

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 5 June 2023
7.30pm

Supported by the Rubinstein Circle

Cuarteto Casals

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

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

From *Art of Fugue* BWV1080 (by 1742, rev. 1745-9)
Contrapunctus 7 • Contrapunctus 9 •
Contrapunctus 10 • Contrapunctus 11 •
Contrapunctus 12 • Contrapunctus 14

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in A Op. 20 No. 6 (1772)
I. Allegro di molto e scherzando •
II. Adagio cantabile • *III. Menuetto. Allegretto* •
IV. Fuga a 3 soggetti. Allegro

Interval

Joseph Haydn

String Quartet in E flat Op. 20 No. 1 (1772)
I. Allegro moderato • *II. Menuetto. Allegretto* •
III. Affetuoso e sostenuto • *IV. Finale. Presto*

String Quartet in G Op. 33 No. 5 (1781)
I. Vivace assai • *II. Largo e cantabile* •
III. Scherzo - Trio • *IV. Finale. Allegretto*



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'He needed only to have heard any theme to be aware – in the same instant – of almost every intricacy that artistry could produce in its treatment.' When **Bach's** son Carl Philipp Emanuel penned these words in his obituary, he was thinking above all of his father's *Musical Offering* and the *Contrapuncti* (i.e. fugues) and canons, all based on the same severe theme, published as *Die Kunst der Fuge* ('Art of Fugue'). Bach specified no instrument for *Art of Fugue*, composed largely around 1742. Intended primarily for study, it has been performed with forces ranging from solo harpsichord to a full orchestra. Yet the clarity and expressive power of single strings make as satisfying a solution as any.

In this second of their two concerts pairing Bach and Haydn, the Casals Quartet plays six of the *Contrapuncti*, beginning with No. 7, in which the fugue theme is answered by its inversion at half speed. No. 9 is an irresistibly buoyant double fugue, popularised in a vocal arrangement by the Swingle Singers. After the elaborate four-part fugue of No. 10, again combining the theme and its inversion, No. 11 is the most chromatically intense of the whole set. No. 12, in lilting triple time, is a pair of fugues of which the second unfolds as a mirror image of the first - the kind of contrapuntal wizardry that was second nature to Bach.

Po-faced North German critics had taken **Haydn** to task for 'the odd mix of the comic and the serious' in his early string quartets, citing also his 'great ignorance of counterpoint'. If the Op. 20 quartets of 1772 knocked the latter charge spectacularly on the head, they also reached new heights of inventiveness, sometimes to the point of inspired eccentricity. Perhaps with his critics in mind, Haydn demonstrated in three of the Op. 20 finales that fugue can not only be deadly earnest (in No. 5), but also, as in Nos 2 and 6, a vehicle for fun and games.

The Quartet in A Op. 20 No. 6 opens with a buoyant, *alfresco* movement in 6/8 'hunting' rhythm. Haydn deploys his characteristic harmonic sleight-of-hand when the second theme deflects from E minor to D major before working round to the anticipated key of E major. At the end of the exposition and recapitulation musette drones enhance the music's bucolic spirit. Haydn marked this delightful movement *scherzando*, as he might well have done the dancing final fugue. Here he works three distinct themes with playful virtuosity, using all the contrapuntal tricks of the trade.

The *Adagio cantabile* is a soulful aria for first violin, expressively embellished when the first section is repeated, and enriched by dark glints of viola colour. With its sequence of four-bar phrases (with the opening phrase repeated to round off the movement – one of Haydn's beginning-as-ending puns), the minuet is the only one in Op. 20 that might, just, be danced. The beautiful, veiled trio is literally a trio, with the second violin falling silent while the other three instruments play *sotto voce* on their lowest string.

The fluid instrumental interplay in the opening *Allegro moderato* of the Quartet in E flat Op. 20 No. 1 typifies Haydn's freedom of texture in the Op. 20 set. This movement, too, is a classic example of the composer's artful thematic economy, with the whole varied narrative evolving from the opening bar.

The minuet begins with two terse four-bar phrases, one jaunty, the other feline, but then expands with exhilarating freedom in its second part. As in Op. 20 No. 6, the trio unfolds in a three-part texture, with the viola only entering just before the harmonically teasing lead-back to the minuet.

The jewel of this quartet is the *Affettuoso e sostenuto* ('Tender and sustained'), in the dusky key of A flat: music of self-communing inwardness that unfolds in a hushed four-part chorale texture, with no discernible 'theme' and minimal articulation. There is something strangely private and elusive about this wonderful movement, with its weird interlocking of parts and quietly audacious dissonances.

The *Presto Finale*, as economically fashioned as the first movement, draws its quirky energy from its laconic opening theme (made up of two three-bar phrases) and a series of syncopations that initiate an exciting sequence of modulations in the central development.

After Op. 20 nearly a decade passed before Haydn embarked on his next set of quartets, published as Op. 33. Lighter in touch and more overtly popular in tone than Op. 20, Op. 33 became one of the composer's greatest international successes. Probably the earliest of the set is the Quartet in G Op. 33 No. 5. Beginning, paradoxically, with a *galant* closing gesture, the opening *Vivace assai* is a movement of almost symphonic boldness and drive, with quasi-orchestral textures created by double stopping and pounding repeated bass notes. Whereas the other first movements in Op. 33 are essentially monothematic, here Haydn accommodates a clear-cut second theme of Mozartian allure, unfolding at leisure over a cello pedal.

The slow movement is an ornate G minor *Largo e cantabile* in which the first violin impersonates a tragic operatic heroine. At the end, after an accompanied violin cadenza, sentiment is deflated by a pizzicato twang. If Haydn is sticking out his tongue here, he sticks it out even further in the so-called *Scherzo*, fooling the listener with displaced accents, and then inserting a malicious pause just when we seem to have found our feet. As if to make amends, the *Trio* is almost exaggeratedly demure.

Simplicity rules in the *Finale*, a set of three variations on a lilting siciliano tune. While the variations are essentially decorative, the second has a luminous grace, with that easy fluidity of texture characteristic of Op. 33. Mozart took up Haydn's idea of a variation finale in siciliano rhythm and gave it a more troubled cast in his D minor Quartet, K421.

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