

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 24 November 2022
7.30pm

Pavel Haas Quartet

Veronika Jarůšková violin
Marek Zwiebel violin
Karel Untermüller viola
Peter Jarůšek cello

Owen Gunnell percussion

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in G Op. 76 No. 1 (1797)

*I. Allegro con spirito • II. Adagio sostenuto •
III. Menuetto. Presto • IV. Finale. Allegro ma non troppo*

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

String Quartet No. 2 in F Op. 92 (1941)

I. Allegro sostenuto • II. Adagio • III. Allegro

Interval

Pavel Haas (1899-1944)

String Quartet No. 2 Op. 7 'From the Monkey Mountains' (1925)

*I. Landscape • II. Coach, Coachman and Horse •
III. The Moon and I... • IV. Wild Night*

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By the end of the 18th Century, **Haydn** had established himself as Europe's most revered composer. The many years he had served as music director to the Esterházy family on their estates in rural Austria and Hungary may not always have been easy from a personal point of view, but the isolation he experienced brought distinct creative advantages. As Haydn suggested: 'I was cut off from the world. There was no one to confuse or torment me, and I was forced to become original.' That originality was much in demand in Vienna, and elsewhere too. The two extended sojourns Haydn made to London in 1791-2 and 1794-5 brought him money and fame in equal measure, and led to the composition of his 12 so-called 'London' symphonies.

The six quartets commissioned by Count Erdődy in 1797 attest to the influence of Haydn's experience in the concert hall. His earlier quartets – some 60 in total – had transformed music originally designed to accompany polite salon conversation into something altogether more complex and ambitious. Now, in his Op. 76 quartets, Haydn infused chamber music with all the flair and drama of the modern symphony. The first of them, in G major, opens with three bold chords, before embarking on a brilliantly worked piece of polyphonic writing in which all four voices are accorded equal importance. The nobility of the *Adagio* that follows recalls Haydn's many masses and oratorios, whilst the third-movement minuet feels more like one of Beethoven's frenetic scherzos than a genteel society dance. The *Finale* offers the quartet's most radical music. Suddenly, we enter the darker realm of G minor, and the development section explores some very unusual tonalities indeed, before a coda restores the joviality of the home key. As an enthusiastic Charles Burney wrote to Haydn about the set: 'they are full of invention, fire, good taste, and new effects, and seem the production, not of a sublime genius who has written so much and so well already, but of one of highly-cultivated talents, who had expended none of his fire before.'

Prokofiev had famously paid homage to Haydn in his Symphony No. 1, the so-called 'Classical', written in 1916-7, and whilst his works were often seen as radical, provocative and eccentric, he never lost his flair for elegant classical form. This aspect of his musical style became particularly pronounced after he returned permanently to the Soviet Union in 1936. The Quartet No. 2 dates from the summer of 1941, when Prokofiev was evacuated to Nalchik, capital of the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic in the Northern Caucasus. There, seemingly encouraged by local officials, he decided to incorporate elements of the indigenous folk music into his own compositions. This was, of course, not a new gesture. 19th-century composers such as Balakirev, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov had used a wide range of Russian and non-Russian material to fashion their particular brand of musical nationalism, and Socialist Realism sought to create an art that was 'national in form, socialist in content.'

Prokofiev's genius was to find a way of seemingly conforming to the dictates of ideology whilst retaining his own highly individual voice. As he observed: 'I felt that the combination of new, untouched Oriental folklore with the most classical of classic forms, the string quartet, ought to produce interesting and unexpected results.' Interesting and unexpected the quartet certainly is. Its three movements abound in arresting instrumental effects, allied with Prokofiev's trademark piquant harmonies, spiky rhythms and beguiling lyricism. Written during a ferocious war by a composer who was to chafe under the constraints of censorship, the quartet is nonetheless suffused with an extraordinary inner freedom.

Prokofiev's quartet is the work of a composer savouring a new and exotic location. **Haas's** Quartet No. 2 expresses a native's love for his homeland. Born into a Jewish family in the Moravian capital of Brno in 1899, he studied with Janáček between 1920 and 1922. Interned by the Germans in the infamous Theresienstadt concentration camp in 1941, he died at Auschwitz in 1944. His second quartet dates from 1925 and, at first glance, resembles other quartets by Czech composers with literary or biographical programmes. Smetana's first quartet is called 'From my life', and Janáček titled his two quartets 'The Kreutzer Sonata' (after the story by Tolstoy) and 'Intimate Letters' respectively. For Haas, however, his inspiration was picturesque, rather than personal. His quartet is subtitled 'From the Monkey Mountains', a nickname for an area of the Moravian Highlands that was popular with tourists.

The quartet's title – as well as those of its four individual movements – suggest a series of evocative, atmospheric, even impressionistic scenes. First comes *Landscape*, which is followed by *Coach, Coachman and Horse*. *The Moon and I...* is a lyric nightscape, whose haunting tranquillity is shattered by *Wild Night*. But there is far more to the work than the static, painterly evocation of place, or the nostalgic memory of a carefree summer vacation. The world that Haas conjures up is full of life, drive, and energy, both human and animal. 'Movement dominates this entire carefree composition,' he wrote. 'From the rhythm of the birdsongs and the rolling landscape, the irregular motion of a horse-drawn carriage on the land, from the warm song of the human heart to the cool and silent flow of the moonshine, the jolly mood of a warm night's celebration to the pure, innocent laughter of the morning's sun, motion abounds here, motion which dominates everything.' When it was premièred in Brno in March 1926, the finale even included a part for a percussionist that underscored Haas's love of interwar jazz, and reminds us that as well as its meadows and forests, Central Europe was home to some of the continent's liveliest centres of modern urban life.

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