

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 27 April 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 D Op. 20 No. 4 (1772)

*I. Allegro di molto • II. Un poco adagio affetuoso •
III. Menuetto. Allegretto alla zingarese - Trio •
IV. Presto scherzando*

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

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet in G Op. 106 (1895)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Adagio ma non troppo •
III. Molto vivace • IV. Finale. Andante sostenuto - Allegro
con fuoco*



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Tonight's three quartets, written roughly a century apart in 1772, 1895 and 1975, offer telling snapshots of the evolution of the genre; glimpses, admittedly, of a vast repertoire. Attend every single quartet concert for a decade and you will probably hear less than 1% of it. **Haydn** alone wrote 68, and he was far from the most prolific: Albrechtsberger, Boccherini and Cambini are just the ABC of the composers who wrote more. By Dvořák's time, this flood had dwindled, making him exceptional with 14 quartets, while Britten's three outnumber those of most of his contemporaries. By leaping the centuries, the Castalian String Quartet also offers intriguing echoes and resonances across time. Haydn and Dvořák open their quartets with similar ideas: establish a soft, introspective mood, destroy it with an abrupt outburst then see what happens. Both Dvořák and Britten have the opening notes of their quartets return to haunt their finales to different but equally poignant effect. And as we journey from Haydn to Britten, the development of string and ensemble technique over two centuries is thrown into spectacularly sharp relief. But above all, tonight is a journey which may not have happened at all without Haydn's six quartets Op. 20.

Pivotal works in the evolution of the genre, the innovations in Op. 20 are famous. Haydn treated all four instruments more equally than his predecessors, deploying the players with greater invention to vary textures and challenging the supremacy of the first violin. He displayed more learned contrapuntal technique than usual, closing three of the quartets with fugues. Two of the Op. 20 quartets are in minor keys; his previous 22 quartets include just one such. These signs of an unusual and new-found seriousness have prompted many theories about what led Haydn in this direction, ranging from the arcane (the quartets reflect philosophical ideas of the day) to personal (his despair at having to spend time away from Vienna performing for the remote, mosquito-ridden court of Eszterháza). Yet important as they are, the innovations of Op. 20 are no more than the means by which Haydn achieved what makes these pieces so notable. He took a genre commonly described as 'divertimento' (a 'diversion') and elevated it by using it to express wonders. In his hands, the quartet became a genre to which Mozart, Beethoven and their successors turned to express some of their most audacious, profound and personal musical thoughts. A piece like Op. 20 No. 4 brings to mind Charles Ives's description of his own quartet as music for four players 'who converse, discuss, argue, fight, shake hands, shut up - then walk up the mountain side to view the firmament!' If there is any music that 'views the firmament' it is the second movement of Op. 20 No. 4, which uses the simplest of structures (a sequence of variations on an ear-catchingly unusual melody) to reach the most

sublime heights and offer each player ravishing solos and duos.

Britten's Third Quartet has a little-known link to Haydn's world, as Britten considered calling it 'divertimento' (as mentioned above, a term widely used for quartets before 'string quartet' became the common term). The divertimento in Haydn's time was a very protean form, but often had five movements arranged palindromically: movements 1 and 5 were substantial bookends; 2 and 4 were dances, usually minuets, while the central movement is often super-lyrical, a solo aria for the first violin. All of the above applies to Britten's piece, albeit his dances are spiky burlesques, not courtly. His finale brings together three of the loves of his life: Purcell; the city of Venice; and Peter Pears. Britten honoured Purcell in different ways, from his first works until his last unfinished manuscript. He especially shared Purcell's love of the chaconne or passacaglia: a repeated bass over which the composer weaves his music. The bass for this particular *Passacaglia* was inspired by church bells he could hear as he worked on this piece in the Hotel Danieli in Venice. It is worth noting too that it references the very opening notes of the quartet. Pears appears through quotations - in the preceding *Recitative* and elsewhere - from the last opera Britten wrote for him, *Death in Venice*.

Knowing that this was to prove Britten's last major completed work, and knowing how personal its inspiration was to him, it is hard to resist finding it profoundly, movingly valedictory. The ending ('dying away' as it is marked on the score) is like an acceptance of mortality. Would Britten have expressed such things in a quartet had Haydn not elevated the genre to this special place in his Op. 20?

In tonight's company, **Dvořák's** Op. 106 represents something of a midway point between the innovations of Haydn and Britten's virtuoso string writing. It was the 13th of his 14 quartets, and displays all the joyous mastery of the form he had acquired over 35 years. He clearly had an astonishingly sharp inner ear, and notates his intricate textures so minutely that the players have their work cut out to realise his every nuance. He is also delightfully mercurial and constantly shifts focus from, say, a single instrument leading to having the entire quartet playing as one, to splitting into two duos or a trio versus a single player; all of this is present in Haydn, but not to this extent. The flow of ravishing, memorable ideas is, as so often with Dvořák, breathtaking, not least because it all sounds so natural and effortless. How tragic that after 1895, when he wrote his last two quartets (this and Op. 105), he wrote no further chamber music, though he lived for most of a decade more.

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