

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 3 January 2024
7.30pm

Carducci String Quartet

Matthew Denton violin
Michelle Fleming violin
Eoin Schmidt-Martin viola
Emma Denton cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in B flat Op. 76 No. 4 'Sunrise' (1797)
*I. Allegro con spirito • II. Adagio •
III. Menuet. Allegro • IV. Finale. Allegro ma non troppo*

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 10 in A flat Op. 118 (1964)
*I. Andante con moto • II. Allegretto furioso •
III. Adagio • IV. Allegretto - Andante*

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 8 in E minor Op. 59 No. 2 'Razumovsky' (1806)
*I. Allegro • II. Molto adagio •
III. Allegretto - Maggiore, Thème russe •
IV. Finale. Presto*

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Haydn completed two remarkable sets of quartets, Opp. 76 and 77, in the years immediately following his second trip to London. The former, comprising six works, was written in 1797 and dedicated to Count Joseph Erdödy. His family had encouraged Haydn's work since the 1770s, and were also becoming increasingly important patrons for the composer's pupil, Beethoven. The fourth in the Op. 76 set is known as the 'Sunrise' Quartet due to the dawn-like calm of its opening chords and the rising theme played by the first violin. This acts both as an introductory gesture, with an almost melancholy quality, and a motivic well for the spirited, more Baroque sonata form that follows.

The E flat major *Adagio* is characterised by the same wistfulness heard in that seeming description of dawn, though it does not disturb the unmistakably tender nature of the music's confessions. While the *Menuet* (teetering on a *Ländler*) bounces in to change the mood yet again, its harmonic language can also seem unsettled, as do the dance's insistent appoggiaturas and changing phrase lengths. And while the sustained music at the beginning of the trio likewise recalls the 'Sunrise', the succeeding chromatic descent is more akin to a sunset or a distinctly cloudy afternoon. There are darker passages in the *Finale*, too, though this rondo hybrid of rusticity and learned counterpoint can shrug off the tonic minor and deliver a suitably giddy *moto perpetuo*.

Shostakovich had firmly established his working relationship with the Moscow-based Beethoven Quartet by the time he wrote his Tenth String Quartet Op. 118. The personnel may have changed over time, but theirs was a rich collaboration, featuring the premières of 13 of the composer's 15 quartets. While many of these works were dedicated to the musicians who likewise performed the Tenth for the first time in 1964, the score featured the name of another composer, Mieczysław Weinberg, whose life Shostakovich had managed to protect during the dark final days of Stalin's rule. But there was also a humorous element to the tribute, with Shostakovich hoping to match his friend's predominance in the genre.

The Tenth is an anxious work, which some have thought to represent Shostakovich's fears about his health at the time, including symptoms related to polio. Two years after finishing the Quartet, the composer suffered a heart attack and had to give up playing the piano in public. The music's troubled nature is manifest in the opening movement, with its uneasy juxtaposition of A flat major and E minor. And, throughout, Shostakovich's musical cryptogram, DSch (D, E flat, C and B natural), snakes its way through the texture, underlining the highly personal nature of this composition.

No sooner has the *Andante* died away than the *Allegretto furioso* begins, offering a danse macabre to rival even the 'Stalin' scherzo of the Tenth Symphony. In its wake, the *Adagio* tries to maintain the composure of

a hymn, perhaps one of mourning, though its tonic of A minor is constantly disturbed by chromaticisms that seek to pull us back to the instabilities of the first movement. But if that *Andante's* combination of keys seemed uneasy, it is nothing compared to the tritonal clash of A flat major and D minor – a manifestly tragic key – in the finale, which likewise begins to fade, suggesting a narrative ongoing.

From Russia we return to Vienna, albeit with a Russian in tow: Count Andreas Razumovsky, ambassador to the Habsburg Empire. During his time in the imperial capital, Razumovsky was something of a diplomatic lynchpin, not least after the Napoleonic Wars and during the Congress of Vienna, though today he is largely remembered thanks to the three string quartets Op. 59 he commissioned from **Beethoven** in 1806, each of which was to include a 'Russian' theme.

The second is the minor-key work in the triptych, though its opening gestures, pitting the tonic against the 'Neapolitan' (or flattened supertonic) of F major, hark back to the first of the group. That interruption prompts a series of silences, which become intrinsic; as does the restive energy of this opening movement, with its harmonic diversity and rhetorical force. Indeed, we quickly perceive what an early critic heard when he said that the conception of these quartets was 'profound and the construction excellent, but they are not easily comprehended'.

Beethoven conceived the ensuing *Adagio* 'when contemplating the starry sky and thinking about the music of the spheres', according to his pupil Carl Czerny. It certainly unfolds at an expansive pace, though the interaction of its slow melody and the more animated counterpoint retains energy. There follows a somewhat uneven *Allegretto* in triple time, with the first violin placing the emphasis on the second crotchet in the bar, while the other three instruments maintain the prevailing metre. It is in this movement's major-key section that Razumovsky's 'Russian' theme makes a somewhat peevish appearance, as if Beethoven were not entirely thrilled at its inclusion.

The F major 'Neapolitan' statement in the opening *Allegro* may well have looked back to the first of the Op. 59 quartets. The C major theme at the beginning of the *Finale*, however, heralds the home key of the third in the trio. A jaunty march, complete with 'Turkish' inflections – familiar from Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and the finale of Beethoven's (later) Ninth Symphony – constantly underlines the discrepancy between C major and the tonic of E minor. But that, in short, is the nature of this Quartet; it favours clashes, dramatic pauses and sardonic humour over uniformity. In embryo, then, it features all the linguistic and philosophical brilliance of Beethoven's later quartets.

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