *Scherzo* in which learned counterpoint appears to serve as the butt of Beethoven's joke. Courtly and country dance find common cause in the quartet's *Menuetto*; Beethoven carries this folk-like flavour into the rondo finale's opening fiddle tune and the second of the movement's diversionary episodes, before unleashing a prestissimo version of the rondo theme and a coda infused with an unsettling sense of menace.

'I carry my ideas around with me for a long, often very long time before I write them down,' Beethoven confessed in 1823 to the composer Louis Schlösser. 'They remain so firmly in my memory that I am in no danger of forgetting a theme I have once conceived, even years afterwards.' Beethoven was thus able to work on several projects at once or interrupt the progress of one large-scale score to concentrate on an equally demanding composition. His sketchbooks and correspondence show that he worked simultaneously on four of his late string quartets, Op. 127 in E flat, Op. 132 in A minor, Op. 130 and Op. 133 in B flat, yet the finished scores appear strikingly independent of each another.

The String Quartet Op. 127 proved to one reviewer present at its public première to be an 'incomprehensible, vague, over-extended series of fantasias – chaos, from which flashes of genius emerged from time to time like lightning bolts from a black thunder cloud', a verdict in tune with the general puzzlement of his fellow audience members. Yet the quartet's majesty rises from the originality of its invention and the many ways in which Beethoven subverts formal convention in pursuit of deeper spiritual truths, from the monumental chords that stand in lieu of a slow introduction to the expansive theme and set of five contemplative variations that occupy the sublime slow movement, the fleeting counterpoint, rhythmic interplay and textural contrasts of the *Scherzando vivace*, and the *Finale's* two distinct sections: the first exuberant, complete with exposition, development and recapitulation; the second, announced by violin trills, a revelation of eternal bliss.

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