

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 27 September 2023
7.30pm

Castalian String Quartet

Sini Simonen violin

Yume Fujise violin

Ruth Gibson viola

Steffan Morris cello

Dénes Várjon piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet No. 15 in D minor K421 (1783)

I. Allegro moderato

II. Andante

III. Menuetto. Allegretto

IV. Allegretto ma non troppo

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

String Quartet No. 1 BB52 (1908-9)

I. Lento

II. Poco a poco accelerando all'allegretto

III. Introduzione. Allegro - Allegro vivace

Interval

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Quintet in F minor Op. 34 (1862 rev. 1864)

I. Allegro non troppo

II. Andante, un poco adagio

III. Scherzo. Allegro

IV. Finale. Poco sostenuto - Allegro non troppo

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Mozart met Haydn for the first time in December 1781, shortly before Haydn published his string quartets Op. 33. Mozart was fascinated, and in late 1782 he began a new set of string quartets of his own, dedicated to Haydn. He took over two years to complete the six; only in January 1785 could Wolfgang and Leopold Mozart and two friends finally play the quartets for Haydn at Mozart's apartment in Vienna. It was on that evening that Haydn turned to Leopold and told him 'Before God, and as an honest man, I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name!'

The D minor quartet K421 was the second of the set to be completed, if we believe an anecdote told by Constanze Mozart to more than one future biographer:

When Mozart was composing the second of the six quartets, his wife was in labour for the first time. He worked in the same room where she lay. Whenever she gave voice to her suffering, he came to her in order to console her; and when she was calmer he returned to his manuscript. The *Menuet and Trio* were composed exactly at the time of the delivery.

The Mozarts' son Raimund was born on 17 June 1783. But even if we choose not to believe that the anxious *Menuetto* could really have been written during a birth, there's no doubt about the special character of this quartet. D minor was a very personal and deeply emotive key for Mozart; its dark colour gives a bitter edge to the finale, and lends the first *Allegro* a brooding intensity that's all the more powerful for being presented in such spartan textures. Haydn certainly thought so, and his own D minor quartet Op. 76 No. 2 of 1796 speaks louder than any words. Composed five years after Mozart's death, it's a direct homage to Mozart's K421. Master had become disciple.

On 17 March 1910, **Béla Bartók** performed with the Waldbauer-Kerpély String Quartet at an all-Kodály concert in Budapest. Two days later, Bartok's own First Quartet received its première. These two concerts would come to be called 'the double birthday of Hungarian Music', and for Bartók himself, they marked an arrival. In 1908, shortly before he commenced writing the First Quartet, he had broken off a relationship with the violinist Stefi Geyer. He called the lamenting first movement of the quartet his 'funeral dirge' for their love.

So Bartók's First Quartet is simultaneously a self-portrait of a young genius striving towards his own creative voice, and a reserved, serious man candidly expressing deep emotion. The first movement is a searching, tortuously chromatic *Lento*, expressive after the manner of Wagner, or the Schoenberg of *Verklärte Nacht*. The movement opens in the form of a canon; a more declamatory central section over a grinding cello drone-bass is a first taste of the visceral, earthy expressiveness so characteristic of the later Bartók.

The central *Allegretto* begins in the manner of a highly chromatic waltz, but develops in sonata form. Linking the *Allegretto* and the final *Allegro vivace* is an *Introduzione* in the form of an instrumental recitative - a question-and-answer exchange between violins and *parlando* cello that evokes Beethoven's famous instrumental dialogue in the Ninth Symphony. Bartok's ultimate answer to the question is no less significant: an explosively rhythmic, high-speed Hungarian folk-dance finale with a fantastic, dancing central *fugato*. Kodály, Bartók's lifelong friend, described the First Quartet as 'an intimate drama, a kind of "return to life" of one who has reached the brink of the abyss', but the overall effect is of energy channelled and finally released: an artistic arrival.

The house where **Brahms** spent the summer of 1865 spills down the pine-forested hillside above the small town of Lichtental near Baden-Baden. Today, it's a Brahms Museum; but Brahms's top floor room, with its views of the Black Forest, saw the birth of the Horn Trio, the G major String Sextet and the *German Requiem*. And something else besides: a piece of substantial unfinished business. Writing to his friend Julius Stockhausen in October 1865 at the tail end of his stay, he mentioned that 'a quintet of sixty-seven pages is waiting to be corrected'.

It had begun life some three years earlier as a quintet for strings. The F minor Piano Quintet is the result of repeated rewriting, and contemporaries immediately saw the finished work as something major - something unprecedented, in fact, since the death of Schubert. Brahms's friend Hermann Levi saw the parallel: 'a masterpiece of chamber music of a kind of which we have had no other example since 1828'.

It feels invidious to comment on the form of a work which Brahms struggled so hard to make speak on its own, purely musical, terms. Its formal strength is massive; its emotional content at times almost volcanic. But compare the way Brahms's tense, quiet ensemble statement of the opening motif immediately fractures, explosively, into strings against piano, and how piano and strings later take turns to accompany each other.

The piano takes the lead over quietly-breathing strings in the *Andante*, and only as the movement approaches its end do strings and piano truly strive together, to ever more rhapsodic heights. The cello's soft *pizzicato* evokes timpani (and heartbeats) at the start of the *Scherzo* and the striding major-key confidence of the trio can't quite dispel the ominous mood - any more than the muscular, headlong argument of the *Finale* was ever likely to lead to a happy ending. Which is not to say that Brahms doesn't look back in this tragic final movement - merely that, in art as in life, he does so merely in order to move courageously and uncompromisingly forward.

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