

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 2 May 2025  
7.30pm

## Hagen Quartet

Lukas Hagen violin  
Rainer Schmidt violin  
Veronika Hagen viola  
Clemens Hagen cello

## Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

### String Quartet in G Op. 54 No. 1 (1788)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Allegretto •  
III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Finale. Presto*

### String Quartet in E Op. 54 No. 3 (1788)

*I. Allegro • II. Largo cantabile •  
III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Finale. Presto*

## Interval

## Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

### String Quartet in A Op. 41 No. 3 (1842)

*I. Andante espressivo – Allegro molto moderato •  
II. Assai agitato • III. Adagio molto •  
IV. Finale. Allegro molto vivace*



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Haydn's six quartets of 1788, published in two sets of three as Opp. 54 and 55, have traditionally been associated with the slightly shady figure of Johann Tost, former leader of the second violins in the Esterházy orchestra. Tost sold the quartets, plus two symphonies, to the Parisian firm of Sieber on Haydn's behalf, though true to form he was slow to hand over the payment. With an eye on maximum circulation, Haydn had already arranged for manuscript copies of Opp. 54 and 55 to be sent to London, where quartets were often performed in public concerts. (In Austria the string quartet was still essentially a 'private' medium for well-to-do connoisseurs.) Some of the new quartets (we don't know which) were played at London concerts in February 1789.

It was long believed that Haydn dedicated the Opp. 54 and 55 quartets to Tost, and fashioned their often high-lying first-violin parts for him. There is, though, no evidence for this. What seems virtually certain is that Haydn tailored these, his most flamboyant quartets to date, specifically to the international market: to London and, especially, Paris, where the flashy, first-violin-dominated *quatuor brillant* – in effect a concerto for scaled-down forces – was in vogue. Yet unlike his French contemporaries, Haydn was far too interested in the quartet as a medium for conversational interplay to allow brilliance to become an end in itself.

At times the driving first movement of Op. 54 No. 1 in G sounds like a scaled-down double concerto for jousting violins, though viola and cello assert themselves in the combative development. In the *Allegretto* second movement Haydn pointedly contrasts an insouciant serenade with nebulous harmonies that wander from G to D flat major (the furthest extreme from G) before slipping effortlessly back to G. This is Haydnesque wit at its most poetic. There's a distant echo, too, of the notorious slow introduction to Mozart's 'Dissonance' Quartet, K465, which Haydn had heard played in Mozart's Viennese apartment.

In the Minuet and Trio Haydn indulges in sly disruptive tactics. At the opening he trips up the unwary with five-bar phrases – dance this music at your peril. The Trio, initially in a three-part texture (minus first violin), begins with two danceable four-bar phrases, then wrong-foots the listener with cross-rhythms. Haydn caps the quartet with an exuberant rondo in *contredanse* rhythm that comes to a comically stuttering end – a novel twist on Haydn's favourite beginning-as-ending pun. If you don't smile, you haven't been listening.

Despite bouts of first-violin brilliance, Op. 54 No. 3 in E is a gentler, more lyrical work. Even when their surface is animated, the outer movements are anchored by frequent cello pedal points. The first – and only – theme of the opening *Allegro*, initiated by second violin and viola and seamlessly continued by first violin, is a delightful example of Haydn's conversational thinking in his string quartets.

Second violin likewise takes the lead in the finale, before the first chimes in with a chuckling counterpoint as the theme is repeated. In another of his trademark monothematic structures, Haydn blurs the join between

development and recapitulation, and creates an air of faint instability by inserting pauses where we don't expect them.

The A major *Largo cantabile* opens with dialogues between the upper and lower pairs of voices, their decorum undermined by constant dynamic changes, and an increasingly ornamental line for the first violin. The cello's final cadential phrase then spawns a rhapsodic A minor episode where the first violin morphs into a gypsy fiddler. In the *Minuet*, with its flicking 'Scotch snap' rhythms, Haydn revives the bare two-part octave textures that had so offended North German critics in his earliest quartets. Is he parodying himself here? The *Trio* then caps this bluntness by opening in octave unison before evolving into a yodelling Ländler.

In 1838 **Robert Schumann** confessed to his fiancée Clara Wieck that 'the piano has become too limiting for me....In the works I am now composing I can hear many things I can hardly express.' The following year he immersed himself in Beethoven's late quartets and began, and then jettisoned, three quartets which, he told Clara, 'were as good as Haydn'. But it was not until 1842, after he had tackled large-scale classical form in his 'Spring' and D minor symphonies, that he felt confident to complete a series of three string quartets. Schumann had lamented the great quartet tradition had 'come to a serious standstill', kept alive only by the works of his friend Mendelssohn. And in the hope of making a lasting contribution to that tradition, he prepared himself by studying in depth the complete quartets of Beethoven and many of Haydn's and Mozart's quartets.

The A major quartet, No. 3, is the most popular of the Op. 41 quartets, and the most personal in its Romantic lyricism and veiled, ambivalent harmonies. Its slow introduction opens with a typically Schumannesque epigram based on sighing falling fifths. This motif then spawns the main theme of the *Allegro*, a relaxed sonata structure that favours songful melody over elaborate thematic development. Falling fifths are also woven into the ardent second theme, played by the cello in its highest register against one of Schumann's typical syncopated accompaniments.

The scherzo second movement, in F sharp minor, is a theme and variations with a difference: the theme is first heard in shadowy, skeletal outline, and only finds its lyrical fulfilment in the poignantly harmonised slow third variation. In violent contrast, the stomping fourth variation transports us to the Hungarian *puszta* before melting into a dreamy coda.

Coloured by the dark, plangent sound of the viola, the *Adagio* is intensely characteristic of Schumann in its mingled rapture and chromatic disquiet. Its dotted 'drum' rhythms (suggested, perhaps, by the *Adagio* of Beethoven's E minor 'Razumovsky' quartet, Op. 59 No. 2) are carried over into the finale, a boisterous, faintly rustic rondo enclosing two contrasting episodes that nostalgically evoke the spirit of an 18th-century gavotte.

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