

# WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 25 January 2023  
7.30pm

## Castalian String Quartet

Sini Simonen violin  
Daniel Roberts violin  
Ruth Gibson viola  
Steffan Morris cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in E flat Op. 20 No. 1 (1772)  
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Menuetto. Allegretto •  
III. Affettuoso e sostenuto • IV. Finale. Presto*

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

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

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 13 in B flat Op. 130 with Grosse Fuge Op. 133  
(1825-6)  
*I. Adagio ma non troppo - Allegro • II. Presto •  
III. Andante con moto ma non troppo •  
IV. Alla danza tedesca. Allegro assai •  
V. Cavatina. Adagio molto espressivo •  
VI. Overtura. Allegro – Fuga*

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Why **Joseph Haydn** composed a significant number of string quartets around 1770, with his Opp. 9, 17 and 20, is unknown. While his quartets were well received in Vienna, at the time there seemed to have been little interest at the Esterházy court where he was employed. Yet with these works, Haydn changed compositional practices: he established a pattern that became the model for the classical quartet, consisting of four movements; the first and last fast, a slow movement, and a minuet. The six quartets of Op. 20, composed in 1772, are often recognised as the more ambitious in scope. Their nickname, the ‘Sun’, might suggest that they represent a new age, but as is so often the case, the historical evidence reveals a more mundane reason: the title page to Hummel’s 1779 edition featured a picture of the sun.

The Op. 20 quartets might have been Haydn’s riposte to Berlin critics, who complained about his, and his contemporaries’, ‘emptiness, the strange mixture of comic and serious, of the tiring and the moving’ and ‘great ignorance of counterpoint’. In comparison to his earlier quartets, in the Op. 20 set Haydn distributed musical interest more evenly around the ensemble and experimented with structure, phrasing, and fugal finales. The first quartet in the published set, in E flat major, exhibits several of these attributes from the start: rather than beginning with the first violin laying out the opening theme over accompaniment, it is introduced by first violin and viola, and then answered by second violin and cello; cello and viola have an unusual melodic prominence as the movement continues.

Hans Keller used Op. 20 No. 1 as an example of what he called Haydn’s ‘anti-minuets’: the associated dance, in triple time, is undermined by the phrasing and editorial dynamics, while the central trio is less contrasting than expected and is, until the final bars, literally a trio, as only the violins and cello play. Like other slow movements in the Op. 20 set, that of No. 1 is marked *Affettuoso e sostenuto*, signalling a new expressivity. Here, Haydn also marked each of the parts *mezza voce* – a direction that would be used by Beethoven in his Op. 74, the ‘Harp’, and extended to *sotto voce* in his late quartets. The *Finale* of Op. 20 No. 1 does not incorporate a fugue, but is thematically compact and full of syncopated verve.

In November 1945, **Benjamin Britten** marked the 250th anniversary of the death of Henry Purcell with two midweek programmes at Wigmore Hall. The second concert fell on Britten’s 32nd birthday and included the première of his String Quartet No. 2 Op. 36, commissioned and performed by the Zorian Quartet. It was dedicated to ‘patron of the arts’ Mary Behrend, to whom Britten admitted that ‘it is the greatest advance I have made [...] it has given me encouragement to continue on new lines’.

Lines of another kind seem important to the score: there is an exceptional clarity to the thematic writing of the Second Quartet, with C major always in the

background, from the opening notes of the first movement, *Allegro calmo, senza rigore*, onwards. Shades of Bartók’s night-music might haunt the muted string writing of the *Vivace*. The finale, *Chacony. Sostenuto*, pays homage to Purcell by its use of a ground bass, a nine-bar theme that is repeated with 21 variations. (Without doubting Britten’s nod to Purcell by the use of the ground bass, he also used it in two other works from 1945: the opera *Peter Grimes* and the last of *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, ‘Death be not proud’.) The *Chacony* is divided into four sections that, Britten explained, ‘review’ the theme from harmonic, rhythmic, melodic and formal perspectives, with each section divided by a cadenza for cello, viola, and first violin respectively. The Quartet ends with an affirmation of C major, the lowest strings of viola and cello lending extra resonance to the concluding repeated chords.

Prince Galitzin’s commission for one, two or three string quartets, at whatever fee the composer thought ‘proper’, persuaded **Beethoven** to return to the genre in 1825. On so doing, he overturned many of the conventions that Haydn had established some 50 years earlier: Op. 130 consists of six movements and while it remained common for individual quartet movements to be performed in concert, Beethoven evidently thought carefully about the shape of the whole. His initial thoughts were for a first movement with a ‘serious and heavy-going introduction’ and a fugal finale. Eventually, the *Adagio ma non troppo* introduction prefaced an *Allegro* that pits two musical ideas against each other: scurrying figuration and a fanfare motto. *Adagio* and *Allegro* are brought together for the movement’s coda. Then follows a turbulent *Presto*, and a slow movement whose emotional complexity is signalled by Beethoven’s markings: *Andante con moto ma non troppo*, for the tempo, with the additional instruction *poco scherzoso* for the first violin. A playful aspect continues into the *Alla danza tedesca* only for a more serious realm to be entered with the *Cavatina*, operatic music marked to be played *sotto voce*.

Beethoven stipulated that there should not be a break between the end of the *Cavatina* and the finale, which came to be known as the *Grosse Fuge*. This huge compendium of freewheeling fugues – described by the composer as ‘tantôt libre, tantôt recherché’ (‘partly free, partly learned’) – interleaved with lyrical and dance- or march-like sections, challenged players and audiences alike. Beethoven’s publisher recommended that the movement be published separately and the composer agreed, providing an alternative finale. It was not until the mid-20th Century that quartets began with any regularity to perform Op. 130 with its original last movement.

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