

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 24 June 2023
7.30pm

In Memory of Pamela Majaro

Wihan Quartet

Leoš Čepický violin
Jan Schulmeister violin
Jakub Čepický viola
Michal Kaňka cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 16 in F Op. 135 (1826)
*I. Allegretto • II. Vivace •
III. Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo •
IV. Grave, ma non troppo tratto – Allegro*

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in D minor Op. 103 (1803)
*I. Andante grazioso
II. Menuetto ma non troppo presto - Trio*

Interval

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet No. 23 in F K590 'Prussian' (1790)
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Allegretto •
III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Allegro*

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All the works in tonight's concert are the final quartets by their respective composers. Opus 135 is also the last whole composition of any kind completed by **Ludwig van Beethoven**, a quarter century after he published his first quartets in 1801.

The first movement comprises a wealth of short, motivic ideas that have strong individuality, yet they fit together as perfectly as the components of a mosaic. The tempo marking – *Allegretto* rather than *allegro* – speaks of moderation and civility rather than high drama. The scherzo brings increased energy, but in the form of vigorous games, not tense confrontation.

Periodically throughout his career Beethoven turned to hymn-like themes for his slow movements. The *Lento* of this quartet uses rapt four-part harmony that emulates the sounds of a church organ or choir. In the middle section, for the first time in this work, we experience doubt and pain – but the benediction that follows is overwhelming, sublimely consoling.

And then the finale, with its title 'The difficult resolution'. Over its opening phrase Beethoven wrote 'Muss es sein?' ('Must it be?'). In recitative the question is asked more urgently and intensely until we reach the *Allegro* with a shout of 'Es muss sein!' – again the words were written into the manuscript. The difficult question returns at the movement's climax, but it is turned away with humour and grace. In the twinkling of an eye, the movement, the quartet and the composer's career are brought to the simplest, most harmonious and complete resolution one could possibly imagine.

At the beginning of the 19th Century, Beethoven was writing his first quartets while **Haydn** was working on his last. Two new Haydn quartets were published in 1802 as Opus 77. He had habitually written his quartets in half-dozen batches, so why stop at two? It has been suggested that he shut up shop because he felt he could not compete with his young rival and former pupil. But he had certainly wanted to write at least one more work in the genre.

Two movements of this planned quartet were completed. The briefest of sketches (one bar of a cello part!), plus reports on progress delivered to the publisher, suggest these were the middle movements of an intended four-movement work. But as he passed the age of 70, Haydn lost the enthusiasm and energy that had sustained this busiest and most prolific of composers. Eventually the two movements were sent to the publisher with, at Haydn's request, one of his visiting cards. On it was written, in German, 'All my strength has left me, I am old and weak.' The publisher dutifully printed these words in lieu of a finale.

The two-movement work, published in 1806 as Op. 103, is neither enfeebled nor valedictory in mood. The composer told his publisher, 'It is my last child, but it

still looks like me.' The *Andante* gives the impression that it was not Beethoven's quartets that were on Haydn's mind so much as the mature and progressive ones of his late friend Mozart. The theme begins as if it is going to be a straightforward affair but progresses in ways that could not have been predicted. An agitated middle section is in effect a development of the single theme, which returns intact before a coda that focuses on its inherent upwardly yearning treble and downward drooping bass characteristics. The minuet, with its bizarre asymmetries and jagged phrases, proves that the composer's mind was as inventive as ever, even if the effort involved in creating new music had finally become too much of a challenge.

At the beginning of 1789, **Mozart** set off for a tour of northern Germany. Part of the trip was spent visiting 'Bach country', i.e. Leipzig, to follow up on Mozart's keen interest in his Baroque predecessor. But this was basically a business trip, in the hope of drumming up commissions or even a court appointment. Mozart was by this time largely dependent on loans from his long-suffering friend and fellow Freemason Michael Puchberg.

As he made his way home, Mozart wrote to his wife, Constanze, and to Puchberg, assuring them that he had received a commission for six string quartets from Wilhelm II, King of Prussia, along with a request for six piano sonatas for the monarch's daughter. There is no court record of him meeting the King or (as he claimed) playing for the Queen, so an element of bluff or exaggeration cannot be ruled out. However, the commission was real enough in his mind for him to write one of the sonatas and three of the quartets. King Wilhelm, a cellist of some skill, had already commissioned chamber works from Boccherini and Haydn, who had duly given his instrument prominence. Mozart's three 'Prussian' Quartets follow suit and naturally give the other instruments solo opportunities by way of balancing the texture.

The third, K590, is the last quartet he wrote. It never reached the Prussian court: along with its two companions it was sold in haste to a publisher for a small sum to secure much-needed ready cash. Writing these works caused Mozart much effort, and several draft movements were discarded. Yet the innovation of giving each instrument its share of the limelight brought rewards in a lively, quasi-operatic texture (*Così fan tutte* was composed at the same time). All four movements of K590 are characterised by a tension between surprise tactics (dynamic contrasts, uneven phrase lengths, teasing cross rhythms) and the overall symmetry demanded by the Classical aesthetic.

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