WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 2 April 2025
7.30pm

This concert is supported by Pauline and Ian Howat

Schumann Quartet
- Erik Schumann violin
- Ken Schumann violin
- Veit Benedikt Hertenstein viola
- Mark Schumann cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)
String Quartet in C Op. 54 No. 2 (1788)
I. Vivace • II. Adagio • III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Adagio – Presto – Adagio

Leo Weiner (1885-1960)
String Quartet No. 2 Op. 13 (1921)
I. Lento • II. Molto vivace • III. Andante • IV. Allegro con anima

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
String Quartet No. 8 in E minor Op. 59 No. 2 'Razumovsky' (1806)
I. Allegro • II. Molto adagio • III. Allegretto - Maggiore, Thème russe • IV. Finale. Presto

UNDER 35S

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The six string quartets **Haydn** wrote in 1788, published in sets of three as Opp. 54 and 55, have traditionally been associated with Johann Tost, a violinist in the Esterházy orchestra. Tost was a slightly shady character given to dreaming up various scams, including an illegal outfit to market stolen copies of works that had entered Prince Nicolaus Esterházy's domain. Yet, there is no real evidence that the sometimes showy, high-lying first-violin parts in these quartets were a tribute to his virtuosity.

It seems far more likely that these six works – more brilliant and dramatic than any of Haydn's earlier quartets – were part of the composer's bid to woo the French musical market. In the popular C major Quartet, Op. 54 No. 2, first-violin virtuosity is a key element in music of enormous rhetorical force. The spacious opening movement, with its wide tonal reach (the second paragraph erupts in a distant A flat after the initial C major), culminates in an inventively reworked recapitulation and a coda of almost orchestral brilliance.

Next comes a haunting C minor *Adagio* in which the leader weaves gypsy-style fantasies above the brooding chorale-like theme in the lower voices – a stylisation of the kind of music that Haydn could have heard played by itinerant gypsy bands. Elided with the *Adagio*, the *Minuet* gently reasserts C major. Its wailing C minor Trio recalls the disturbing power of the *Adagio* while presenting a distorted parody of the *Minuet*.

All the Quartet's accumulated tensions are resolved in the finale. This opens, surprisingly, with an *Adagio* that juxtaposes an eloquent song for first violin with a soaring cello line; then a racy, witty *Presto* intrudes, suggesting an upbeat ending. Instead, Haydn brings back the *Adagio* to provide a touching close to one of his most original and wide-ranging string quartets.

Of the same generation as his compatriots Bartók and Kodály, **Leó Weiner** was a boy prodigy whose music attracted international attention while he was still a student. He later became a revered teacher at the Liszt Academy in Budapest. Although Weiner sometimes drew on the Hungarian gypsy style, he showed little interest in the folk-song researches of Bartók and Kodály. His music owes more to 19th-century Austro-German composers, from Beethoven, via Mendelssohn (as a young man Weiner was dubbed 'the Hungarian Mendelssohn'), to Brahms. Yet he always retains a distinctive voice of his own.

Dating from 1921, the second of Weiner's three string quartets won the prestigious Coolidge Prize and was subsequently dedicated to the American patron Elizabeth Sprague-Coolidge. The Quartet's design is traditional, with the first and last movements cast in sonata form, though the music's fluid chromaticism can evoke Fauré and Debussy. With a nod to Beethoven (say, his 'Pathétique' Sonata and late string quartets Opp. 127 and 130), the brooding *Lento* introduction recurs at the climax of the first movement's development. Living up to its *appassionato* marking, the *Allegro* is music of high nervous intensity, marked by feverish *tremolos* and churning cello *ostinatos*, and shot through with shafts of *dolce* lyricism.

In the second movement, replete with teasing cross-rhythms and lightning key changes, Weiner puts an edgy, 20th-century gloss on the scintillating Mendelssohnian scherzo. True to its models, the music finally vanishes into the ether. The *Andante* opens as a mournful cello-violin duet, with something of a Hungarian flavour, and continues with a rapt, *dolcissimo* song spun in turn by first violin, second violin and viola against a murmuring background. Following without a break, the finale offsets its sinuous themes with a ferocious, quasi-orchestral central climax. Towards the end, Weiner lingers over the graceful second theme in slower tempo, before sentiment is swept away in the whirlwind close.

Around the turn of the 19th Century, Vienna was swarming with musically cultured Russian, Polish and Hungarian aristocrats. Those who could afford it even supported their own string quartets. One such was the Russian Ambassador Count Andreas Kyrilovich Razumovsky, who commissioned **Beethoven** to compose three quartets 'with Russian melodies, real or imitated'. Completed in 1806 and premièred in 1807, they challenged both players and audience, as Beethoven no doubt intended. The *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* reported that 'three very long and difficult Beethoven quartets … are attracting the attention of all connoisseurs. They are profoundly thought through and composed with enormous skill, but will not be intelligible to everyone….'.

In contrast to the tranquil expanses of No. 1, the opening *Allegro* of Razumovsky No. 2 is nervy and compressed, with its unsettling pauses (as so often in Beethoven, silence is a crucial part of the music's structure), volatile tonality and disconcerting swings between brusqueness and yearning lyricism.

According to his pupil Carl Czerny, Beethoven conceived the hymnic *Molto Adagio* while gazing at 'the star-studded heavens' and contemplating 'the music of the spheres'. Unfolding with infinite spaciousness, it contains no fewer than five themes, from the opening chorale to the gently rocking melody, like a celestial lullaby, that closes the exposition.

Beethoven follows this with an agitated, obsessive piece, neither Minuet nor Scherzo, whose limping syncopated rhythms seem to equivocate between 3/4 and 6/8 time. As in the first movement, Beethoven makes a prominent feature of abrupt plunges from E minor to F major. The *Trio* duly incorporates a Russian theme: a hymn of praise to God, later used by Musorgsky (in *Boris Godunov*), Rachmaninov and others. Beethoven, though, seems to mock the noble melody by working it in an uncouth parody of a fugue. Did Razumovsky share the joke, one wonders?

So far all the movements have been in E minor or E major. To offset the prevalence of E, the boisterous march finale begins in C major, only consolidating E minor much later. Beethoven has fun exploiting this C major-E minor dichotomy at each return of the theme, teasing us as to the exact moment of its reappearance – a ploy he was not too proud to borrow from his one-time teacher Haydn.