

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 26 January 2025
7.30pm

Belcea Quartet

Corina Belcea violin
Suyeon Kang violin
Krzysztof Chorzelski viola
Antoine Lederlin cello

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet No. 20 in D K499 'Hoffmeister' (1786)
*I. Allegretto • II. Menuetto. Allegretto •
III. Adagio • IV. Allegro*

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

String Quartet No. 3 Op. 94 (1975)
*I. Duets. With moderate movement • II. Ostinato.
Very fast • III. Solo. Very calm • IV. Burlesque.
Fast, con fuoco • V. Recitative and Passacaglia
(La Serenissima). Slow*

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 9 in C Op. 59 No. 3 'Razumovsky'
(1806)
*I. Introduzione. Andante con moto – Allegro
vivace • II. Andante con moto quasi allegretto •
III. Menuetto. Grazioso • IV. Allegro molto*



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In the summer of 1773, the 17 year-old **Mozart** left his native Salzburg in order to spend four months in Vienna. Although he never landed the court position his ambitious father had hoped for, the trip left its mark on his creative output all the same. There, he discovered the quartets of Haydn – as well as a lively culture of quartet playing – and he soon found himself inspired to compose works in the same spirit. His six so-called 'Viennese' quartets were written later that year, and he returned regularly to the genre thereafter, playfully rivalling Haydn's pre-eminence. Most of Mozart's quartets were published in sets, as with the six 'Haydn' quartets in 1785 and the three 'Prussian' quartets in 1791, just a few weeks after his untimely death. The 'Hoffmeister' quartet was not, though, part of such a group. Written in 1786, it is named after Mozart's friend and fellow free-mason, the publisher Franz Anton Hoffmeister.

Occasional it might have been, but the quartet is no less masterly for that. The opening Allegretto starts genially enough and shares the same radiant home key – D major – as much of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Yet like *Figaro*, the movement's seeming equanimity masks more complex emotions. An advert for the quartet described the second movement Menuetto as having being 'composed with an ingenuity (being interwoven with canonic imitations) that one not frequently finds wanting in other such compositions'. Here, the dance form associated with polite Viennese salons is imbued with a contrapuntal inventiveness that Mozart had learned not just from Haydn, but from the scores of Bach and Handel too. Then comes a warm and expressive Adagio in which a singing line is deftly spun across all four instruments. The energetic Finale is full of fidgety motifs and fluttering trills that decorate a witty and wide-ranging harmonic adventure. The joshing interplay of themes and voices even sounds a little like a conversation between the composer and his publisher.

If Mozart's 'Hoffmeister' is a work written by a composer at the height of his compositional energies, then **Britten's** String Quartet No. 3 is a distillation of a life's work and even a farewell to life itself. In 1970, Britten had been advised of the necessity of surgery to correct a defective heart valve. Yet he was determined to complete what would be his final opera, a version of Thomas Mann's novella, *Death in Venice*, so put off medical treatment until May 1973. A stroke meant that Britten's final years were marked by physical weakness, although there was no corresponding diminution in his creative powers, and in the autumn of 1973, he completed his third and final string quartet. It is dedicated to Hans Keller, the Austrian-born British musicologist, and its five movements have titles revealing Britten's interest in the creative possibilities of form. Together, they form an arch shape – a device borrowed from the quartets of Bartók. Shostakovich, too, had often employed such structures in his 15

quartets: Britten knew Shostakovich personally and the two composers had long admired each other's works.

But the String Quartet No. 3 is above all an intensely intimate work that takes us to the very heart of Britten's emotional world. The first four movements were composed at Aldeburgh, but the fifth was written on a visit to Venice, a city that Britten loved (and where his ghostly masterpiece, *The Turn of the Screw*, had been premièred in 1954). Subtitled 'La Serenissima', the finale is a *passacaglia* that unfolds over a repeated bass line that Britten claimed represented the sound of pealing Venetian bells. Britten also cites a number of themes taken directly from his *Death in Venice*, including a brief motto that Gustav von Aschenbach addresses to the beautiful Polish youth, Tadzio. Its words are 'I love you' – here addressed, surely, to Britten's partner, the tenor Peter Pears. The quartet was premièred in Aldeburgh on 19 December 1976, just a fortnight after Britten's death.

In 1806, the Russian ambassador to Vienna, Andrei Razumovsky, commissioned **Beethoven** to compose three works for his resident string quartet. Erudite, multilingual and cosmopolitan, Razumovsky had been Russian Ambassador to the Hapsburg Court since 1792. He may have represented the authorities in St Petersburg, but he was actually descended from an important Ukrainian family. His father had been an important Cossack official, elected Hetman of the Zaporizhian Host in 1750. When Catherine the Great abolished the Hetmanate in 1764, she appointed him to the title of Field Marshall of the Russian Army. An erudite figure of the Enlightenment, Razumovsky père, had studied in Göttingen in the 1740s. Given this heritage, it is no surprise that his son would go on to combine a career as a diplomat with that of a patron of the arts.

An early review highlighted the groundbreaking qualities of the new quartets: 'Three new, very long and difficult violin quartets by Beethoven, dedicated to the Russian ambassador Count Razumovsky, also attract the attention of all connoisseurs. They are deep in conception and marvellously worked out, but not universally comprehensible, with the possible exception of the third one, in C major, which by virtue of its individuality, melody, and harmonic power must win over every educated friend of music'.

Razumovsky had asked Beethoven to include a *thème russe* in each quartet, yet the third is the only one of the set not to quote a Russian melody directly. Indeed, in its vigorous finale, Beethoven's use of counterpoint seems to pay homage to Bach, rather than his well-connected imperial patron. Yet, Razumovsky cannot have been disappointed in the finished score, with its powerful journey from hesitant chromaticism to heroic affirmation of artistic creativity, and even life itself.

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