WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 30 May 2023
7.30pm

Supported by The Dorset Foundation - in memory of Harry M Weinrebe

Jerusalem Quartet
Alexander Pavlovsky violin
Sergei Bresler violin
Ori Kam viola
Kyril Zlotnikov cello

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)
String Quartet No. 21 in D K575 'Prussian' (1789)
I. Allegretto • II. Andante •
III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Allegretto

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)
String Quartet No. 2 in F Op. 92 (1941)
I. Allegro sostenuto • II. Adagio • III. Allegro

Interval

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
String Quartet in C minor Op. 51 No. 1 (c.1865-73)
I. Allegro • II. Romanze. Poco adagio •
III. Allegretto molto moderato e comodo - Un poco più animato • IV. Allegro

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Mozart's 23 string quartets trace a path of ever greater refinement and economy of means. Prince Karl Lichnowsky, a pupil of Mozart's, took him to Berlin in 1789 to meet Frederick William II, King of Prussia. An important patron and skilled amateur cellist, Frederick commissioned six string quartets in addition to some piano sonatas from Mozart. The first of the quartets, No. 21 in D K575 'Prussian', was completed straight away with two more in May and June 1790. Out of a need to raise funds, Mozart sold the quartets to a Viennese publisher, who printed them following Mozart's death in 1791.

The opening movement is written in sonata form and is notable for the mix of tension and wit that is found within the writing. It is often commented that Mozart's scoring here is somewhat delicate compared to that of his earlier string quartets. The second movement's lyrical elegance is especially emphasised as a result of the sparce textures that the four instruments weave. The third movement is altogether more serious in temperament, though the trio section does provide contrast to this. Dynamic drive and dissonance are two central features in the final movement. Mozart starts the movement by returning to the theme of the opening movement for this rondo. Even though the subsequent thematic idea, taken from the first six notes of that theme, can sound relatively simple this movement is the most intricately crafted in the entire quartet. Instruments interchange their material, stop in mid flow and almost examine the individual parts, or add ornamentation as the movement progresses.

A significant deepening of the action in World War Two occurred in June 1941 when German troops invaded Russia. For their safety, Prokofiev was evacuated with other composers from Moscow to the remote city of Nalchik, around 900 miles south of Moscow, in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains. Prokofiev recalled in his autobiography, 'The Arts Committee Chairman in Nalchik told us, "You have a gold mine of folk music in this region that is practically untapped"; he produced some songs collected by previous visitors to the city. They were fresh and original, so I settled on writing a string quartet, thinking that the combination of new, untouched Oriental folklore with the most classical of forms, the string quartet, ought to produce interesting and unexpected results.' Prokofiev began his String Quartet No. 2 in F Op. 92 on 2 November and completed it the following month. The quartet's successful première was given in Moscow by the Beethoven Quartet in April 1942; however, some press reports criticised Prokofiev for the 'barbaric' harmonies and 'strident' sonorities he employed.

The opening movement is in sonata form, though its thematic material sounds roughly hewn and needing a good deal of polishing down. This impression is added to by the aggressive rhythms employed in the development section, whilst the central exposition consists of three tiny thematic ideas that jostle for space in a claustrophobic atmosphere. The middle movement essentially acts as two movements compressed into one. Beginning slowly, it draws upon a local love song for inspiration, after which a scherzo-like section is heard, as the tempo gradually increases and the spirit of a local dance is evoked. The final movement is where Prokofiev most clearly achieved the merging of old and new he referred to in his autobiography. Haydnesque sonata-rondo form is combined with a first theme derived from another local folk dance, which is contrasted with a more formal second theme. The movement drives headlong towards a fierce development section, after which the themes reappear in reverse order.

Brahms's String Quartet in C minor Op. 51 No. 1 was perhaps begun as early as 1859; broadly completed in 1865, it remained unpublished until 1873 when he was 40 years old. Apparently, he felt the weight of tradition regarding this genre above all others, which reputedly led Brahms to reject up to 20 previous attempts at a satisfactory string quartet. One of his letters records his thoughts on the matter, 'It is not hard to write music, but it is prodigiously hard to sweep all the unnecessary notes under the table.' In this string quartet, Brahms could not be accused of wasting notes since the initial thematic idea, heard at the quartet's start, provides the foundation for the opening and final movements. In and of itself, this serves to give the quartet a sense of unity and internal logic that sets the composition apart and has caused some to comment upon the near symphonic sense inherent within the piece. It is these characteristics, along with an advancement of harmony, that Arnold Schoenberg particularly praised in his essay *Brahms the Progressive*. He saw these factors as helping to move the quartet form on from the stasis following Beethoven and Schubert.

The opening movement begins with an idea of some urgency played by all four instruments, with the movement being noted for its robust and sentimental qualities in particular. The second movement, a *Romanze*, is at once pensive, delicate and restrained in its scoring. Sadness pervades the third movement scherzo, and the trio section is given a slightly rustic feel. The final movement almost returns the quartet to where it began: the first movement's intensity, key signature and thematic kernel are all strong features. Indeed, if any questions were left unanswered from the first movement, Brahms responds to them here, but with great economy of means. That notwithstanding, Brahms also allows himself enough virtuosic leeway to play the instruments off against each other through his polyphonic scoring, prior to a condensed coda which wastes no time in arriving at its conclusion.