WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 3 December 2024
7.30pm

Chiaroscuro Quartet
Alina Ibragimova violin
Charlotte Saluste-Bridoux violin
Emilie Hörnlund viola
Claire Thirion cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)
String Quartet in D minor Op. 9 No. 4 (?1769-70)
I. Allegro moderato • II. Menuetto • III. Adagio cantabile • IV. Finale. Presto

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
String Quartet No. 7 in F Op. 59 No. 1 'Razumovsky' (1806)
I. Allegro • II. Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando • III. Adagio molto e mesto • IV. Thème russe. Allegro

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)
String Quartet in D minor D810 'Death and the Maiden' (1824)
I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto • III. Scherzo. Allegro molto • IV. Presto

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Late in life Haydn said he wanted his long series of string quartets to begin with the Op. 9 set, composed around 1769. Written during the years when Haydn emerged as an indisputably great composer, these quartets have a seriousness and a mastery of thematic development that are a world away from his lightweight divertimento-quartets published as Op. 1 and 2.

Most impressive of the Op. 9 quartets is No. 4 in D minor, Haydn's first quartet in the minor. In the Classical period, the minor mode was associated with a special rhetorical intensity. With its disquieting pauses, sighing appoggiaturas and extreme dynamic contrasts, the first movement evokes the 'emfindsamer Stil', or 'heightened sensibility', of CPE Bach.

The Minuet, written against the grain of the courtly dance, is equally powerful. The phrase structure is asymmetrical, the tonality restless, with cadences asking new questions rather than resolving. The spirit lightens with the D major Trio, composed as a 'trio' for the two violins, with the first playing in double stopping throughout.

The serenade-like Adagio, with its delicate violin embellishments, is another point of relaxation in this predominantly severe quartet. Back in D minor, the Finale begins as if it were a fugue and continues with bantering *scherzando* textures. But levity is banished from the development, with its grimly striding arpeggios, and the recapitulation, reaffirming D minor right through to its brusque, uncompromising close.

Commissioned by Count Andrey Kyrillovich Razumovsky, Russian ambassador in Vienna, Beethoven's Op. 59 quartets of 1806 baffled many when they were premièred in February the following year. The Viennese correspondent of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* wrote that 'three very long and difficult Beethoven quartets…are attracting the attention of all connoisseurs. They are profoundly thought through and composed with enormous skill, but will not be intelligible to everyone….' When the Italian violinist Felix Radicati admitted he found them incomprehensible, Beethoven allegedly retorted: 'Oh, they are not for you, but for a later age.' The story may have grown in the telling. Yet whereas Beethoven's Op. 18 quartets quickly entered the repertoire, it took several decades for the Razumovskys to win general appreciation.

When that Viennese critic described the quartets as 'very long', he must have been thinking especially of the F major, No. 1. In 1806 this was almost certainly the longest quartet ever composed. This is the Eroica among Beethoven's quartets. All the movements are in full sonata form, creating a sonata orgy without parallel in Beethoven's output. The very opening of the opening Allegro, with its echt-Beethovenian combination of spaciousness and tension, establishes the quartet's epic scale.

Beethoven follows this with an idiosyncratic *scherzando* movement that grows from the cello's laconic rhythmic monotone (ridiculed by early critics) and embraces a delightful variety of moods and conversational textures. Over the F minor Adagio, Beethoven inscribed the words 'a willow or acacia over my brother's grave'. Was he alluding to his brother Georg, who had died in infancy? Whatever Beethoven's intended meaning, the Adagio is one of his noblest elegies, a more intimate counterpart to the funeral march of the Eroica.

At the end the tragic mood is dissipated by a violin cadenza that flows directly into the finale. Fulfilling Razumovsky's request for 'Russian melodies, real or imitated' in each of the Op. 59 quartets, the cello introduces a Russian folk tune, 'Ah my luck, such luck!', telling of an old battle-weary soldier. Beethoven changes its character from Slavic melancholy to a jaunty dance that hovers ambiguously between F major and D minor. Then, just before the close, he makes last-minute amends for jollying up the tune by slowing it down and adorning it with soulful chromatic harmonies.

By the early 1820s, Schubert had established a growing reputation in Vienna as a composer of songs, partsongs and piano miniatures. Yet with a creative self-confidence that belied his unassuming demeanour, he was determined to establish himself as a composer of instrumental music, in the royal line of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. In February 1824, he composed in rapid succession his Octet and two magnificent string quartets, in A minor ('Rosamunde') and D minor ('Death and the Maiden'). He dedicated the quartets to Ignaz Schuppanzigh, whose ensemble had premièred or would première each of Beethoven's quartets. But while Schuppanzigh admired the 'Rosamunde', he was disparaging about the D minor, reportedly advising Schubert to stick to writing songs!

Perhaps Schuppanzigh was nonplussed by the music's driving energy and quasi-orchestral textures that can strain the quartet medium to near-breaking point. The whole work is saturated by the minor mode. The outer movements and Scherzo are in D minor, while the G minor Andante con moto (a warning not to drag) is a set of five variations on the 'death' motif in Schubert's song 'Der Tod und das Mädchen' ('Death and the Maiden'). Only in the exquisite fourth variation in G major - a free meditation on the theme - does the mood brighten.

It may be over-fanciful to say that the quartet is 'about' death. But it is certainly about the cumulative power of rhythm. Each movement exploits the dynamic potential of short rhythmic cells. The opening triplet figure and its inspired transformations galvanise the mighty structure of the first movement. In the coda the momentum becomes febrile before the music exhausts itself with a haunting harmonic shift and desultory sobs from the cello.

The swinging, syncopated Scherzo evokes a Czech furiant while anticipating the Nibelungen motif in Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. Schubert specialised in the tarantella finale, though in his hands the dance can become a frantic night ride, 'à la 'Erlkönig'. The finale of the D minor Quartet is one of his most powerful: music of dark, febrile energy that uses the technique of soft unison writing to sinister effect.