

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 4 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 F Op. 74 No. 2 (1793)

*I. Allegro spiritoso • II. Andante grazioso •
III. Menuet – Trio • IV. Finale. Presto*

String Quartet in G minor Op. 74 No. 3 'Rider' (1793)

*I. Allegro • II. Largo assai • III. Menuet. Allegretto – Trio •
IV. Finale. Allegro con brio*

Interval

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

String Quartet in B flat Op. 67 (1875)

*I. Vivace • II. Andante • III. Agitato. Allegretto non troppo •
IV. Poco allegretto con variazioni*



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It was the long-standing tradition of public quartet performances in London – in this respect far ahead of Vienna – that prompted **Haydn** to compose six new string quartets in 1793, in preparation for his second, triumphant visit to England. Two of them (we do not know which) were introduced at the violinist-impresario Johann Peter Salomon's concerts in the Hanover Square Rooms in 1794. Published in two groups of three as Op. 71 and Op. 74, the quartets were dedicated to Count Anton Georg Apponyi, who had sponsored Haydn's initiation into the Masonic brotherhood in 1785.

While Haydn's earlier quartets were composed essentially for the salon, Opp. 71 and 74 are clearly designed for the concert hall. All feature powerful, sometimes quasi-orchestral sonorities, virtuoso writing for all four instruments, especially the first violin (a tribute to Salomon's prowess), and extreme contrasts of texture, register and dynamics.

Another characteristic of these 'London' quartets is that each begins with a forceful introductory gesture – a cue for any chatter in the Hanover Square audience to cease. In the Quartet in F, Op. 74 No. 2, the opening fanfare-like unisons turn out to be a skeletal outline of the bustling main theme. Yet, as so often in late Haydn, surface merriment can be deceptive. This is a complex symphonic structure, full of forceful instrumental effects. In the central development the one jolly main theme becomes embroiled in a tense contrapuntal argument.

There is a strong family likeness between the melody of the *Andante grazioso* and the 'Clock' theme of Symphony No. 101. The three variations on this skittish tune show a delicate sense of colour, highlighting each of the instruments at one point or another. First and second violins swap roles in the central variation, which turns to the minor key for a free mediation on the theme.

As in several of Haydn's London symphonies, the *Minuet* is more than halfway to a Scherzo, with its *Allegro* pacing and fierce comic energy. The Trio, beginning (like the slow movement and finale) with a three-part texture, dips into the dusky key of D flat major. The impish melody of the finale became an instant hit, and soon appeared in a keyboard arrangement. Predictably, Haydn allows this catchy tune to run riot, working it in quicksilver contrapuntal imitation and making teasing play with its first two notes.

The Quartet in G minor, Op. 74 No. 3, the sole minor-keyed work in these quartets, became a special favourite, helped by its nickname 'The Rider' after the galloping rhythms of the finale. In the first movement Haydn closely integrates the vehement in-tempo introduction into the main body of the movement. The introduction's repeated pairs of notes influence both the tense, fragmentary first theme and the second subject, a blithe waltz tune that much later initiates a mysterious chromatic leadback to the recapitulation.

The *Largo assai*, in the glowing, contrasting key of E major, is one of Haydn's most majestic and searching slow movements. The hymnlike melody becomes more and more boldly rhetorical as it proceeds, with extreme

dynamic contrasts and breathtaking plunges to remote chords. When the main section returns, after a central episode in E minor, Haydn intensifies the rhetoric with flamboyant decorations for the leader and an otherworldly *pianissimo* tremolo for all four instruments.

After the *Largo*'s *pianissimo* close, the G major *Minuet* at first tactfully avoids a forceful emphasis on the home key. The leader's repeated high Ds in the second half provide the cue for the edgily chromatic G minor Trio, which heightens rather than relaxes the tension – the opposite of what a Trio is supposed to do. The finale sets the agitated equestrian theme, with its syncopations and abrupt dynamic changes, against dazzling high-lying bravura that pays tribute to Salomon's prowess. There is a blithely dancing second theme, linked by its upbeat to the first. Haydn draws together elements of both themes in the fiery development, and in a coda that resolves the movement's contrasts – and the minor-major tensions of the whole work – with an exhilarating burst of G major.

More than any other composer of his generation, **Brahms**'s life work was rooted in creative engagement with the music of the past. His struggles to re-invigorate Classical tradition in the revered forms of the symphony and string quartet are well known. He often complained of the impossible challenge set by Beethoven, and famously remarked to a friend that he had destroyed 20 string quartets before publishing his two Op. 51 quartets at the age of 40. Having finally conquered the medium, Brahms could relax in his B flat Quartet of 1875, an inspired *jeu d'esprit* whose outer movements recreate the spirit of Haydn and Mozart.

With its tally-ho horn-calls (an obvious allusion to Mozart's 'Hunt' Quartet, K458) and teasing shifts of accent and key, the scherzo-like *Vivace* is Brahms at his most capricious. The metre changes from 6/8 to 2/4 for the second theme, a demure polka which is then fused with the 'hunting' theme. In the *Andante* Brahms contrasts the sweetly soaring melody of the outer sections (characteristically varied on its return) and a dramatically modulating central episode replete with stern, Baroque-style dotted rhythms.

'The most amorous, affectionate thing I have ever written' was the composer's uncharacteristically fulsome verdict on the third movement, a dusky waltz-intermezzo with an underlying unease. By muting the other three instruments, Brahms ensures that the 'tender viola solo' (his own words) emerges clearly from the texture.

For the finale Brahms writes a set of eight variations on a lolloping, quasi-folk tune. In the penultimate variation Brahms brings back the first movement's 'hunting' theme, revealing its latent kinship with the finale's theme. Other themes from the opening movement, including the polka, reappear in the final variation. Then, in a witty *envoi*, Brahms brings the Quartet full circle by combining the variation theme with the hunting calls that had opened the work.

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