

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 25 May 2022 7.30pm

Schumann Quartet

Erik Schumann violin

Ken Schumann violin

Veit Benedikt Hertenstein viola

Mark Schumann cello

CLASSIC *fm*

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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet No. 15 in D minor K421 (1783)

I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante • III. Menuetto and Trio. Allegretto • IV. Allegretto ma non troppo

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

String Quartet No. 1 'Kreutzer Sonata' (1923)

I. Adagio - Con moto • II. Con moto • III. Con moto - Vivace - Andante • IV. Con moto - Adagio

Interval

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

String Quartet No. 20 in D K499 'Hoffmeister' (1786)

I. Allegretto • II. Menuetto. Allegretto • III. Adagio • IV. Molto allegro

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The D minor quartet from the set **Mozart** dedicated to Haydn can be dated to the summer of 1783, for Constanze Mozart recalled that her husband was working on it at the time of her first pregnancy. D minor can be a vivid and dramatic key with Mozart, but this quartet is on the contrary sombre, even in passages in the major, such as the second subject, in F, of the opening *Allegro*. A work that starts with a downswing through an octave, accompanied by pulsations suggestive of an accelerated heartbeat, never escapes anxiety.

The second movement is a slow rondo, in F major, but with frequent slips into the shadow world of the minor.

Then comes the minuet, with a trio in D major that is the work's one moment of relaxation, though perhaps an excessive, forced relaxation.

For finale there is a set of variations, on a theme whose dotted rhythms might suggest horseback riding. Late in the movement D major is at last achieved, but then the theme returns, and with it the minor mode. Right at the end, painfully high, the first violin repeats its downward octave.

Janáček relates his first quartet to a short novel by Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, in which the eponymous violin sonata by Beethoven is playing in the background. The male central character, in the midst of a critique of marriage, confesses to a fellow railway passenger that he has killed his wife on account of her affair with a violinist with whom she played the Beethoven sonata. Janáček, himself unhappily married and lost in hopeless love for a woman who was also married (Kamila Stösslová), evidently sympathized. In 1908-9 he composed a piano trio on the subject, a work he reconfigured as the present quartet in October 1923, taking a break from work on his penultimate opera, *The Makropulos Affair*.

Right away, the temperature is high. A phrase shoots up, golden in the tones of the three upper instruments, then descends to the lower octave. As the closing chord is held, the cello comes in with anxiety and ostinato. Two features of the work are at once established, both relevant to the Tolstoy subject: the coexistence of ardour and desperation, and fission within the team. The same gesture, of rising appeal from three instruments and circling worry from the fourth, is immediately repeated, with each of the violins in turn the odd one out. More circling follows, with motifs sometimes recalling those already heard. Everything is then reprised, up to a final reminiscence of how it all started.

The second movement, with its galumphing first theme, sounds as if it is going to be a scherzo. However, it turns eerie, with descending tremolos played close to the bridge (*sul ponticello*), and introduces another 'appeal' theme that is repeated and repeated again with increasing urgency. With everything now in place, the movement can play these ideas off against each other and take them further.

If the second movement is a transformed scherzo, the third is a derailed slow movement – and here the connection to the Beethoven draws close, for what we hear first, in canon between first violin and cello, is the second subject of the 'Kreutzer' first movement, moved into the minor and Moravianized. Once again, lyricism is immediately countered by insecurity (more *sul ponticello*). The middle part of the movement is taken over by alarm calls and descending scales, after which a calmer passage is prelude to an intensification of what came earlier.

At the start of the finale, the quartet's very first idea has become a memory, turning into melancholy melody. Once again, agitation soon returns in its customary form of ostinato and melody with repeated notes. Once again, too, the drama is played out, to the full.

The solitary quartet Mozart wrote soon after his 'Haydn' set takes its nickname from its first publisher, Franz Anton Hoffmeister, a friend and colleague of Mozart's who had recently started a music press. It begins, a little on the slow side, with a very straightforward first idea – a four-bar phrase in unison, entirely on the notes of the tonic triad – that proves the entry point for an exposition of manifold ideas, unusual shapes and adventurous harmony. The first excursion, after the dotted rhythm of the initial theme has been given play, is not towards the dominant but solidly into B minor, the relative minor. And though the dominant, A major, is soon then reached, a wider space has been opened, enough to accommodate a slow theme in C sharp minor – which, however, is still based on the descending triad that was the basic principle of the first theme (and of the B minor one). Richness thus goes along with consistency. The development has a lot to do with repeated notes, which again go back to the opening idea, and the recapitulation is followed by a coda.

A minuet with a bagpipe-like opening strain, and a trio section in the minor, separates all this from the adagio, which is a sonata movement in G, again with some tight harmonic corners. The opening idea, featuring the two violins in thirds, comes back at the beginning of the development in the richer, deeper colour of viola with cello, the violins now echoing.

For finale Mozart provides another sonata movement: a comedy this time, started by the violin twirling in triplets almost alone. Fuller ideas follow in due course, including a second subject that bubbles up in an atmosphere of pulsing repeated notes. The development brings to a summit the whole work's contrapuntal ingenuity, while the recapitulation reminds us of its adventurous harmony. And a coda caps the lot.

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