

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 4 March 2025  
7.30pm

## Quatuor Ébène

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

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 1 in F Op. 18 No. 1 (1798-1800)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato • III. Scherzo. Allegro molto • IV. Allegro*

Raphaël Merlin (b.1982)

Tetrhappy: String Quartet (2025) *UK première*

Co-commissioned by Radio France, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, Wigmore Hall, MUSE Concert Series at The University of Hong Kong, Philharmonique de Namur, Philharmonique de Namur, Festival Internacional de Música da Póvoa de Varzim and Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ

*Interval*

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

String Quartet No. 3 in E flat minor Op. 30 (1876)

*I. Andante sostenuto – Allegro moderato • II. Allegretto vivo e scherzando • III. Andante funebre e doloroso, ma con moto • IV. Finale. Allegro non troppo e risoluto*



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The writing of string quartets was a daunting proposition for any young composer in the Vienna of the 1790s. Between them Haydn – still at the height of his powers – and Mozart had raised the quartet to a supreme vehicle for subtle, civilised musical discourse. Not surprisingly, then, **Beethoven** was careful to establish his credentials as a composer for his own instrument, the piano, before taking up the challenge of this exalted genre. Before he bit the bullet in 1798, Beethoven steeped himself in the quartets of his great predecessors; and more than with any of his previous works, he made painstaking sketches, both in his workbooks and in the pocket books he carried around on country walks.

When the Op. 18 quartets were published in 1801, Beethoven gave first place to the F major, the most intellectually complex and expressively far-ranging work of the set. Saturated by its opening theme, the first movement is full of that restless, dynamic energy so crucial to the young Beethoven's make-up. His sketchbook reveals that the ubiquitous opening motif took long to reach its final form.

Despite Beethoven's well-known aversion to programmes, he admitted to his friend Karl Amenda that he had the tomb scene of *Romeo and Juliet* in mind when composing the D minor Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato. With its unusual 9/8 metre and its long, Italianate *cantilena* over a pulsing accompaniment, this movement is a cousin to the Adagio of the contemporary Piano Sonata, Op. 22. But whereas the sonata movement is meditative, the quartet's Adagio is tragic. In the development and, even more, the coda, the ornamental 'turn' in the main theme drives the music to a pitch of intensity unprecedented in a string quartet.

As in the 'Eroica' Symphony, Beethoven follows the disconsolate close of the Adagio with a hushed, scurrying Scherzo, made uneasy by the irregular phrase structure and pervasive chromatic inflexions. The finale opens with a skittish flurry of triplets that will dominate the whole movement. A contrasting lyrical melody in C minor later turns up in distant keys in the development amid passages of capricious contrapuntal imitation. Then, in the coda Beethoven wittily combines opposites by counterpointing the triplets with an expanded variation of the lyrical theme.

Cellist of the Quatuor Ébène from 2002 to 2023, **Raphaël Merlin** wrote frequently for string quartet, from jazz and pop transcriptions to a concerto for quartet and orchestra (*Eléa*), before composing his String Quartet 'Tetrhappy' in 2025. The work was inspired by Charles Mingus' *Self Portrait in Three Colors*, whose title conjures up the intimate and immersive experience of the full-time quartet – a famous *mariage à quatre* – and underlines the inherent fragility of the ensemble. 'Tetrhappy' unfolds as a series of free variations in which the quartet's members appear as mutually dependent individuals, bound by the law of the whole. The protagonists appear on the stage – as a quartet, a trio, a duo or individually – each in his or her own light,

with the others as aural witnesses, acting as a mirror. Within this ensemble there are ten sub-groups: six duos and four trios, to which can be added four solos that represent essential moments of solitude. Each variation in 'Tetrhappy' represents a new search for equilibrium, at once precarious and galvanising. Passing allusions to journeys, communal experiences and personal traits are made more or less clear by the four interpreters. As a fourway therapy, with abundant 'happy' and playful (*giocoso, scherzando*) moments, the life of the quartet confronts the impossibility of squaring the circle, tetra-pi. (Adapted from a note by Raphaël Merlin).

The most 'westernised' Russian composer of his generation, **Tchaikovsky** first tried his hand at the Austro-German genre of the string quartet in his early 30s. The success of his D major Quartet (1871) prompted a second quartet in 1874. Leading the premières of both quartets was the Bohemian Ferdinand Laub, a friend and colleague of Tchaikovsky's at the Moscow Conservatoire. Laub died suddenly, aged just 43, in March 1875. The following January Tchaikovsky swiftly sketched and completed a third quartet, in the sombre key of E flat minor, as a memorial to the violinist.

Initiated by an elegiac slow introduction (Andante sostenuto), the first movement combines a monumental scale with a flow of memorable melody. At the centre of the introduction the first violin sings a luscious Italianate tune over a *pizzicato* accompaniment, an overt tribute to Laub's artistry. When the Allegro moderato begins, its *valse triste* main theme turns out to be a variant of the introduction's hesitant opening. The movement comes full circle with a return of the introduction's Italianate melody, finally slipping from B flat major to the darkness of E flat minor. The spirit lightens with the second movement, an airily textured scherzo with more than a whiff of Mendelssohn. There is even a suggestion of the transformed Bottom in the downward plunges across the four instruments. Back in E flat minor, the Andante forms the quartet's emotional heart. There is something ritualistic about this gloomily impressive music, written against the background of a funeral march. After Tchaikovsky's death the heartfelt central duet for violin and cello was chosen for memorial concerts in St Petersburg, Moscow and Kharkov.

Grief is summarily banished in the brisk and breezy rondo Finale. This is Tchaikovsky in Russian folk mode, though evocations of stomping peasants are offset by a Mendelssohnian lightness of touch, including deft bouts of *fugato*.

Some years later, Tchaikovsky was treated to a surprise performance of the quartet while staying with friends. At the end he commented, laconically: 'At first I didn't much like the Finale, but now I see that it is quite good.'

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