

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 4 June 2023
11.30am

Cuarteto Casals

Abel Tomàs violin
Vera Martínez-Mehner violin
Jonathan Brown viola
Arnau Tomàs cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in D Op. 20 No. 4 (1772)

*I. Allegro di molto • II. Un poco adagio affetuoso •
III. Menuetto. Allegretto alla zingarese - Trio •
IV. Presto scherzando*

String Quartet in C Op. 33 No. 3 'The Bird' (1781)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Scherzo. Allegretto •
III. Adagio ma non troppo • IV. Rondo. Presto*



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There had been occasional divertimentos for two violins, viola and cello before **Haydn**. But no previous composer had shown any interest in exploring the string quartet as a flexible, conversational medium. Stumbling on the form 'by accident' (his own words), Haydn did more than anyone to raise the string quartet from its origins in the *alfresco* serenade to a vehicle for the most sophisticated musical discourse, and a touchstone for a composer's 'taste' and craftsmanship.

After Haydn's divertimento-like quartets of the mid-late 1750s published as Opp. 1 and 2 came a gap of a decade. These were Haydn's early years at the Esterházy court, dominated by the production of symphonies for Prince Nicolaus's evening entertainments. When Haydn returned to the quartet medium in 1769 he did so with a vengeance, producing in rapid succession the three sets, Op. 9, Op. 17 and Op. 20, that marked the string quartet's coming-of-age.

We can only guess what prompted this sudden effusion of quartet writing. Perhaps Haydn's experience of writing reams of baryton trios for Prince Nicolaus had made him eager to explore, in a less limited medium, the possibilities of interplay between solo strings. Another factor may have been the presence of the brilliant young violinist Luigi Tomasini, leader of the Esterházy orchestra and, we may guess, of the *ad hoc* court string quartet, in which Haydn played second violin.

Fine as are Opp. 9 and 17, with the Op. 20 set of 1772 the string quartet came to full maturity. From every standpoint these six works reach new heights. Where the first violin had dominated in Haydn's earlier quartets, he now creates a free exchange of ideas, with each player assuming a distinct identity. Much of the writing suggests 'a conversation between four intelligent people', as Goethe pithily characterised the string quartet – a reminder that the art of civilised, often witty, conversation was avidly cultivated in 18th-century salons.

The Quartet in D major Op. 20 No. 4 is the most obviously 'tuneful' of the set, and the most forward-looking in its incorporation of popular-style melodies. The expansive yet sinewy opening *Allegro di molto* makes dramatic capital of its initial 'drum' motif, always likely to pivot the music to an unexpected tonal area. Haydn often pairs the instruments in thirds and sixths, as in the mellifluous – and to our ears Mozartian – dialogues of the second theme.

The poignant *Un poco adagio affettuoso* ('tenderly') is Haydn's only variation movement cast entirely in the minor key. The second half of the theme, with each instrument rising by step, reaches an almost excruciating pitch of intensity. After three variations (the first a duet between second violin and viola, the second led by the cello) and a reprise of the theme, Haydn expands the scale in a moving fantasia-cum-coda that stresses the theme's dissonant shapes before fragmenting into silence.

After this tragic disintegration the *alla zingarese* minuet and finale mine Haydn's favourite Hungarian 'Gypsy' vein. In the former a riot of offbeat accents keep the listener guessing as to whether this is a minuet or a gavotte. In sly contrast, the cello-led trio deals in perfectly regular four-bar phrases. The finale lives up to its *scherzando* billing in music of controlled waywardness, treating its impish opening motif in the informal conversational textures that are among the chief delights of Haydn's quartets.

There was another gap of nearly a decade before Haydn's next set of quartets published as Op. 33. In letters to potential subscribers of December 1781, the composer proclaimed that the quartets were written 'in a completely new and special way'. While it's easy to dismiss Haydn's 'new and special way' as sales talk, there *are* new features in Op. 33. Compared with much of Op. 20, Op. 33 is lighter and more 'popular' in tone. Ideas seem to grow inevitably out of each other, with the instruments moving fluidly between background and foreground, theme and accompaniment.

The first movement of the Quartet in C major Op. 33 No. 3 ('The Bird') has one of the most magical openings in all Haydn. After a bar of pulsing quavers, the first violin steals in with a sustained high G, grows increasingly animated (with a hint of birdsong), then plunges down two octaves against an ardent rising cello line. C major seems firmly established. But Haydn then questions this certainty by repeating the same process in D minor before gliding back to the home key. The violin's 'chirping' figure permeates so much of the texture, right through to the second theme, a popular-style melody on first violin. Haydn further exploits the movement's unstable opening in an oblique, 'off-key' recapitulation', and in the reharmonisation of theme in the very last bars.

The main part of the so-called *Scherzo* is about as un-jokey as it gets. Contradicting the usually bright key of C major, this music transmutes a dance into a hymn or prayer, with all four instruments playing *sotto voce* on their lowest strings. With comical incongruity, the trio introduces more birdsong in a twittering violin duet. The serene, warm-textured *Andante* surely left its mark on the slow movement of Mozart's 'Dissonance' Quartet, in the same key. Instead of literally repeating the first half of the movement, Haydn varies it with floridly expressive figuration for the first violin.

The *Rondo* finale is Haydn at his most antic. Its manic refrain is modelled on a Slavonic folk dance known as a *kolo*. After the tune has tumbled down from first violin to cello, Haydn swerves into an impassioned Gypsy-style episode. But the hyperactive folk tune can never be repressed for long. The coda is pure slapstick, with a tiny fragment of the theme tossed about between upper and lower instruments before the music vanishes into thin air.

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