

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 25 February 2024
7.30pm

Quatuor Ébène

Pierre Colombet violin
Gabriel Le Magadure violin
Marie Chilemme viola
Yuya Okamoto cello

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet No. 21 in D K575 'Prussian' (1789)
*I. Allegretto • II. Andante •
III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Allegretto*

Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998)

String Quartet No. 3 (1983)
I. Andante • II. Agitato • III. Pesante

Interval

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

String Quartet No. 1 in G minor Op. 27 (1877-8)
*I. Un poco andante - Allegro molto ed agitato •
II. Romanze. Andantino • III. Intermezzo. Allegro
molto marcato - Più vivo e scherzando •
IV. Finale. Lento - Presto al Saltarello*



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Mozart's 23 string quartets trace a path of ever greater refinement and economy of means. Prince Karl Lichnowsky, a pupil of Mozart's, took him to Berlin in 1789 to meet Frederick William II, King of Prussia. An important patron and skilled amateur cellist, Frederick commissioned six string quartets in addition to some piano sonatas from Mozart. The first of the quartets, No. 21 in D K575 'Prussian', was completed straight away and two more followed in May and June 1790. Out of a need to raise funds, Mozart sold the quartets to a Viennese publisher, who printed them following the composer's death in 1791.

The opening movement, in sonata form, is notable for the mix of tension and wit that is found within the writing. It is often commented that Mozart's scoring here is somewhat delicate compared to that of his earlier string quartets. The second movement's lyrical elegance is especially emphasised as a result of the sparse textures that the four instruments weave. The third movement is altogether more serious in temperament, though the trio section does provide contrast to this. Dynamic drive and dissonance are two central features in the final movement. Mozart starts the movement by returning to the theme of the opening movement for this rondo. Even though the subsequent thematic idea, taken from the first six notes of that theme, can sound relatively simple, this movement is the most intricately crafted in the entire quartet. Instruments interchange their material, stop in mid flow and almost examine the individual parts, or add ornamentation as the movement progresses.

Depending on your viewpoint, **Schnittke** was either one of the 20th Century's foremost compositional geniuses or an iconoclast, given his tendency to subvert traditional musical forms and structures or to appropriate and then transform ideas or inferences taken from other composers. The String Quartet No. 3, written in 1983, exemplifies his polystylistic technique. Its source materials are brief quotations from both the *Stabat mater* of Flemish Renaissance composer Orlande de Lassus, written circa 1558, and Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* for string quartet, written in 1825. Two musical monograms are added: Dmitry Shostakovich (D-E flat-C-B, or in German notation D-S-C-H), first used in the composer's String Quartet No. 5 in B flat Op. 92; D-G-A-B, derived from Ludwig van Beethoven, plays a subsidiary role.

The quartet has three movements played without a break to constitute a sequence that is something of a wild ride which requires the performers to have full command of every gesture, inflection and interweaving element. The Lassus, Beethoven *Grosse Fuge* and Shostakovich elements are played sequentially at the start of the opening movement; thereafter everything seemingly quickly disintegrates. Schnittke picks up his disparate threads and reveals the thematic and tempo links between them with slightness of hand before developing variations upon each one. The second movement further exemplifies Schnittke's

inventiveness, as all four ideas are extensively used yet with such precise and extreme scoring that the music must verge upon controlled violence. This is another contradiction Schnittke delighted in: his scoring's concision lends the work cohesion whilst perpetually taking it to the edge of destruction. The final movement, stylistically akin to Shostakovich's string quartets, is an extended slow quasi-funereal coda. Throughout the quartet, though everything sounds satisfactory musically, the listener can be left feeling confused, bewildered or in a state of despair, dejection and desperation.

Grieg's String Quartet No. 1 in G minor Op. 27 is in fact the second of three works he wrote in the genre. An earlier string quartet, written in the early 1860s, is now lost, whilst the String Quartet No. 2 in F was left with only two movements completed at the composer's death. The G minor First Quartet was written in 1877-8. Shortly after completing the work, Grieg wrote to a friend, 'I have recently finished a string quartet which I still have not heard. It is not a trivial work designed to peddle occasional flashes of brilliance. Rather, it strives towards breadth, soaring flight and above all resonance for the instruments.' The quartet is notable for its extensive unison playing, requiring double and triple or even quadruple-stopping from all players. Splashes of polyphonic writing provide additional colour and variety. Debussy was critical of Grieg's approach; his own string quartet is, perhaps somewhat ironically, sometimes thought to be grafted from Grieg's composition. Tchaikovsky and Liszt, however, thought positively of it. The latter wrote, 'It is a long time since I have encountered a new composition, especially a string quartet, which has intrigued me as greatly as this distinctively admirable work by Grieg.'

The quartet's four movements are unified by a single theme, which Grieg took from his song *Spillemænd* ('The minstrel'), which was the first of six Ibsen settings that constitute his Op. 25. Ibsen's poem centres on the *hulder*, a water spirit who offers minstrels great musical gifts in exchange for their happiness. Some commentators have opined that the choice of this song as thematic material suggests both an allusive and elusive personal manifesto for Grieg. Indeed, the composer is known to have told friends, 'Herein lies a bit of a life story.' The theme is played in unison at the beginning of the opening movement, the material for almost all of which is derived from it including at least eight variations. The quartet's cyclic design extends beyond the bounds of the opening movement to influence the other three movements. The second movement sees the theme presented in sequence with agitated contrasts. The third movement exemplifies Grieg the Norwegian nationalist, given that each melody possesses the energy of folk dances. The final movement is lively *Saltarello* inflected dance form, bookended by re-statements of the theme.

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