

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 3 December 2023  
7.30pm

## Quatuor Ébène

Pierre Colombet violin  
Gabriel Le Magadure violin  
Marie Chilemme viola  
Yuya Okamoto cello

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*

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) String Quartet No. 3 BB93 (1927)  
*I. Prima parte: Moderato • II. Seconda parte: Allegro •  
III. Recapitulazione della prima parte: Moderato •  
IV. Coda: Allegro molto*

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) String Quartet in G D887 (1826)  
*I. Allegro molto moderato • II. Andante un poco moto •  
III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace - Trio. Allegretto •  
IV. Allegro assai*



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During his time as Vice-Kapellmeister to the Esterházy family, **Haydn** was not permitted to take on other commissions or seek publications of his work. But with his ascent to head of the music staff in 1766, he was given much greater freedoms, as witnessed in the composition of his Op. 20 string quartets in 1772. Issued by Chevardière in Paris two years later, they also appeared in print in Vienna, thanks to Artaria, and finally in London.

Rare among contemporary sets, Haydn's Op. 20 features two minor-key quartets. The F minor, although published fifth, was the first to be composed, before it was joined by the G minor work we hear this evening. With its odd seven-bar phrases, the opening movement of No. 3 can seem short-tempered. Certainly the development perpetuates those feelings of uncertainty, thanks to a rich chromatic palette, which continues in the recapitulation.

Traditional dance steps would likewise struggle to match the uneven phrases of the minuet and trio. Thankfully, the *Adagio* is more serene. Although it tends to turn in on itself, the slow movement features expanses of lyricism, which Haydn shares between the instrumentalists, including the often-uncelebrated viola. The *Finale*, however, returns us to the work's overriding gruff mood, with hiatuses, incautious leaps and a hushed sidestep into the tonic major revealing Haydn's anarchic spirit.

There is something equally adventurous about **Bartók's** Third String Quartet, which he composed in 1927 and which was first heard here at Wigmore Hall, on 19 February 1929. It was played at that initial performance by the Waldbauer-Kerpély Quartet (performing as the Hungarian String Quartet), who had been Bartók's loyal collaborators since the première of his First Quartet in 1910 and the Second in 1918. A near decade-long gap then ensued, during which Bartók's writing for the instruments had become much more extreme.

In many ways, this 1927 work, followed almost immediately by the creation of the Fourth Quartet, establishes the composer's 'quartet style', as taken up by figures such as Ligeti. In terms of playing techniques, this includes combinations of *glissando*, *pizzicato* and *col legno* (using the wood of the bow), as well as playing over the fingerboard and the bridge, alongside highly accented passages, the use of mutes and passages with exaggerated vibrato or strumming the instrument like a guitar. But when the philosopher and musicologist Theodor Adorno wrote of 'the formative power of the work' following its première – what he called its 'iron concentration, the wholly original tectonics' – he was also addressing the structural ingenuity of Bartók's music.

At times, it can be hard to grasp what the composer is seeking to achieve, not least at the outset. The work begins with an eerie cluster of four notes, against which the first violin spells out the remaining pitches of the chromatic scale. Throughout, the harmonies are no less

tightly bound and largely eschew the counterpoint of Bartók's other quartets. The palette then broadens in the *Allegro*, which continues without break, as the composer's study of folk sources comes to the fore, evoking *verbunkos* models in its juxtaposition of slow (*lassú*) and fast (*friss*).

This opposition is further mirrored in the third and fourth sections of the Quartet, with the former offering a *Ricapitulazione*, though it is more a variation, even a simplification, of the music of the *Moderato*. And then, to close, there are further iterations of the rondo-like *friss* music from the *Seconda parte*, before harmonic and quasi-tonal implications bring us full circle in one of Bartók's most concise creations.

1826 was a disappointing year for **Schubert**. Following the death of his teacher Salieri, he had applied for the job of court composer in Vienna, only to be told that the role had been abolished. Many friends were also absent from the city, while the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, a mainstay of its music scene, had been highly critical of Schubert's recent string quartets. Publication of other works had also become something of a rarity. Yet despite all this, 1826 saw inspired creativity, including the composition of some of Schubert's finest songs and his Piano Sonata in G D894, as well as the String Quartet that shares its tonality, doubtless written to counter Schuppanzigh's ill-judged claims.

The opening of the G major Quartet is decidedly brusque. Rather than returning to the melodic (*Lied*-inspired) basis of his previous quartets, Schubert offers an intense, Beethovenian study in motif and form. The febrile nature of the material nonetheless gives the work an emotional quality that is prescient of the late String Quintet in C D956. As such, the harmonic language can often be unpredictable, further emphasised by various accents and syncopations, as the first subject builds to a ferocious exchange. This in turn triggers a modulation to B flat major, the home key of the subsequent thematic area. The development is one of fragments, harmonic sleights of hand and contrasting textures, before a short, fractured recitative introduces the more lyrical recapitulation, albeit one in which assumptions rarely prove true.

The *Andante* offers a bruised response to this combative structure, though it is likewise full of music that fails to tell all. Indeed, it is not long before its timid lyricism turns to violence. The *Scherzo* is similarly fidgety. Only during the *Trio*, an oddly aristocratic *Ländler* – the countryside cousin of the waltz – does Schubert allow respite. This is the lyrical heart of the work, the slow movement which we have craved. Yet the return of the *Scherzo* and the aggressively enthusiastic finale deny any lasting cure. At times, the closing *Allegro* can seem almost comic, though its humour is blacker by far, pointing to a manic refutation of Schuppanzigh's criticisms. Sadly, this would be the composer's last string quartet.

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