

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 29 January 2022 7.30pm

## Jerusalem Quartet

Alexander Pavlovsky violin

Sergei Bresler violin

Ori Kam viola

Kyril Zlotnikov cello

Supported by The Dorset Foundation - in memory of Harry M Weinrebe

## Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 1 in F Op. 18 No. 1 (1798-1800)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato •  
III. Scherzo. Allegro molto • IV. Allegro*

String Quartet No. 7 in F Op. 59 No. 1 'Razumovsky' (1806)

*I. Allegro • II. Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando •  
III. Adagio molto e mesto • IV. Thème russe. Allegro*

Interval

String Quartet No. 12 in E flat Op. 127 (1824-5)

*I. Maestoso - Allegro • II. Adagio, ma non troppo e molto cantabile •  
III. Scherzando vivace - Presto • IV. Finale. Allegro*



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**Beethoven** began his first set of six string quartets, Op. 18, in 1798. He returned to the genre in 1806, with the three Op. 59 quartets dedicated to Count Razumovsky. The single quartets Op. 74 and Op. 95 followed in 1809 and 1810 respectively, and then, in his final years, came the last five: Op. 127 (1825), Op. 130 (1825, originally incorporating the 'Grosse Fuge' Op. 133), Op. 132 (1825), Op. 131 (1826), and Op. 135 (1826). These 16 works thus chart the trajectory of his mature career, each demonstrating in different ways Beethoven's willingness to push the boundaries of classical form and to explore the many varied sound-worlds of the string quartet as an ensemble. Although now regarded as pinnacles of the repertoire, the story of their composition and first performances illustrates both the social aspect of chamber music and how long it sometimes took for Beethoven's music to be appreciated.

Beethoven's quartet output is often presented in distinct historical periods, suggesting that he composed in wholly different styles in each decade. It is true that in the Op. 18 quartets he kept to the conventional pattern of four movements and used familiar forms, whereas in the later quartets he varied the numbers of movements, sometimes running them into one another, and went against harmonic and structural expectations to a greater degree. However, there are certain characteristics of Beethoven's quartets that suggest that across his career there were continuities as well as changes.

For instance, Beethoven often depends on quite simple musical ideas to generate material. Op. 18 No. 1 begins with a turn motif, played in unison by the quartet, which is manipulated throughout the first movement. The *Allegretto* second movement of Op. 59 No. 1 constantly returns to a rhythm played on one note. By the late quartets, philosopher Theodor Adorno observed, Beethoven could even take something as basic as a trill as his starting point.

Against that emphasis on motivic coherence, contrast is also important in Beethoven's quartets. In Op. 18 No. 1, accents and momentary silences heighten dynamic contrasts in each of the movements. Op. 59 No. 1 and Op. 127 explore even greater extremes, with the composer carefully indicating changes in volume and articulation. Such contrasts can be playful as well as dramatic, as shown in the thematic, registral and dynamic juxtapositions of Beethoven's *Scherzo* movements.

In Op. 18 No. 1 the pattern is conventional: the busy opening *Scherzo* contrasts with the mercurial central Trio, before repeating the first section. The equivalent movement of Op. 59 No. 1 is not so strict in form, as indicated by Beethoven's description of it as an *Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando*. 'Scherzo' in this instance is more a puckish mood than a form. The aforementioned one-note rhythm persists despite all manner of other melodic ideas and harmonic areas being thrown at it.

A different tack, combining both approaches, is taken by Beethoven in Op. 127. The *Scherzando vivace* begins with pizzicato chords that seem to belong more to the end of a movement than the beginning. The main, rather jerky theme is shared between all the instruments, but this long multi-part section is suddenly interrupted by a questioning phrase from cello and viola. Subsequently the music seems to lose energy until there is a rush into the central *Presto*, with the first violin pursuing a long rising phrase brought back to earth by a foot-stamping dance. The first section returns, though it is not repeated exactly, as happened in Op. 18 No. 1. What's more, all of these contrasting ideas stay in play: the *Presto* reappears at the end, as if the movement could continue further.

Expressive lyricism marks each of the slow movements. The beautiful cantilena of the *Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato* of Op. 18 No. 1 is inflected by the light and dark of shifts between major and minor modes and surprisingly dramatic changes in dynamic; a kind of musical chiaroscuro effect. The opening of the *Adagio molto e mesto* of Op. 59 No. 1 is marked *sotto voce*, implying an introversion belied by the increasingly ornate filigree embellishments shared between instruments. A similar pattern emerges in the *Adagio, ma non troppo e molto cantabile* of Op. 127, with the first violin introducing a fragile melody which is gradually woven into an elaborate musical texture that absorbs a kaleidoscope of moods and keys.

In 1801, Beethoven wrote to his friend Karl Amenda asking him not to circulate his manuscript copy of Op. 18 No.1. He explained that he had 'just learned how to write quartets properly'. For the revised, published version of the F major quartet he trimmed and tightened the motivic working and smoothed over some of the more dramatic contrasts. Beethoven's decisions in part were informed by the feedback he received from his peers and patrons, who shaped his approach to composition in myriad ways. On the advice of violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, who gave the premières of almost all of Beethoven's quartets and was a trusted, if often teased, colleague, Beethoven reordered the Op. 18 set: what we now know as No. 1 was composed second, after what was published as No. 3. The '*Thème russe*' of the finale to Op. 59 No. 1 nodded to that fact that its commissioner, Count Razumovsky, was Russian. Even when his hearing had badly deteriorated and he avoided attending concerts, Beethoven remained engaged in collaborations. Schuppanzigh recalled the composer crouched in the corner of the room while his quartet rehearsed Op. 127, correcting bowings and changing tempo markings. It is a striking alternative image of Beethoven as a musician trying out and sharing ideas, constantly testing the limits of the possible.

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