WIGMORE HALL 125

Thursday 27 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. 5 in A Op. 18 No. 5 (1798–1800)
I. Allegro • II. Menuetto •
III. Andante cantabile • IV. Allegro

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

Interval

String Quartet No. 14 in C sharp minor Op. 131 (1825-6)
I. Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo •
II. Allegro molto vivace • III. Allegro moderato •
IV. Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile •
V. Presto • VI. Adagio, quasi un poco andante •
VII. Allegro

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When he brought out his **Op. 18** Quartets in 1801, Beethoven was not the first composer to have emulated Haydn's practice of publishing string quartets in sets of six. In 1785 Mozart had paid similar tribute to the man who created the quartet genre, dedicating his Op. 10 set to the senior composer. Beethoven could hardly ignore that grand gesture. After all, he was setting himself up as worthy to stand alongside both of his predecessors.

The quartet he placed fifth in Op. 18's published order is the one that specifically addresses Mozart. The numbering itself may be intended to make the point. Mozart's Op. 10 No. 5 (K464) is in A major, the same key as Beethoven's Op. 18 No. 5, and the similarities do not end there. Both works place the *Minuet* second in the four-movement structure, and follow it with a theme and variations as the slow movement.

Beethoven is reported to have said of K464 that, in it, Mozart was saying, 'This is what I could have written if the time had been right.' Now Beethoven's replies from the new century, emulating Classical good manners but frequently letting his impatience with them break through.

The barbed accents and forceful repetitions that buffet the compact first movement convey at least a hint of parody. The *Minuet* (rather than the more up-to-date scherzo) begins politely but short circuits to create an awkward silence, while the trio places a jolting emphasis on the wrong beat. It is in the slow movement that the composer most radically demonstrates the difference between his age and that of Mozart, with the variations going beyond embellishment into the realms of deconstruction and reconstruction. With Beethoven having asserted his right to move on from the ways of the past, the lively closing movement finally achieves harmonious accord between the two eras.

Having expanded the expressive range of the quartet medium with his Op. 18 set, Beethoven made a further advance with the three **Opus 59** works commissioned by Russia's Ambassador to the Habsburg Empire, Count Andrei Kirillovich Razumovsky (1752-1836). By the time they were completed, in 1806, Beethoven had already unleashed his revolutionary *Eroica Symphony*. Primed to expect something of equivalent originality, the Viennese public found plenty in the new quartets that was provocative and confrontational.

The first movement opens with a rootless chord that initiates a lengthy introduction, finding a dark, labyrinthine way to the home key. Even then, the *Allegro* begins several bars before C major is fully established, joyfully; thereafter the themes continuously evolve.

The second movement proceeds as if on tiptoe and guided by candlelight. Razumovsky had requested that a traditional Russian theme be included in each of 'his' three quartets. In No. 3 Beethoven did not specify where, if anywhere, he had inserted one, though the enigmatic character of this *Andante* suggests it is the most likely place. As if reluctant to disturb the mood, the graceful minuet that follows speaks gently, though the trio section injects sufficient energy to provide contrast.

The coda of the minuet is a shadowy passage recalling the mysterious introduction to the first movement. Indeed, it proves to be a transition to the finale, which begins in fugal style but emerges as a contrapuntally enriched version of sonata form. This *Allegro molto* revisits some of the harmonic tensions of the first movement, but an unflagging sense of purpose ensures that ebullience wins the day.

When Beethoven sent the score of **Op. 131** to the publisher in 1826, he scribbled on the manuscript, 'Stolen and stitched together from shreds and patches.' The alarmed publisher took this at face value, and Beethoven had to explain that his comment was a leg-pull. A work of profound inner logic, the quartet was nonetheless pieced together from fragmentary ideas, extensively reworked and rearranged, as the sketchbooks reveal. One of the most unified of all musical creations, this seven-movement epic is at the same time a marvel of free invention.

Although for most listeners the matter of key structure is of only subliminal significance, it is worth referring to it to explain the Quartet's progress to a disconcerting ending. The introductory C sharp minor *Adagio* is in the ancient fugue form – this is one of those special moments when music looks far into the past and future at the same time. The jig-like *Allegro* that follows like a first movement proper (in D major) has simplicity and gaiety.

Without a break we arrive at the *Allegro moderato*, a jagged and unsettled transition of 11 bars that takes us to the A major 'slow movement', a series of variations on a flowing *andante* theme. The last 'variation' is in fact a coda in which part of the original theme reappears illuminated by soft trills.

The E major *Presto* is a form of scherzo, with teasing hesitations, a rustic, hurdy-gurdy episode and some surprise pizzicato interjections. A madcap coda seems about to round the movement off when we find ourselves in the vast, solemn, cathedral space of a G sharp minor *Adagio*. Yet this proves to be not the full-scale slow movement it first appears, but the grand portal to the finale.

The concluding, galloping *Allegro* is in C sharp minor. We have arrived back in that key after journeying though a panoply of tonalities; but near the end Beethoven lands us on the remote shore of D major – and stays there for so long that the hurried conclusion in C sharp minor is a shock that rarely feels 'right' to the first-time listener. Beethoven has taken the music of his time to a point where we can no longer be sure where we are.