

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 28 December 2024
7.30pm

Carducci String Quartet

Matthew Denton violin
Michelle Fleming violin
Eoin Schmidt-Martin viola
Emma Denton 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*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

String Quartet in F (1902-3)

*I. Allegro moderato, très doux • II. Assez vif,
très rythmé • III. Très lent • IV. Vif et agité*

Interval

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 2 in A Op. 68 (1944)

*I. Overture. Moderato con moto • II. Recitative
and Romance. Adagio • III. Valse. Allegro •
IV. Theme and Variations. Adagio*



UNDER 35S

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Haydn's Op. 20 string quartets date to 1772. At the time, he was still very much part of Prince Nicolaus's organisation at Eisenstadt, south of Vienna, where he had recently composed the *Missa Sancti Nicolai* and the 'Farewell' Symphony. But Haydn's promotion to *Kapellmeister* and the role's slightly freer contract also allowed him to explore opportunities beyond the palace. Given that the Prince cared little for chamber music, the Op. 20 quartets were certainly the result of such a development and proved particularly successful when published by Chevardière in Paris in 1774, with an image of the sun on the cover – hence the set's nickname.

The fourth of the six quartets, in D major, begins in a surprisingly pensive manner, though this belies the unpredictable spirit of what follows, as the Allegro shifts between moments of tender sobriety and exhilarating virtuosity. There is even greater variety in the expansive Adagio. Set in D minor – a sombre, often funereal key – it contains diverse variations, featuring Baroque zest, Classical poise and even a foretaste of Romanticism.

The tonic major returns for the minuet, where accented violin lines work against the music that is shared between the viola and cello. Together, this chopping and changing gives the dance its Hungarian flavour, hence the marking of 'alla zingarese'. In the second part, each player becomes independent of the other, before the cello leads a clipped if self-assured Trio. Finally, Haydn adds another spoonful of paprika to his Presto scherzando, bringing this delightfully capricious Quartet to a close.

In 1903, Fauré asked his pupils at the Paris Conservatoire to write a work in celebration of the 10th anniversary of Debussy's String Quartet – a work that had helped launch the composer's career. By the end of April, **Ravel** had completed the first draft of his tribute. Fauré was not particularly impressed with the results, though the young Ravel was thrilled to receive Debussy's personal encouragement. Time has also been justly kind to the work, which although indebted to its model is nonetheless distinctive, a brilliant variation on a theme rather than a mere imitation.

That is instantly apparent in the first movement, where a lilting theme in F major provides a suave, ambling variant of Debussy's much brusquer *idée*. There follows a modulation to D minor for the second subject, seductively echoed at the double octave and with pizzicato droplets suggesting a nocturnal setting. The tritone at the tail end of its melody – moving from B flat to E natural – nonetheless sounds a note of disquiet.

Divergences of mood similarly pervade the following dance. Its pizzicato textures were inspired by both Debussy's *Assez vif et bien rythmé* and the gamelan orchestra Ravel and his contemporaries encountered at the Exposition Universelle in 1889. The use of the Aeolian and Dorian modes, however, suggests a more European, even courtly, sensibility, in turn pointing to the Iberian tropes that often infused the Basque-born

Ravel's soundworld. As in the first movement, there is a more reflective middle section, with elements of a Sarabande, before the exuberance returns.

The ensuing *Très lent* is a touching confession, in the cast of the *Pavane pour une enfant défunte* (1899). It certainly defies Stravinsky's quippy description of Ravel's 'watchmaker' artificiality, not least due to the music's rule-breaking harmonic procedures, which may have been one of the reasons Fauré blanched at the score. The work ends, however, with an impulsive hoedown that constantly juxtaposes bars of three and five beats each. The second subject reiterates its equivalent in the first movement, though twilight melancholy has now turned to joy. Finally, Ravel caps his (sole) Quartet with a cheery flurry of sound, providing a new model for future generations, both at home and abroad.

Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 2 in A major Op. 68 dates to September 1944, when he was working at an artists' retreat in Ivanovo, 150 miles northeast of Moscow. It was written shortly after his haunting Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor Op. 67. The kinship between the two compositions is certainly apparent in the Quartet's sonata-form Overture – we might ask, to what? But unlike the Trio, with its overt references to the atrocities committed by the Nazis against the Jews, the Quartet evades specific extramusical themes, even if its dissonances and unsettling atmosphere befit the times.

The second movement, Recitative and Romance, is tripartite in form. Long sustained chords support a haunting violin cantilena, which mixes Bachian elements with Jewish songs and modalities. A neo-Mozartian aria then emerges in the eerily simple middle section, though it is not long before the harmonies blacken, and we return to the music of the Recitative.

The Valse that follows is, perhaps, closest in spirit to the contemporaneous Piano Trio, including Shostakovich's frequently cited image of Holocaust victims being forced to dance beside their own graves. As in the Finale to the Trio, Shostakovich turns an ostensibly social waltz into a chilling *danse macabre*, heard here through a veil of mutes.

The mood of the Recitative returns in the introduction to the Finale, albeit in the same E flat minor with which the waltz ended. It generates an awkward tonal gulf from the home key of A major, to which we may have hoped the Quartet would ultimately return. The main business of the work's last movement centres on a folk-like theme. Featuring various twists and turns, it provides the basis for an unpredictable and sometimes violent set of variations. Eventually, these lead not to A major but to the tonic minor, with a restatement of the theme played in full-blooded mourning. Victory has proved elusive, though there is, at least, a sense of conciliation and closure.

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