

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 2 July 2022 7.30pm

Cuarteto Casals

Abel Tomàs violin

Vera Martínez-Mehner violin

Jonathan Brown viola

Arnau Tomàs cello

CLASSIC *fm*

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Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in G minor Op. 20 No. 3 (1772)

*I. Allegro con spirito • II. Menuetto. Allegretto •
III. Poco adagio • IV. Finale. Allegro molto*

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 1 in C Op. 49 (1938)

I. Moderato • II. Moderato • III. Allegro molto • IV. Allegro

Interval

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

String Quartet No. 3 in D Op. 44 No. 1 (1838)

*I. Molto allegro vivace • II. Menuetto. Un poco allegretto •
III. Andante espressivo ma con moto • IV. Presto con brio*

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Haydn was 40 when he composed his six string quartets Op. 20 in 1772. He had been working for the wealthy Esterházy family for more than a decade and took up the position of Kapellmeister – music director – at the palace of Esterháza in rural Hungary in 1766. This grand Rococo building was often compared to Versailles, but it was far from Vienna's rich musical culture and social life. Haydn was, in his own words, 'completely secluded from the world,' and the resulting isolation meant that 'nobody could distract me or confuse me; in this way I became original.' The Op. 20 quartets embody that spirit of innovation to the full. His earlier quartets had been gallant pieces, suffused with the worldliness of the aristocratic salon and its cult of elegant conversation. Now, however, he produced a series of pioneering works that were imbued with the spirit of what would become known as *Sturm und Drang* ('storm and stress'). This literary movement of the 1760s and 1770s emphasized the extremes of human emotion and the primacy of an individual's subjective experience, and is often seen as a forerunner of Romanticism.

The Quartet in G minor Op. 20, No. 3 is the first of two quartets in the set written in the minor key (the other is the fifth quartet, in F minor). An often severe work of great economy and concentration, it eschews any sense of ordinary charm or formal convention. It opens with a spirited *Allegro* that is full of expressive contrasts of register, dynamics and texture. Nervous trills, rhetorical pauses and a frequent sense of rhythmic asymmetry lend it a sense of uneasy drama and undermine any tendency to traditional lyricism. It would be hard to imagine anyone dancing to the minuet that follows. It clings to the same, desolate minor as the opening *Allegro*, and the intervening trio offers only the slightest sense of emotional relief. The G-major slow movement strikes a note of reflective stoicism, with a long, winding melody shared between first violin and cello. The *Finale* is as jittery as the first movement – whether we find this humorous or disconcerting will depend on both the performance and our mood. It ends inscrutably.

When he was interviewed about his String Quartet No. 1, **Shostakovich** stated: 'Don't expect to find anything particularly profound in this, my first quartet opus. In mood, it is joyful, merry, lyrical. I would call it "spring-like".' It was composed between 30 May and 17 July 1938 and premièred in Leningrad on 10 October that year, and its mood is disconcertingly direct and simple. After all, Stalin's purges still raged, and terror pervaded the Soviet Union. Shostakovich himself had been criticised for his opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, in January 1936, and later that year, he withdrew his haunting Symphony No. 4. The triumphant première on 21 November 1937 of his Symphony No. 5 marked his artistic rehabilitation, and its conventional four-movement structure paved the way for the first quartet. Strange as it might seem, the Classical proportions of the fifth symphony and the first quartet

were very much in keeping with the aesthetics of the times. Under Stalin, the revolutionary spirit of the 1920s avant-garde had been jettisoned. In its place came Socialist Realism, which gave rise to industrial quantities of sprawling historical novels, pompous oil paintings, neo-classical buildings, and – in music – grand operas and heroic symphonic narratives, and artists were encouraged to express the dignity of high culture in a language accessible to the masses.

Superficially, Shostakovich's quartet conforms to this paradigm. Cast in the guileless key of C major, made up of the standard four movements of the Classical quartet, and lasting around 15 minutes in performance, it feels like an early Haydn divertissement – or a chamber-sized version of Prokofiev's so-called 'Classical' Symphony of 1916-7. Nonetheless, it contains intimations of Shostakovich's characteristically ironic approach to musical dramaturgy. The stability of the home key is constantly destabilised by harmonic ambiguities, and there is something distinctly uncanny about the humour of the third-movement scherzo. Most of all, it is the work's structure that proves so unsettling. Shostakovich swapped the original order of its opening *Moderato* and concluding *Allegro*, meaning that two extended and meditative movements are followed by two shorter, faster numbers. The radical deformation of Classical form that Shostakovich would pursue in all 15 of his quartets is already on display in this, his first exercise in the genre.

Despite his veneration for Beethoven and Schubert, **Mendelssohn** was as much a Classicist as he was a Romantic. The three string quartets that make up his Op. 44 date from 1837-8, around the time of his marriage to Cécile Jeanrenaud, the daughter of a Huguenot pastor from Frankfurt. The first of them – in the sunlit key of D major – radiates feelings of young love and new beginnings. The opening *Molto allegro vivace* is a burst of exuberant inspiration that harks back to Mendelssohn's youthful Octet of 1825. Although the first violin often carries the melodic interest, Mendelssohn's command of counterpoint allows him to dispose the musical material across all four instruments with conspicuous generosity. The well-proportioned minuet shows the composer in elegant, Rococo mood. The third-movement *Andante* feels like one of Mendelssohn's 'songs without words', and like the preceding minuet, its emotional register is one of genteel sensibility rather than grand passion. In the finale, Mendelssohn once again revels in his gift for flawless counterpoint. Marked *Presto con brio*, it is characterised by the same vivacious dance rhythms that are such a feature of the finale of the 'Italian' Symphony, interspersed with more lyrical moments of reflection and interiority.

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