

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 30 May 2022 1.00pm

Škampa Quartet

Helena Jiříková violin

Adéla Štajnochrová violin

Martin Stupka viola

Lukáš Polák cello



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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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*

Aleksandr Porfiriyevich Borodin (1833-1887)

String Quartet No. 2 in D (1881)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Scherzo. Allegro •
III. Notturmo. Andante • IV. Finale. Andante - Vivace*

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Beethoven's 16 quartets opened up new and often radical ways of thinking about the possibilities of chamber music, and his late quartets in particular stand as towering – and even rather daunting – masterpieces of European romanticism. However, as well as looking forward, Beethoven was also aware of his debts to his predecessors, especially Mozart and his former teacher, Haydn. This is especially clear in the 6 Quartets Op. 18, composed between 1798 and 1800 to a commission from an important aristocratic patron, Prince Joseph Franz von Lobkowitz. The F major quartet was, in fact, the second of the set to be composed, although it was placed first in the published sequence. Sharing its home key with the Symphony No. 6 (the 'Pastoral') and the Symphony No. 8, it is full of the freshness, poetry and geniality of those works.

The musical rhetoric of the opening *Allegro con brio* is crisp and succinct, and its first subject echoes the main theme of the first movement of Haydn's quartet Op. 50 No. 1 (1787). Indeed, the impartiality with which Beethoven treats all four instruments is something learned from the older master, who had introduced ever greater prominence to both first and second violins, viola and cello over his long career. If Beethoven's first movement is fundamentally Classical in conception, the second is more starkly emotional. It was said to have been inspired by the tomb scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, and certainly the German Romantics claimed Shakespeare as their own at a time when he was rather less celebrated in his homeland than he is today. Beethoven initially gave it the tempo marking of *Adagio molto*, but later revised this to the more explicitly expressive *Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato* ('affecting' and 'with passion'). Beethoven's scherzos can often be unruly and even rowdy, but this one is surprisingly urbane and witty, harking back to the Enlightenment and its cultivation of reason and well-ordered sentiment. Beethoven was too much himself, however, to be entirely constrained by the Rococo values of the rapidly vanishing 18th Century. Accordingly, when he revised the quartet, he changed the tempo marking of the finale from a delicate *allegretto* to a full-blown *Allegro*, as if urging the players to turn their backs on the temperance of the past and to embrace new and visionary worlds instead. Yet even here, the movement never sacrifices its well-proportioned sense of humanity, and its skittish energy and rhythmic vitality are offset by flashes of an equally affecting and reflective lyricism.

The string quartet was to remain central to Austro-German musical culture throughout the rest of the 19th Century, and Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms all built on Beethoven's example. Russian composers were, by contrast, rather more cautious. In the first half of the century, the most famous 'Russian' quartets were Beethoven's three 'Razumovsky' quartets Op. 59, commissioned by the then Russian ambassador to Vienna. Later on, only Tchaikovsky embraced the quartet wholeheartedly, finding it an ideal vehicle for his particular amalgam of Western-

inspired academic rigour and Russian lyric charm and producing three masterpieces in 1871, 1874 and 1876. The so-called 'nationalists' largely scorned the quartet, primarily because of its associations with Western European culture and conservatory-style academicism. Balakirev, Cui and Musorgsky wrote none at all, and Rimsky-Korsakov's barely figure in the modern repertoire. Of the group (sometimes referred to as the 'Mighty Handful'), it was really only **Borodin** who evinced any sympathy for the genre, and even then, his mentor Stasov dismissed his two quartets as the work of a 'rabid Mendelssohnist'.

Mendelssohn proves to be an excellent guide to the musical world of Borodin's quartets, which abound in melodic allure and well-proportioned formal elegance. To audiences more familiar with the colourful exoticism of the 'Polovtsian Dances' from the unfinished opera *Prince Igor*, or with orchestral works such as *In Central Asia*, such facets of Borodin's character can come as something of a surprise. Yet he was an accomplished cellist who regularly participated in chamber music performances, and despite holding down a day job as a professional chemist, he nonetheless managed to acquire a secure compositional technique through careful imitation and some lessons from another mentor, Balakirev.

The String Quartet No. 2 dates from the summer of 1881 and many of its themes have passed into popular culture through their use in the 1953 Broadway musical *Kismet*. Borodin certainly had a winning way when it came to writing delightful tunes, yet his melodic fluency conceals his quartet's remarkable, yet unostentatious, command of form and technique. With the exception of the third, slow movement – a ravishing nocturne with a prominent part of the composer's own instrument – all of its other movements are written in Classical sonata form. The second subject of the opening *Allegro moderato* – which would normally be a more relaxed and lyrical answer to the first subject – is, in fact, a more complex tripartite structure in its own right. Throughout, Borodin delights in his grasp of complex, inventive counterpoint; in the second-movement *Scherzo*, he makes elaborate use of imitation and canons to fashion textures of sylvan delicacy. Borodin's approach to harmony is equally ingenious; whilst broadly conforming to the conventional tonic-dominant outline of the classical tradition, he inflects it with picturesque excursions to unexpected tonal areas, imbuing the quartet medium with his own particular chromatic language. Such devices may not immediately strike the ear and the quartet's winsome charm appeals more obviously to the heart than the intellect. Yet Borodin's masterpiece reminds us that for all their apparent rejection of academic training, the composers of the Russian nationalist school could be every bit as meticulous in their musical craftsmanship as their Western European counterparts.

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