WIGMORE HALL 125

Tuesday 25 November 2025
7.30pm

Elias String Quartet
Sara Bitlloch violin
Donald Grant violin
Simone van der Giessen viola
Marie Bitlloch cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 2 in G Op. 18 No. 2 (1798-1800)
I. Allegro • II. Adagio cantabile •
III. Scherzo. Allegro • IV. Allegro molto, quasi presto

String Quartet No. 11 in F minor Op. 95 'Serioso' (1810)
I. Allegro con brio • II. Allegretto ma non troppo •
III. Allegro assai vivace ma serioso – Più allegro •
IV. Larghetto espressivo – Allegretto agitato

Interval

String Quartet No. 13 in B flat Op. 130 (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. Finale. Allegro

This programme has changed slightly since these programme notes were written.

In July 1792, the 21-year-old Beethoven moved from his home town of Bonn to the Austrian capital of Vienna. One of the reasons was the chance to take up a course of tuition from the revered Joseph Haydn. Perhaps unsurprisingly the rebellious young Rhinelander was an impatient pupil and soon fell out with his master, though their relationship improved in later years.

In 1801 Beethoven published his first string quartets, a set of six, Op. 18. They had been worked on for several years. Haydn had habitually published his own quartets by the half-dozen, so it can be debated whether this gesture was a tribute, a challenge, or both.

The work that Beethoven placed second in his set is one in which nothing can be taken at face value. It begins with florid, elegant gestures that suggest 18th-century formality and 'good taste'. Soon, however, awkward accents and dissonances suggest that the ultra-politeness is in a spirit of mockery.

It is possible that there is more hidden mischief in the *Adagio*: the unexpected twists and turns that follow the seemingly heartfelt aria come suspiciously close to being a parody of the slow finale of Haydn's Op. 54 No. 2 Quartet. The staid trio section that begins as a counter to the *Scherzo*'s jumpy theme becomes riddled with wriggling elaboration, while the finale's continuous debate gets progressively more ridiculous. Yet these ironies went over the head of many a listener, and Op. 18 No. 2 was once nicknamed the 'compliments' quartet on account of its supposed gentility.

Just five years after publishing his Op. 18 set, Beethoven took a leap forward with the three 'Razumovsky' Quartets. Between these and the 'Late' Quartets of the mid-1920s come two composed in successive years, 1809 (the 'Harp') and 1810 (Op. 95, inscribed 'Serioso' by the composer). In an 1815 letter to the English musician and music administrator George Smart, Beethoven wrote of the latter: 'The Quartet is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public.'

In fact Op. 95 had already been given a performance by that time, though presumably for a more select audience than Beethoven would have deemed 'the public'. To its first listeners it must have seemed as if pages of the score had been torn out stitched together without any attempt to disguise the joins. In the whirlwind of the first movement themes are not given space to establish themselves, while answering phrases are cut off as if having their right to expression denied. The *Allegretto* that follows has two contrasting themes, each preceded by a descending scale: a placid polyphony and a more fugal idea. On the reprise, the polyphony is taken over by the fugato like a vine entwining a tree.

A mysterious chord ushers in the third movement, an earnest and stressful scherzo that twice gives way to the trio, which is varied on its second appearance. After a nervous, slow introduction, the finale takes us on a night ride where slithering, shivering, threatening sounds loom at us in the darkness. Eventually, a scampering dance breaks out in the tonic major, but cannot hope to resolve the anxiety that has built up. The Quartet was written when Vienna was under siege from Napoleon's armies; what else can you do in uncertain times but whistle in the dark?

The Op. 130 String Quartet has caused much head scratching over the past two centuries: why did Beethoven accede to his publisher's request and write a replacement finale? At the first, private performance in 1826, the work climaxed in the mighty, uncompromising, forever 'modern' *Grosse fuge* – and it is in that form that it will be heard tonight. By the time it came to be published, in 1827, the *Grosse fuge* had been detached from the Quartet and in its place was a genial and unchallenging movement at the opposite end of the musical spectrum.

How could such a radical change of direction possibly work? Before we address this conundrum, let us take the journey through the Quartet step by step.

Whether performed with the new *Allegro* finale or the original *Grosse fuge*, the Op. 130 Quartet consists of six movements. The first has as its background the old certainties of sonata form, but the bonds between elements have been loosened. This is followed by a brief scherzo, then an *Andante* whose disparate material seems to coexist rather than cohere. Next comes a rustic dance, *Alla tedesca* meaning 'in the German style'. And then the *Cavatina*, a title invoking the human voice and the genre of song. But this music goes beyond anything that could be expressed in words.

So: we arrive at a point where a decision must be made. We have been shown how complex our world is, and how delicate the balance is between its diverse components. The *Cavatina* has uncovered the pain, and the beauty, of never fully understanding our place in all this. Are we going to look for an answer, or accept our lot?