

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 27 May 2024
1.00pm

Takács Quartet

Edward Dusinberre violin
Harumi Rhodes violin
Richard O'Neill viola
András Fejér cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in D minor Op. 42 (1785)

*I. Andante ed innocentemente • II. Menuetto.
Allegro - Trio • III. Adagio e cantabile • IV. Finale.
Presto*

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet in E flat Op. 51 (1878-9)

*I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Dumka (Elegia).
Andante con moto • III. Romanza. Andante con
moto • IV. Finale. Allegro assai*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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The 1780s were a crucial decade for the string quartet, and no composer was as central to the development of the form during this time as **Joseph Haydn**. By then he had already made several ventures into quartet writing, including a set of six expansive quartets, his Op. 22. But in 1779, a renegotiated contract with his employer, Prince Nikolaus I of the Esterházy dynasty, meant that he became newly free to exploit commercial opportunities for his music.

And so when in 1781 Haydn's new set of six quartets Op. 33 were published, he claimed to have composed them in a 'new and special manner' - no doubt with an eye for sales. Then an Op. 50 set arrived in 1787, and another the following year, Opp. 54 and 55. When Mozart published his own six quartets Op. 10 in 1785, he dedicated them to Haydn as 'the fruit of a long and laborious endeavour'. In those words we can detect not only Mozart's personal admiration, but also the growing esteem of quartet composition itself, which - in Haydn's hands more than anyone's - became a form suffused with wit, humour and intimacy, a musical equivalent (as Goethe would later observe) to an intelligent conversation between friends.

In the familiar march of Haydn's quartet numbers during this period, however, we find an outlier: a single quartet in D minor Op. 42. Unlike the surrounding groups of six works, it was published on its own in 1785, and is relatively short in duration.

This lonely work has long proven a puzzle. A possible clue is a letter to a publisher of April 1784, in which Haydn revealed he was working on three short string quartets for a Spanish patron, each in three movements. No further record of them exists (if they were ever completed) which has led some to believe that Op. 42 is one of them, or - since it has four movements rather than three - that Haydn repurposed material from that job.

Adding to its singular position, the marking of the first movement *Andante ed innocentemente* might lead us to suspect a lightweight work, a cast-off. But the assured elegance with which Haydn develops his deceptively simple opening dispels any thought of triviality. The three following movements all contain quintessential Haydn modes of expression in compact form: a bright and brisk minuet, with sinuous chromatic lunges, is followed by a tender violin aria, *Adagio e cantabile*, before we finish on a punchy fugato *Finale*. The pomposity of the latter's 'learned' style is playfully deflated at the very end with an understated, off-hand close - the epitome of the 'conversational' aesthetic.

Almost a century separates Haydn's quartet from **Antonín Dvořák's** String Quartet No. 10 in E flat, completed in 1879. But like that earlier work, this quartet was composed at a time when new opportunities were opening up for the composer. Dvořák was the son of a zither-playing butcher from a Bohemian village, and for much of the 1870s he worked

as a music teacher and organist in Prague, somewhat removed from the main currents of European music life.

He was nonetheless writing a considerable amount of music, and when he began to incorporate Slavonic folk elements into his work, it would soon prove the key to success. Brahms became an admirer, and in 1877 sent his Berlin publisher Fritz Simrock a copy of Dvořák's *Moravian Duets*, with a recommendation to work with him. He relayed that Dvořák was very talented but poor, and helpfully explained how to pronounce his name. When Simrock then commissioned a set of *Slavonic Dances*, they sold tremendously well - in the words of one critic, there was 'a positive assault on the music shops'.

Dvořák scores were soon in high demand, and other folk-tinged works, such as his orchestral *Slavonic Rhapsodies*, were quickly being performed across Europe. It was at during this period of growing recognition that Dvořák composed his string quartet Op. 51, in response to a request for a 'Slavonic' work from Jean Becker, a violinist in the Quartetto Fiorentino - one of the most highly respected quartets of their day, and pioneers of quartet playing as a professional concert activity in its own right.

Becker certainly got what he asked for. Dvořák expertly blends Slavonic elements into the quartet idiom with a natural melodic flair. The arpeggiated opening of the first movement is particularly lovely in its warm, rich sound, and its second subject is embellished with a jolly countermelody in a polka rhythm. The second movement is a *Dumka* - a traditional lament which Dvořák practically made his own as an instrumental form, marked by strummed pizzicato chords and a mournful melody in call-and-response. But halfway through it suddenly transforms into a lively triple-time dance, with rhythmic groupings that suggest the rustic *furiant*. An emotional counterweight is the *Romanza* movement that follows, a necessary reflective pause, perhaps, before the high-spirited *Finale*. Though Dvořák didn't employ the term, it's arguable that the competitive leaping dance known as the *skočná* influenced the main theme of this rondo-like movement.

Hearing such an attractive, open-hearted and well-crafted work, today it seems only natural that Dvořák's music should have prospered. A few months after completing the quartet, he heard it performed at the Berlin home of one of the foremost violinists of the 19th Century, Joseph Joachim. It was an evening that showed the composer how he was, at last, moving up in the musical world. As he wrote from Berlin: 'Being here for only a few hours I had spent so many enjoyable moments among the foremost artists, that they will certainly remain in my memory for the rest of my life'.

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