

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 26 May 2023
7.00pm

Novus String Quartet

Jaeyoung Kim violin
Young-Uk Kim violin
Kyuhyun Kim viola
Wonhae Lee cello

Darius Milhaud (1892-1974)

String Quartet No. 6 Op. 77 (1922)

I. Souple et animé • II. Très lent • III. Très vif et rythmé

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

String Quartet No. 2 in A minor Op. 13 (1827)

*I. Adagio - Allegro vivace • II. Adagio non lento •
III. Intermezzo. Allegretto con moto - Allegro di molto •
IV. Presto - Adagio non lento*

Interval

Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)

String Quartet No. 1 in D minor Op. 7 (1904-5)

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Like his companions in this evening's programme, **Darius Milhaud** was a keen string player. He was the second violinist in his teacher Léo Bruguier's quartet, when Debussy's sole but seminal contribution to the genre was prominent among its repertoire. Completed in 1893, Debussy's masterpiece certainly provided a benchmark for a subsequent generation of composers, including Ravel. Milhaud was, doubtless, the most prolific of them all, writing 18 string quartets between 1912 and 1950. Idiosyncratic, polystylistic, they veered between what he saw as the diatonic, Latin tradition and a chromatic, Germanic one, with evidence of the latter in his Fifth Quartet of 1920.

Milhaud's colleagues and compatriots were appalled by this polymodal work, which he dedicated to Schoenberg. Poulenc was particularly displeased by the experiment, while Saint-Saëns called it a 'charivari' - a confused noise or cacophony. Perhaps in response, Milhaud stepped back from the brink with his String Quartet No. 6 Op. 77 of 1922, dedicated to Poulenc. And although its three movements, lasting but ten minutes in total, likewise embrace polymodality, the music is anchored in the home key of G major to provide an engaging bridge between traditions.

The opening movement, *Souple et animé*, is richly textured, featuring a long-spun viola melody and perkier interjections from the violins. While all the players are equally determined, none is in charge, their lines coalescing in moments of seeming happenstance. Simpler and calmer is the central *Très lent*, an object lesson in Milhaud's claim that 'a polytonal chord is much more subtle when soft'. The finale, on the other hand, shows that it was also 'much more powerful when violent than a tonal combination', though the movement, for all its harmonic distinctions, speaks of Ravelian *raffinesse*.

Described as being 'in' A minor, **Mendelssohn's** Second String Quartet Op. 13 begins with a calm but searching introduction in the major key. Its questioning motifs are taken from 'Frage', the first song in his *12 Lieder* Op. 9. The original text, also by the composer, asks 'Ist es wahr?' ('Is it true?') at the start and end of a Lied concerning fidelity. Here, however, its dotted gestures spur a chilling trill, leading into the hectic energy of the first movement proper, with inquisitive rhythms returning throughout.

The *Adagio* begins in the same calm mood as at the start of the work, though it again belies the argument at the movement's core, told in fugal form. Only with the *Intermezzo* does the sense of purpose relent, as Mendelssohn contrasts a lilting theme with the kind of scurrying we might associate with his score for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The turbulent drama then returns in the rondo-finale, taking Beethoven's String Quartet No. 15 in A minor Op. 132 as its model. Reflective passages may ensue, though these are also preparing for the conclusion, when Mendelssohn brings us full circle. Written at the age of 18, this ingenious work was numbered second, though it was, in fact, the composer's first mature contribution to the genre, preceding 'No. 1' in E flat major Op. 12 by two years.

Chamber music also had a significant part to play in **Schoenberg's** development. A C major quartet movement from 1894 marked the beginning of his long association with the genre, which then continued in 1897 with a four-movement work in D major. The quartet, couched in the language of Brahms - who had only recently died - won the immediate appreciation of the Tonkünstlerverein, though its members were equally swift to express their dismay when Schoenberg submitted his string sextet *Verklärte Nacht* two years later.

Undimmed by the ire of the invariably conservative Viennese, Schoenberg's First String Quartet Op. 7, completed in September 1905, continued yet further down the path set by *Verklärte Nacht* and its bold orchestral successor *Pelleas und Melisande*. Originally, the Quartet had similarly programmatic aims, though these were to touch on more abstract thoughts, instead of the correspondingly poetic and dramatic narratives of *Verklärte Nacht* and *Pelleas*. In his sketches, Schoenberg noted down phrases such as 'rejection, defiance', 'desperation', 'enthusiastic strength to fight, development of fantasy, energy', 'greatest intoxication of the senses' and 'quiet happiness and the return of peace and harmony'. While, significantly, these were to remain private ideas, it is still possible to trace the moods in the music that arose.

Formally, the Quartet follows the structure of a complete sonata, as in the First Chamber Symphony Op. 9, with which the work shared its première in February 1907. The first performance was a familiarly unhappy one, with Paul Stefan later remembering that 'many found the work impossible, and left the hall during the performance, one particularly humorously through the emergency exit'. In both scores, Schoenberg had compressed the traditional four movements into one, offering a single, through-composed form. But, unlike the 20-minute Chamber Symphony, the Quartet occupies the length of many of its predecessors, lasting 40 minutes in total.

The first violinist takes the lead, before the opening D minor reveals much denser polyphony. At times, the players act independently of each other, the material in constant flux. Matters soon reach fever pitch, however, with any link to a tonal anchor stretched to breaking point. And while there are passages suggesting Schoenberg's 'greatest intoxication of the senses', the underlying propulsion rarely relents.

The scherzo section follows immediately and is much more disarming, evoking Haydn and Mozart in its bucolic tropes. But it also contains a polyphonic charge, its harmonic language knotting around itself more quickly than we might imagine. Providing further contrast, the adagio section is much bleaker, with eerie tremolos implying programmatic intent, before the final rondo twists into life. Turning the material round and round, it follows a thrilling, if occasionally treacherous, road to D major.

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