

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 5 December 2023
7.30pm

This concert is supported by the Rubinstein Circle.

Ehnes Quartet

James Ehnes violin
Amy Schwartz Moretti violin
Che-Yen Chen viola
Edward Arron cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in G Op. 77 No. 1 (1799)
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Adagio •
III. Menuetto. Presto • IV. Finale. Presto*

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

String Quartet No. 2 in C Op. 36 (1945)
*I. Allegro calmo, senza rigore •
II. Vivace • III. Chacony. Sostenuto*

Interval

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

String Quartet in A minor Op. 41 No. 1 (1842)
*I. Introduzione. Andante espressivo - Allegro •
II. Scherzo. Presto - Intermezzo • III. Adagio • IV. Presto*

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Quite why **Haydn** only completed two out of the six string quartets in his Op. 77 set has long been a matter of musicological debate. Was age a factor? Haydn was 67 at the time of composition in 1799. Did he feel compelled to devote more time and energy to his last choral works? *The Seasons*, the *Te Deum* and the last two of his Masses were all written around the same time. Or was their delayed publication in 1802 a factor in his decision to abandon the genre to which he had given so much? That year saw the publication also of Beethoven's Op. 18 string quartets, which were commissioned by Prince Lobkowitz at the same time as Haydn's Op. 77 works. Contemporary opinion favoured Beethoven's works, which were more daring in their conception, rather than Haydn's exquisitely crafted offerings from an experienced hand. This is not to say, however, that Haydn's compositions do not strike new ground. In them Haydn achieves a new equilibrium between contrasting factors that were evident in previous works: chordal writing and counterpoint, accompanied melody and equality amongst the instruments, and a prominent first violin against involved parts for each instrument.

The opening theme of the first movement bears a striking resemblance to a march-like Hungarian recruiting song called a *bokázó*, which relies heavily on a third interval. This in turn becomes a feature of both the movement and the quartet as a whole. An accompaniment in triplets becomes evident, before the second violin introduces another theme. The development section starts with a false recapitulation of the themes, then a *forte* unison gesture marks the start of the real recapitulation. The slow second movement is the only one lacking any apparent folk music influence. A notable feature is the prominence of the first violin part, which ranges across the heartfelt writing. Scored in free sonata form, the development section shows Haydn at his most inspired. The third movement finds the first violin leaping from near the bottom of its range to the uppermost reaches. The trio section is tinged with a folk idiom with its dance-like figures which maintain the energy level, through sudden changes of dynamic and bursts of faster notes. The *Menuetto* is repeated after a bar of silence. The fourth movement draws its main theme from a Croatian *kolo*, a round dance form that Haydn heard in his youth. Providing much in the way of impetus, this monothematic movement is virtuosic for all four performers.

Britten's String Quartet No. 2 in C Op. 36 was written in 1945 to mark the 250th anniversary of Henry Purcell's death. Purcell was a significant influence upon Britten in terms of both instrumental and vocal writing. Later the same year, Britten would turn to Purcell for the theme to his *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*.

The first movement opens with the wide interval of a tenth played by the first violin and the cello as the

start of the first theme. The second violin extends this onwards before the viola accompanies with a drone, also consisting of a tenth interval. The effect of this thematic sequence is repeated twice using different note and instrumental combinations, before the material is subjected to further variations and development. The cello presents a rolling arpeggio, on top of which the other instruments impose their tenth intervals before several ideas are presented simultaneously. The central movement is a scherzo for muted strings against which a full-voiced theme is presented. At times it sounds as if ghostly echoes of the first movement persist. The trio section is ushered in by the lower strings, but the first violin defiantly states a new theme, before the main scherzo theme returns. The final movement is Britten's tribute to Purcell, even using the old English spelling of chaconne, *Chacony*, for the title. The nine-bar theme is presented first in unison before being put through a sequence of 21 variations. Britten uses these variations to review the theme in groups from harmonic, then rhythmic, then melodic and finally formal viewpoints. Solo cadenzas link the groups of variations, with the final group also acting as a coda to the entire movement.

It was often **Robert Schumann's** habit to focus on writing a single genre for periods at a time. If 1840 was devoted mostly to songs, then 1842 was a year of chamber music. The String Quartet in A minor Op. 41 No. 1 was written simultaneously with No. 2, and No. 3 quickly followed. All three were written after studying the quartets of Mozart, Beethoven and Haydn with an accompaniment of Bach's contrapuntal writing. They were completed within five weeks and dedicated to Felix Mendelssohn. Although there is idiomatic writing for the strings some passages can sound as if they were written at the keyboard. Evidentially, criticism of this hit home and all Schumann's future chamber compositions were to feature the piano.

Bach's contrapuntal influence is evident at the start of the first movement, before the music transitions to a more polyphonic manner of writing. An *Allegro* section is pianistic in tenor, before the material is developed and repeated to reach a subdued conclusion. The fast *Scherzo* main theme appears in contrasting guises: light and airy, then forceful and energetic. The trio section's lyricism acts almost as a foil between these two opposing moods. The third movement is akin to an eloquent love ballad, in which the winsome theme is stated by the first violin then the cello. After repetition an agitated central section interjects before the initial mood returns. The final movement's bold thematic writing is presented with unexpected changes in tempo, dynamism and mood along the way.

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