

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 29 March 2023
7.30pm

Quatuor Van Kuijk

Nicolas Van Kuijk violin
Sylvain Favre-Bulle violin
Emmanuel François viola
Anthony Kondo cello

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet No. 17 in B flat K458 'The Hunt' (1784)

I. Allegro vivace assai
II. Menuetto. Moderato
III. Adagio
IV. Allegro assai

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

String Quartet in G minor Op. 10 (1893)

I. Animé et très décidé
II. Assez vif et bien rythmé
III. Andantino, doucement expressif
IV. Très modéré

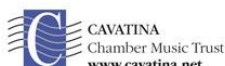
Interval

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

String Quartet No. 6 in F minor Op. 80 (1847)

I. Allegro vivace assai
II. Allegro assai
III. Adagio
IV. Finale. Allegro molto

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Mozart wrote his String Quartet No. 17 in B flat K458 'The Hunt' in 1784 and it may have received its première at Mozart's Viennese residence early the following year. On that occasion, the performers reportedly included the composers Haydn and Dittersdorf on violins, Mozart on viola and Vanhal, the leading Viennese cellist of the day. Mozart's father, Leopold, was present. He wrote to his daughter Nannerl, 'Herr Haydn said to me, "I assure you solemnly as an honest man, that I consider your son to be the greatest composer of whom I have ever heard; he has taste, and possesses a thorough knowledge of composition!"' This quartet is the fourth of a set of six that Mozart dedicated to Haydn.

The quartet's nickname, which was not assigned by Mozart, draws attention to the first theme of the opening movement. The violins suggest a pair of horns playing a hunting call. Much of the movement's substance derives from the contrast between this calling phrase and the second theme, which consists of a five note motif that almost trills. With consummate skill, Mozart fully explores the potential of his material to lead with inevitability to the movement's coda. The second movement is a minuet that finds a contrast between first violin and cello usefully explored. The third movement *Adagio* exemplifies the sense of space that Mozart brought to the finest of his string quartets. Particularly noteworthy is the cello part, which because of its prominence can appear to sound quite vulnerable at times. The start of the final movement almost echoes the beginning of the first one with its energy and excitement, which is heightened still further with the call and response motif that is the movement's second theme. Though the construction of the movement is a complex amalgam of rondo and sonata forms, to the ear it sounds decidedly uncomplicated. Truly, this is art that conceals art.

Debussy's String Quartet in G minor Op. 10 is his only work in the genre. Written in 1893, Debussy had previously experimented loosely with writing in a Wagnerian idiom. Ultimately, he discarded this approach with his earlier opera *Rodrigue et Chimène* in favour of a style influenced by the Symbolist poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé. About the new approach, used for the quartet, Debussy wrote, 'Any sounds in any combination and in any succession are henceforth free to be used in a musical continuity.' Dedicated to the composer Chausson, the work met with a mixed reaction following its première on 29 December 1893 by the Ysaÿe Quartet. The composer Paul Dukas, however, was present and was outspoken in his praise of the first and third movements. The work had a significant impact upon Ravel's approach to writing his own single string quartet.

The cyclical structure frequently used by César Franck in his compositions, notably for his Symphony

in D, is often cited as a prominent feature of the quartet. However, this perhaps over-simplifies things and misses out the unique flavour with which Debussy imbued his composition. His mixing of both modal and whole-tone scales within the work is one example.

The first movement is structured like a classical opening movement; however, with the second movement the quartet embarks upon a decidedly modernist path. It is a scherzo that is notable for its inclusion of daringly-scored pizzicati, reputed to have been inspired by Javanese gamelan music. Debussy had first heard gamelan music during a visit to the 1889 International Exposition in Paris. The third movement suggests, in a protean form at least, the neo-classical modally-based ambiance that would eventually shape the soundworld of his opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*. The fourth movement begins with a somewhat pointed use of the instruments, before the mood softens and material from the previous movements is presented in *précis*.

Felix Mendelssohn's String Quartet No. 6 in F minor Op. 80 was written in September 1847. In May of that year, Mendelssohn's sister Fanny died suddenly. Four years his senior, Fanny was also an accomplished composer, particularly of piano works and songs. Felix was badly affected by her death and his own health was deteriorating too. He wrote to a friend of the 'greatest emptiness and desolation in my heart and mind'. This, his final string quartet, is amongst his last completed works and was written during a recuperative stay in Switzerland. That attempt to recover his health was ultimately unsuccessful, as Felix died on 4 November that year.

If your experience of Mendelssohn's compositions is predominantly the youthfully brilliant Octet or his joyous symphonies, this quartet will come as something of a shock. From the start, the mood is gloomy and doom-laden. There is hardly any significant break from this ambiance across the quartet's four movements. The first begins in a frenzy, which immediately establishes the work's unsettled frame of mind. Only a subtle contrast between first and second themes provides any respite. The second movement scherzo follows almost without a break and in the same key. If anything, this one ratchets up the intensity; the viola and cello play significant roles in this respect. The third movement, in the contrasting key of A flat major, maintains an air of sadness even if it is not quite as unremitting as the previous two. The *Finale*, however, returns to the former tragic vein to conclude the work. There can be little doubt that the quartet is one of Mendelssohn's most personal compositions. It raises the question about the direction his writing might have taken, had he lived beyond the age of 38.

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