

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 31 March 2022 7.30pm

Jerusalem Quartet

Alexander Pavlovsky violin

Sergei Bresler violin

Ori Kam viola

Kyril Zlotnikov cello

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

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 3 in D Op. 18 No. 3 (1798-1800)

I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto • III. Allegro • IV. Presto

String Quartet No. 9 in C Op. 59 No. 3 'Razumovsky' (1806)

I. Introduzione. Andante con moto – Allegro vivace •

II. Andante con moto quasi allegretto • III. Menuetto. Grazioso •

IV. Allegro molto

Interval

String Quartet No. 14 in C sharp minor Op. 131 (1825-6)

I. Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo • II. Allegro molto vivace •

III. Allegro moderato • IV. Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile •

V. Presto • VI. Adagio quasi un poco andante • VII. Allegro



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How to begin? That seems to be the question asked by **Beethoven** with each of the quartets on this evening's programme. Op. 18 No. 3 was the first of the set to be composed, but its languid opening meant that it was displaced as opener in favour of the more assertive F major quartet. Op. 59 No. 3 begins with sustained chromatic chords from which the first violin suddenly slips into a quixotic *Allegro vivace*. Op. 131 dispenses with first-movement sonata form or an additional introduction and commences instead with a slow fugue that evades the home key of C sharp minor.

Having each begun in unconventional ways, these three quartets reflect Beethoven's changing attitude to formal expectations across the course of his career. The four movements of Op. 18 No. 3 follow 18th-century precedents. Yet there are signs of things to come. For example, Beethoven dramatizes the sonata form of the opening *Allegro* through harmonic intensification: the C sharp leading note that the cello plays as the exposition repeats is expanded at the end of the development, to become a C sharp chord played by the whole quartet before subsiding to recapitulate the opening theme. Then, the *Presto* finale includes what Joseph Kerman recognises as 'one of the first examples of Beethoven's rough-grained counterpoint', as the scampering melody is passed in canon between the instruments.

By 1806, when he composed the three Op. 59 quartets, Beethoven's command of the genre was unquestioned. The third of the set is perhaps the most conventional: there is no obvious Russian melody in homage to the dedicatee, Count Razumovsky, and the forms, while much expanded, are familiar. On the publication of the Op. 59 quartets in 1808, a critic for the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* noted that they were long and difficult pieces, suited to connoisseurs. Of the three, the third was said to be the most immediately comprehensible: 'by virtue of its individuality, melody, and harmonic power [it] must win over every educated friend of music'.

Beethoven uses timbre in the *Andante con moto quasi allegretto* of Op. 59 No. 3 inventively: the deliberate steps of the cello's pizzicato line lend tension to the restlessly winding melody in the upper strings. Unusually for Beethoven, the third movement is a minuet, not a scherzo. Its contrasting sections are repeated, as is convention, but then the coda rather than concluding peters out and Beethoven directs the quartet to lead straight into the finale, an *Allegro molto* fugue with a lengthy, repetitive theme.

The blurred boundary between the last two movements of Beethoven's Op. 59 No. 3 indicates the composer's interest in expanding the string quartet beyond its conventional structural framework. There are several examples of his linking movements or adding to or expanding the proportions of individual movements. By Op. 131, composed between November 1825 and July 1826, Beethoven had gone far beyond those norms. There are seven movements. Some are so short they could not stand on their own; some are so long, with multiple parts, they could almost be a

quartet in themselves. The music runs continuously or, if there are breaks between movements, they are notable ruptures. Violinist Karl Holz complained to Beethoven: 'But we won't be able to repeat anything! When are we supposed to tune?'

Richard Wagner described the opening *Adagio* of Op. 131 as 'the saddest thing ever said in notes'. The subsequent sections contain a wide range of contrasting emotions. No. 2, *Allegro molto vivace*, shifts to a bucolic D major, only interrupted by the abrupt recitative of No. 3. Its histrionics vanish almost as swiftly as they arrived, to subside into the *Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile* that begins No. 4. This is a long, multi-part section, which is a kind of compendium of Beethoven's slow movements. Eventually, No. 5 hurries in, a *Presto* scherzo that seems to gather pace and size as it continues. In comparison, the *Adagio* of No. 6 seems too brief and rudely interrupted by the arrival of the finale, which pushes the quartet to a galloping finish.

The dedications of the Op. 18 and Op. 59 quartets reflect Beethoven's dependence on aristocratic patrons to support his ventures. In the 1790s, Prince Lobkowitz gave the young composer a yearly stipend and, for a while, lodgings in his palace. Still more significantly, the Prince introduced Beethoven to musicians such as the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, whose quartet gave the first performances of Op. 18.

Schuppanzigh's next quartet was sponsored by Count Razumovsky; he gave the ensemble a stipend and lodgings and occasionally played with them. The Russian Ambassador to Austria had supported Beethoven for several years – he was one of the subscribers to his Piano Trios Op. 1 – but this was his first commission. What's more, he gave Beethoven access to Schuppanzigh's quartet; as Mark Ferraguto puts it, they functioned as 'a laboratory for his newest creations'.

A generous commission from Prince Galitzin encouraged Beethoven to return to string quartet composition in the 1820s. This time there was no personal connection between composer and patron: the Russian Prince had written asking for one, two, or three quartets, at whatever fee Beethoven thought appropriate. Beethoven composed Opp. 127, 132 and 130 in response. Opp. 131 was not commissioned, which perhaps explains why it seems like such a personal work, as does Beethoven's dedication to Field Marshal Baron von Stutterheim, who had agreed to enlist the composer's nephew Karl into the army, something Beethoven only agreed to after Karl's suicide attempt in summer 1826.

The première of Op. 131 once again was to be by Schuppanzigh's quartet but there were delays. The first performance took place almost a year after the composer's death, on 9 March 1828.