

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 5 July 2024
7.00pm

Schumann Quartet

Erik Schumann violin
Ken Schumann violin
Veit Benedikt Hertenstein viola
Mark Schumann cello

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet No. 18 in A K464 (1785)
*I. Allegro • II. Menuetto • III. Andante •
IV. Allegro non troppo*

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

String Quartet No. 1 in B minor Op. 50 (1930)
*I. Allegro • II. Andante molto - Vivace •
III. Andante*

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 12 in E flat Op. 127 (1823-4)
*I. Maestoso - Allegro • II. Adagio, ma non
troppo e molto cantabile • III. Scherzando
vivace - Presto • IV. Finale. Allegro*

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Not surprisingly, the figure of Haydn hovers over **Mozart**, 14 years his junior and preciously brilliant – but not immediately so in the medium of the string quartet. Haydn's six Op. 20 quartets of 1773 had had a profound effect on Mozart in his set of six K168-173, in which the latter's recognition of Haydn's mastery was as much a grudging sort of flattery as recognition of his own failings. Nearly a decade was to pass before Mozart turned again to the string quartet, again as a result of Haydn's groundbreaking Op. 33 set of six, composed in 1781 and which he described as 'written in a new and special way', informed by a fluent repartee rather than self-conscious rhetoric, with an infectious candour, less reliance on fugue, and an appeal to cognoscenti and dilettanti alike.

Leopold Mozart considered the second three of the 'Haydn' set to be lighter and simpler than the first, and the K464 String Quartet in A certainly has a conversational fluency and understated craft. The first movement cleverly folds imitative passages into the music's classical energy, and the return to the opening material is elegantly teased. The minuet and trio open in a stern unison that is immediately mollified, while contrasting dynamics and an odd bar's silence place it some way from the dance's courtly origin. The trio is a gentler affair, with the upper instruments behaving themselves over a steady descending scale from the cello. The *Andante*, the longest movement of the four, is a set of six highly decorative variations and a coda. The fourth is in the minor key and the sixth introduces a military tattoo (reminiscent of Leporello's 'Notte e giorno faticar' from *Don Giovanni*), which extends into the coda and has given this quartet its 'Drum' nickname. The finale is another sonata movement based on two taut thematic tags and a marked use of repeat-note pedals from the cello; the movement disappears into a *pianissimo* close, its lack of resolution making a deep impression on Beethoven.

Sergey Prokofiev sailed perilously close to civilisation-shaking events – two world wars, the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression and Stalin's brutal stranglehold of the USSR. From the age of 22, the formidably gifted young man travelled to Europe and the United States, making his name as both pianist and composer, and was taken up by Diaghilev and Stravinsky. After two peripatetic decades, with a number of years based as an expatriate in Paris, in 1936 he settled with his family back in the USSR, where 12 years later in 1948, like his fellow composer Dimitry Shostakovich, he fell foul of the Soviet purges of bourgeois 'formalist' artists. He survived the accusations and died in Moscow, on the same day that Stalin's reign of terror also came to an end.

In 1930, Prokofiev embarked on an extensive piano tour of the USA and during long train journeys made a close study of the Beethoven string quartets. The String Quartet No. 1 had been commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation of the Library of Congress that same year and had its première there in 1931. The

composer referred to the work's classical idiom, especially in the first of the three movements, but then drew attention to two distinctive features: the finale is the slow movement, and the key of B minor means that for the cello's and viola's lowest C string, the low B note is not available in conventional tuning. The first movement may be classical in layout but is unmistakably Prokofiev at his most energetic and contrapuntal. The Shostakovich-like bleakness of the short, slow opening to the scherzo not only anticipates the mood of the *Andante* finale, it also makes a stark contrast to the savage bite of the *Vivace* main section. The slow movement is a deeply felt meditation, cast as contrapuntal dialogues between the instruments over dark, shifting harmonies. A brief upheaval of energy near the end subsides to a desolate close.

Beethoven composed his String Quartet No. 12 in E flat Op. 127 as the first of three commissioned in 1822 by the Russian Prince Nikolai Golitsyn, a fine amateur musician, and it was the first of the five late quartets (plus the *Grosse Fuge*) Beethoven wrote between 1824 and 1826. With its four movements, Op. 127 is the most conventionally laid out, but otherwise this spacious and luminous work is packed with new ideas. As in the late piano sonatas, Beethoven both invites and challenges listener and performer to go with his large-scale plans of memory and anticipation, where the boundless connections between theme, gesture and tonality still, after 200 years, exercise and enthrall hearts and minds.

The first movement is an *Allegro*, dominated by three organ-like *Maestoso* statements. These three sign-posts work alongside the conventional sonata form, which here is oddly understated – the actual moment of recapitulation slides in very unobtrusively, and their three different keys are crucial not only within this taut first movement but also to prepare us for the work's close some 40 minutes later. The slow movement is in serene A flat and is a set of six variations. The third variation, marked *Adagio molto espressivo*, switches without preparation to the key of E major, and is a sort of pre-variation that strips the theme back to its basics – Beethoven did something similar in the twentieth of his 'Diabelli' *Variations*. The quartet's sixth variation is folded into the slow movement's coda. This sublime suspension of time is blown away by the *Scherzando vivace* which swerves between lively dance and tight counterpoint, with an odd and brief *allegro* 'rest' in the middle; the trio, in E flat minor, goes by in a flash, over some startling modulation, and with a 'pretend' return at the end of the scherzo repeat (as in the Symphony No. 9). The *Finale*, in lightly applied sonata form, combines lightness of mood and robust country dances. The slightly slower *allegro con moto* coda takes this remarkable work to a transcendent close.

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