

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 28 November 2024  
7.30pm

## Tetzlaff Quartet

Christian Tetzlaff violin  
Elisabeth Kufferath violin  
Hanna Weinmeister viola  
Tanja Tetzlaff cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

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*

*Interval*

Jörg Widmann (b.1973)

String Quartet No. 2 'Choralquartett' (2003, rev. 2006)

Johannes Brahms 1833-1897)

String Quartet in A minor Op. 51 No. 2 (?1865-73)

*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Andante moderato •  
III. Quasi menuetto, moderato - Allegro vivace •  
IV. Finale. Allegro non assai*



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When **Beethoven** sent this monumental late quartet to his 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. And that is not the only paradox: one of the most unified of all musical creations, this seven-movement epic is at the same time a marvel of free invention.

The *Adagio* with which the Quartet opens 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. Though marked 'molto espressivo' and emotionally intense, the material has a modal purity, the sense of key becoming more elusive as the temperature rises. Yet the jig-like *Allegro* that follows like a first movement proper (in D major) has simplicity and gaiety. The modulations are sophisticated in the extreme, but the melodic material retains its naive, delicate charm.

Without a break we arrive at the *Allegro moderato*, a jagged and unsettled transition of eleven bars that takes us to the A major 'slow movement', a series of variations on a flowing *Andante* theme. After profound transformations of this melody (including tempo and metre changes), the last 'variation' is a coda in which part of the original theme reappears illuminated by soft trills.

In the E major *Presto* the scurrying first theme, with its teasing hesitations, is offset by a rustic, hurdy-gurdy episode and some surprise pizzicato interjections. A madcap coda seems about to round the movement off when suddenly 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 *Allegro* has something of the nocturnal gallop character of the 'Moonlight' Sonata's finale, which shares the home key of C sharp minor. We have arrived back in that key after journeying through a panoply of tonalities; but near the end Beethoven lands us once again 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.

One of the most internationally performed of living composers, **Jörg Widmann** was born in Munich. He is equally active as a clarinet soloist and teacher. His Second String Quartet was written in 2003 and revised in 2006. It consists of a single, slow movement which the composer has said would have been 'inconceivable' without his having known Haydn's

*Seven Last Words*, a meditation on Christ's crucifixion written originally for orchestra but later arranged for string quartet. Widmann writes: 'In my examination of crucifixion themes, the "path" and the "final journey" were the essential expressions. My work begins at the end of the path. These are all final tones, phrases from the past which originate from nowhere and do not lead anywhere. The horrifying friction and abrasion of skin on wood forms a central theme and is associated through silence with tonal choral elements. I am interested in investigating how, through the course of the work, sound effects no longer represent desolation, and tonal elements no longer represent confidence'.

**Johannes Brahms** had reached the age of 40 before he published his first two quartets, as a pair, in the autumn of 1873. Four years earlier they had been sufficiently advanced for the composer to ask for a private play-through. News of this must have reached his eager publisher, as Brahms sent a letter explaining that he did not consider them ready for submission. He pointed out that Mozart had taken considerable care over the six quartets he had written to honour Haydn – so it was only right that he should give his closest attention to turning out 'one or two passably acceptable ones'.

Just as Mozart had been conscious of Haydn, the master who had brought the quartet form to maturity, so Brahms was acutely aware of the unsurpassed achievements of Beethoven in the genre. A bust of that revered figure had pride of place in his study. Brahms's friend and biographer Max Kalbeck asserted that 20 attempts at writing a quartet were made before the two that form Opus 51 saw the light of day. Whether any material from these projects survived in finished works will remain unknown, since Brahms was conscientious about destroying anything he deemed unworthy.

The A minor Quartet is intricately crafted. The exposition of the first movement moves swiftly from melancholic yearning to nervous agitation, which disperses to bring in a wistful melody over a plucked accompaniment. The *codetta* blows in like a gust of wind: its mood swings are even more rapid and extreme. On these apparently volatile foundations a movement of immense stature is built. The slow movement is notable for the eruption of a pained central section reminiscent of late Schubert, and there is a similarly Schubertian feel to the sad, subdued minuet, which unexpectedly has a scherzo episode as its trio. A feature of the entire Quartet is the juxtaposition of triple and duple or quadruple time, and the *Finale* opens with a 'square' theme over a 'triangular' accompaniment. A sense of determinedly heading in several directions at once persists until a series of quiet chords achieves unity, before a final flurry of activity.

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