

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 27 September 2024
7.30pm

In memory of Anne Swain

Castalian String Quartet

Sini Simonen violin
Daniel Roberts violin
Natalie Loughran viola
Steffan Morris cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in G minor Op. 20 No. 3 (1772)
*I. Allegro con spirito • II. Menuetto. Allegretto •
III. Poco adagio • IV. Finale. Allegro molto*

György Kurtág (b.1926)

6 Moments musicaux Op. 44 (1999-2005)
*Invocatio (un fragment) • Footfalls • Capriccio •
In memoriam György Sebők • Rappel des
oiseaux (Etude pour les harmoniques) • Les
adieux (in Janáček's manier)*

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quartet in G D887 (1826)
*I. Allegro molto moderato • II. Andante un poco
moto • III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace - Trio.
Allegretto • IV. Allegro assai*

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When, in 1779, the publisher Hummel of Berlin issued the second edition of **Joseph Haydn's** fifth set of string quartets, he added a flourish on the front page of the score: a little picture of a smiling sun. It was a printer's stock image; a piece of 18th-century clip-art, if you like. But to this day, the six quartets that we now know as Haydn's Op. 20 are still referred to as the 'Sun' quartets. It just seemed right.

Haydn wrote these six quartets in 1772, and he was already thoroughly familiar with the combination of two violins, viola and cello. But in the decade since his Op. 1 (1762), he'd pushed its possibilities progressively further. Just listen to the results in this third quartet of the set, cast in the stormy key of G minor. The first violin, darkened by the viola an octave beneath it, sings a terse, urgent melody while second violin and cello push forward with a brusque, interlocking accompaniment. It's a stark texture, but throughout the movement, stringency transforms itself into warmth through the medium of instrumental dialogue and rough-cut humour.

It's a new way of writing for these four instruments – one that means that the *Menuetto* can become a bittersweet extension of that same mood. And although the first violin does eventually resume its traditional, brilliantly decorative role in the hymn-like G major *Poco adagio*, the cello has got there first – with the rest of the group creating a glowing halo over its quietly unfurling semiquavers and impassioned declarations. There's no one leader here. So we reach the *Finale*, and Haydn echoes the opening sonority of his first movement even as he speeds on his way. Bach would have admired the way Haydn works through his musical puzzle; but Haydn is too civilised, and too optimistic a composer not to bring this G minor quartet safely home to G major. It arrives *sotto voce* – like a thief in the night.

György Kurtág has been called a sculptor of notes, but he defines his own work in words borrowed from the poet Attila József: 'the structures stripped bare hold up the empty air'. Born to Hungarian parents in Lugoj, in a region that since 1920 had been part of Romania, he survived Nazi occupation and postwar Communist tyranny, before the 1956 Hungarian Revolution sent him to Paris. There he studied with Messiaen and Milhaud before finding creative liberation in the music of Webern and the writings of Samuel Beckett. Now in his late 90s, he continues to craft a musical language in which silence can be as meaningful as sound; in which the full weight of musical history is present in the smallest gesture.

Kurtág has always been drawn to small ensembles, and the title of his *6 Moments musicaux* for string quartet alludes directly to Schubert (though it might not be coincidence that the opus number – 44 – is shared by Schumann's three string quartets). It's not strictly true to say that Kurtág gives little away:

everything that he needs to say is packed with perfect eloquence into these six brief pieces, which draw on his own piano cycle *Játékok* and whose titles reference Samuel Beckett, Beethoven, birdsong, the poet Endre Ady and the Hungarian pianist and teacher György Sebők, who died in 1999. As to the music, there's certainly humour (he describes the *Capriccio* third section as 'full of cunning pitfalls') as well as darkness (the *Dies irae* funeral chant in the 'light, tender, volatile' fifth section) and echoes of Janaček's speech-melodies in the final *Les adieux*. But Kurtág wants you to listen and form associations for yourself: ultimately, (and, if you like, consolingly) there are no wrong answers.

On 31 March 1824 **Schubert** wrote to his friend Leo Kupelwieser: 'I have tried my hand at several instrumental things, and have composed two quartets...and want to write another quartetto, really wanting in this manner to pave the way to a big symphony'. Those two quartets appeared in due course – the Quartet in D minor known as 'Death and the Maiden' and the A minor quartet Op. 29 – but two years passed before Schubert finally tackled the third. The G major Quartet appears to have been written – incredibly – in just 10 days: 20–30 June 1826, at Schubert's home in the Wieden, the future Fourth District of Vienna. Its first movement might (or might not) have been the 'new quartet' played by Ignaz Schuppanzigh's quartet in Schubert's one and only public benefit concert, on 26 March 1828.

The G major Quartet surpasses in scale the biggest symphony Schubert ever wrote. But its basic forms are classical; and its melodic inspiration is vintage Schubert (did he ever write a melody more heart-melting than the one he gives to the cello in the *Scherzo's* central *Trio*?). The opening chord, with its sudden darkening from major to minor, is crucial: the whole quartet is coloured by this tension. The jagged outbursts of the first subject loom up through the tremolando: this is an epic journey, but also a deeply emotional one.

There's certainly a foreshadowing of *Winterreise* in the *Andante* – this desolate walking-song, with its two violent outbursts, tells its own story and another minor/major shift falls like a blessing on the final bar. The *Scherzo* is a vortex of controlled energy, with an irresistible swing. And the model for the finale is clear enough: it's a huge, freewheeling (but not untroubled) dance of the kind that closes Mozart's *Divertimento* K563 and (more to the point) Mozart's G minor string quintet. Schubert could have given us a more conventional finale, though after what has gone before, it's hard to see how. Instead – in Donald Tovey's words, 'we have the momentum of a planet in its orbit'.

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