

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 29 December 2023
7.30pm

Doric String Quartet

Juliette Roos violin
Ying Xue violin
Hélène Clément viola
John Myerscough 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

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) String Quartet No. 2 BB75 (1914-7)

I. Moderato
II. Allegro molto capriccioso
III. Lento

Interval

Edward Elgar (1857-1934) String Quartet in E minor Op. 83 (1918)

I. Allegro moderato
II. Piacevole (poco andante)
III. Allegro molto

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Beethoven's Op. 18 quartets marked his first official foray into the genre when they were published in Vienna in 1801. There had likely been earlier works, but these six compositions were a clear statement of intent. They were also lucky to be given a strong start in life, thanks to the patronage of the man named at the top of the score: Joseph Franz von Lobkowitz. His support was to be one of the lynchpins of Beethoven's career; returning the compliment, the composer dedicated several works to the Czech prince, including three of his symphonies.

The fifth quartet in the Op. 18 set is in A major and was composed between 1798 and 1800. Many have heard in it a tribute to Mozart, namely his String Quartet No. 18 in the same key, K464, which was also published as the fifth in a set of six quartets dedicated to Haydn in 1785. But as much as Beethoven's work is imbued with an appropriate level of homage to his idols, he is very much his own man, striding out with unique humour and ingenious responses to the expectations of his listening public.

The elegance of the chirpy first movement might almost be heard in inverted commas, as if Beethoven were declaring that he too could provide fittingly graceful music for the imperial capital. There are notable minor-key excursions, though these provide an exception to the rule and thereby underline the prevailing level of sophistication. Although Beethoven had already eschewed the courtly minuet in favour of more discursive scherzos by the time he wrote this Quartet, the second movement offers a rather severe version of the dance. Again, the subsequent plunge into the minor highlights that buttoned-up nature.

The *Andante* is more guileless. Its gentle hymn-like song is simplicity itself, based on rising and falling scales. From these humble beginnings come great things, however, as witnessed in the ensuing set of variations, which are full of tonal, harmonic and developmental originalities, as well as moments of profundity. In response, the finale is the model of legerdemain, bringing this charming and witty work to an uplifting close.

Bartók wrote his Second String Quartet between 1914 and 1917, a period in his life otherwise dominated by the collection and, particularly, the arrangement of folksongs – the latter when field trips were curbed by the events of the First World War. Certainly, the harmonic language of the work's first movement derives from that native repertoire, albeit pressed to more expressionistic ends. As motifs pass between the players, tonality becomes increasingly fluid, further stimulating the feeling of ebb and flow. There is a lyrical heart to the movement too, though its serenade-like textures cannot win through, and the movement ends with a shiver.

The year before he began the Second Quartet, Bartók travelled to what is now Algeria, where he was able to study the songs and dances of the Berber peoples.

Their folk music had a tighter melodic range than the Hungarian tunes that had previously been Bartók's focus, as well as employing different modes and accompanied by persistent drumming. These elements come to characterise the wild second movement, in which lyrical responses prove even briefer than in the first. The finale is contrastingly introspective. Climaxes often seem inconclusive and, rather than acting as one voice, the four instruments appear in isolation, before concluding with desolate pizzicato chords. The Quartet was first heard in Budapest on 3 March 1918, played by the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet.

By that time, **Elgar** was just about to embark on his String Quartet, which had its première at Wigmore Hall on 21 May 1919. Written alongside the Cello Concerto, which reflected on the horrors of war, and the Piano Quintet, with which the Quartet shared its first performance, Op. 83 forms part of a premature clutch of 'late' works. Following the death of Elgar's wife Alice in April 1920, there were to be painfully few new projects thereafter, aside from abortive attempts to write another symphony and a first opera. While the sketches for both show no dimming of inspiration, the depressive composer's self-confidence had clearly faded.

The Quartet is another matter. While it likewise demonstrates that Elgar was never going to produce 'anything violently chromatic or cubist', to use his own words, he was readily exploring new ideas in 1918. The first movement, for instance, is a flowing creation that rarely touches the ground. Its inventive combination of pastoral modalities and Brahmsian chains of thirds, as in the composer's Fourth Symphony (in the same key), perpetuates the sense of rootlessness. Rhythmically, too, the first and second subjects – the latter tending towards a more, though not completely, untrammelled major key – evade expectation. This may be music on the doorstep of disillusionment, but magnetic inspiration is still in reach.

The *Piacevole (poco andante)* has a salon-like temperament – or at least one in search of the salons of lost time – and harks back to the ease of *Chanson de matin* (quoted briefly) and *Salut d'amour*. Alice, to whom the latter was dedicated, likened the Quartet's middle movement to 'captured sunshine', with the 'sound of bees and insects on a hot summer's afternoon', as Elgar may well have heard at Brinkwells, the thatched Sussex cottage where the work was written, though the audience would be forgiven for perceiving darker clouds too. Nonetheless, there is vigour enough in the Quartet's finale, a jauntier, more jagged recollection, perhaps, of the headlong energy of the *Serenade for strings* Op. 20 or the *Introduction and Allegro* Op. 47. But where those turn-of-the-century works promised future wonders, including the oratorios, the symphonies and the concertos, the propulsion here might be considered a (near) last gasp of glory.

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