

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 3 May 2025  
7.30pm

## Hagen Quartet

Lukas Hagen violin  
Rainer Schmidt violin  
Veronika Hagen viola  
Clemens Hagen cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in A Op. 55 No. 1 (1788)  
*I. Allegro • II. Adagio cantabile •  
III. Menuetto • IV. Finale. Vivace*

String Quartet in B flat Op. 55 No. 3 (1788)  
*I. Vivace assai • II. Adagio ma non troppo •  
III. Menuetto • IV. Finale. Presto*

*Interval*

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

String Quartet No. 2 'Intimate Letters' (1928)  
*I. Andante • II. Adagio • III. Moderato • IV. Allegro*



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By the mid-1780s **Haydn** was leading something of a double life as Esterházy opera Kapellmeister and European celebrity. Publishers were falling over each other to acquire his latest works, while commissions and invitations were pouring in from all over Europe. Thanks above all to Haydn himself, there was a near-insatiable demand for string quartets in the domestic market. After the international success of Op. 33, published in 1782, he was on something of a quartet roll, producing two more sets before the end of the decade: Op. 50, dedicated to the King of Prussia, in 1787, and the six quartets published as Opp. 54 and 55, in 1788.

It was long believed that Haydn composed the Opp. 54 and 55 quartets for the violinist-turned-entrepreneur Johann Tost. There is, though, no evidence for this. What seems virtually certain is that Haydn tailored these, his most flamboyant quartets to date, specifically to the international market: to London and, especially, Paris, where the flashy, first-violin-dominated *quatuor brillant* was in vogue. Yet unlike his French contemporaries, Haydn was far too interested in the quartet as a medium for conversational interplay to allow virtuosity to become an end in itself.

The A major Quartet Op. 55 No. 1 has a bold and brilliant first movement, kick-started by a theme that pits the high-flying first violin against a repeated *gruppetto* figure in second violin and viola. Haydn offsets this arresting opening with smoothly flowing writing in a freely imitative texture, and a slightly whimsical second theme that pairs the violins in thirds. The D major *Adagio cantabile* opens as a trio for the lower three instruments, before the first violin repeats the noble melody in a higher octave. With its dusky contrapuntal episode in D minor and written-out cadenzas for all four instruments, the beautiful movement prefigures the great hymnlike Adagios in Haydn's Op. 76 quartets.

With its regular phrasing and sinuous touches of chromaticism, the *Minuet* is more courtly than usual with Haydn. In the convivial *Ländler* Trio the second violin carries the tune beneath a stratospheric descant for the first violin. The finale opens with one of Haydn's jolly rondo tunes, then breaks into an elaborate fugato that sets the skittering opening motif against a sustained *cantus firmus* theme – a delightful, and quite unacademic, fusion of the popular and 'learned' styles. Could Haydn have been thinking of the fugue-meets-opera-buffa finale of Mozart's K387 here? When the rondo tune finally returns to round off the movement, it acquires a piquant new harmonic twist.

Among the six predominantly extrovert quartets in Opp. 54 and 55, Op. 55 No. 3 is the most quietly spoken, with a pervasive (and to some ears Mozartian) chromatic flavour. The ostensibly easy-going triple-time first movement, based, as so often in Haydn's quartets, on a single theme, draws its tonal drama from the piquant clash between E flat and E natural in the opening bars. At the start of the recapitulation – which develops as much as it recapitulates – the theme is even more chromatically unstable before Haydn nonchalantly turns it upside down.

Written against the background of a slow march, the *Adagio ma non troppo* – a theme with two variations and a coda – has a characteristically Haydnesque mixture of sweetness and solemnity. In the first variation the second violin takes the tune beneath the first violin's decorative countermelody, while the second variation unfolds in free canonic imitation. The jaunty swagger of the *Minuet* is repeatedly undermined by drooping chromatic lines. In a variant on Haydn's favourite 'ending-as-beginning' pun, the Trio then puts a lyrical cast on the minuet's exuberant cadential phrase. For his finale Haydn writes a scampering, rhythmically brilliant jig. This is comic opera by other means, full of quickfire repartee and energising counterpoint.

Like virtually everything **Leoš Janáček** composed in his glorious, torrential Indian summer, his Second String Quartet was inspired by his love for Kamila Stösslová, an antique dealer's wife whom he had met on holiday in 1917. Although her feelings did not go beyond friendship and respect, Kamila became his Muse and confidante. As he began the Quartet early in 1928, only months before his death, he wrote to her, 'I have started to write something beautiful. It will contain our life. I am calling it Love Letters. Just one instrument will be your interpreter throughout the work: the viola d'amore. How delighted I am! I shall be alone with you. No one else between us.'

In the end Janáček changed the title to the less explicit 'Intimate Letters', and substituted a conventional viola when he found that the viola d'amore did not easily fit with the other instruments. A private programme underlies each of the movements. In letters to Kamila the composer stressed the joyful significance of many passages, and the 'great fulfilment' of the ending. Yet the music often belies his words. In all four movements the mood is predominantly tense, anxious, occasionally violent. Rhythms are fragmented, melodies break off before they can take wing.

Janáček told Kamila that the opening *Andante* evoked 'the impression on seeing you for the first time', though to judge from this nerve-end music of wild contrasts, based, as so often in Janáček, on Moravian folk rhythms, that first meeting was far from serene or joyous. The second movement works its hypnotic theme against ever-changing backgrounds, while the third is a nostalgic lullaby-reverie that rises to the most ecstatic climax in the whole Quartet.

The finale mingles an exuberant Czech folk dance, aching lyricism and sudden strange hesitations. In the closing pages the folk dance grows ever more frenetic; and the Quartet ends with a series of violent, enigmatic chords that sound like a new crisis rather than a conclusion, let alone a 'fulfilment'. Perhaps one hint as to their significance can be found in another letter Janáček wrote to Kamila while composing the finale: 'It is getting darker. One has to admit it. The sign at the crossroads.'

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