

WIGMORE HALL 125

Wednesday 5 November 2025
7.30pm

Leonkoro Quartet

Jonathan Schwarz violin
Emiri Kakiuchi violin
Mayu Konoe viola
Lukas Schwarz cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) String Quartet in D Op. 20 No. 4 (1772)
*I. Allegro di molto • II. Un poco adagio e affetuoso •
III. Menuetto alla Zingarese. Allegretto • IV. Presto e scherzando*

Erwin Schulhoff (1894-1942) 5 Pieces for String Quartet (1923)
*I. Alla Valse viennese • II. Alla Serenata • III. Alla Czeca •
IV. Alla Tango milonga • V. Alla Tarantella*

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) String Quartet in D minor D810 'Death and the Maiden' (1824)
*I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto •
III. Scherzo. Allegro molto • IV. Presto*



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When, in 1779, the publisher Hummel of Berlin issued the second edition of **Joseph Haydn's** fifth set of string quartets, he added a little flourish: on the front page of the score, amid Grecian urns and lyres, a little picture of a smiling sun. It was a printer's stock image; an 18th-century emoji, if you like. But to this day, the six quartets that we now know as Haydn's Op. 20 are still referred to as the 'Sun' quartets. It just seems right.

And just look at the movement titles of this fourth of the set: *Un poco adagio e affettuoso* (A little slowly, and tenderly); *Menuet alla zingarese* (Minuet in gypsy style). Few works of this period match the sensuous warmth and effortless flow of Haydn's first movement. The built-from-the-bottom opening, the infectious swing of its main themes, and the expressive close-harmony swooning of his pairs of instruments: Schubert's and Brahms's chamber music would be unthinkable without the example of Op. 20 No. 4.

The same goes for the slow movement: a set of variations on a dark-hued, folk-like theme in which the focus is on the expressive potential of each instrument's voice, rather than its virtuosic potential. *Affettuoso* indeed – emotion dictates form (there's nothing remotely Baroque about that glorious cello variation). And do Romani people even dance minuets? Haydn serves notice on the courtly dance of tradition; peppery cross-rhythms subvert this minuet into something very different (you might even call it a joke). Finally, the dead giveaway – *Presto e scherzando* (fast and joking): an entire, hilariously inventive finale in scherzo style. A true conversation is impossible without the potential for humour – and nothing bridges social differences more quickly. With the quiet final smile of Op. 20 No. 4, Haydn creates a musical language that unites, even while it laughs.

Erwin Schulhoff was many things. He was born in Prague, and trained in Dresden (with Max Reger) and Paris (with Claude Debussy). He was a soldier of the Habsburg Empire, and a jazz pianist in Weimar Berlin; a wit, a modernist and a *provocateur*. As Schulhoff himself put it, 'I have a tremendous passion for the fashionable dances and there are times when I go dancing night after night with dance hostesses...purely out of rhythmic enthusiasm and subconscious sensuality; this gives my creative work a phenomenal impulse, because in my consciousness I am incredibly earthly, even animalistic'.

The *Five Pieces* – effectively a dance suite – for string quartet (1923) raised eyebrows when they were premièred at the International Society for Contemporary Music Festival in Salzburg on 8 August 1924. Schulhoff applies his sardonic humour to the expected central European stereotypes: a spiky mock-Viennese waltz and a Bartók-like parody of Czech folk music, as well as a nervy, laconic *Serenata* (the bittersweet spirit of Czech and Moravian folksong permeates its dissonances) and to finish, an electrically-charged *Tarantella*.

But Schulhoff was a man of his time, and his horizons stretched far beyond Central Europe. Naturally, a work dedicated to Darius Milhaud would have to include some homage to South America. The haunting, impassioned *Tango Milonga* provides just that – and rather surprisingly, turns out to be the heart of the whole suite. 'Not all composers, old or young, have the good sense not to take themselves, now and again, too seriously', wrote the American critic Olin Downes from Salzburg. Later that night, he reported finding Schulhoff at the piano in a nearby tavern, playing ragtime 'till the walls tottered'.

On 31 March 1824 **Schubert** wrote to his friend Leo Kupelweiser: 'I have composed two quartets...and want to write another *quartetto*, really wanting in this manner to pave the way to a big symphony'. The quartets were those in A minor (Op. 29), and a larger, even more ambitious work in D minor containing a set of variations based on his 1817 song *Der Tod und das Mädchen*. But doubts, illness and depression intervened; the D minor quartet was not played until 1 February 1826, when it was performed at the apartment of the court opera singer Joseph Barth in Prince Schwartzberg's winter palace. The violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh – the dedicatee of the A minor quartet, who had premièred each of Beethoven's late quartets – was present at a repeat performance a few days later at the home of the composer Franz Lachner. His assessment was blunt – 'My dear fellow, this is really no good at all; leave well alone and stick to your songs'.

To be fair, Schuppanzigh had heard a read-through of a work unlike anything else in Schubert's – or any other composer's – output: grand in scale and forceful in its gestures. The rhythm heard in the first bar recurs to an almost obsessive extent, allowing the music no repose even in the places – such as the second group of the first *Allegro* – where classical form permitted some relaxation. It propels both that movement, and the final *Presto*: a relentless 6/8 *tarantella* that some commentators have chosen to hear as a dance of death.

The *Scherzo*, too, has a startling severity, following the example of both Haydn and Mozart in their own late D minor quartets. Only in the *Andante con moto* – variations on a theme crafted from elements of *Der Tod und das Mädchen* – is there a real sense of consolation. The quiet theme and five subtly-coloured variations culminate in a radiantly peaceful sixth variation and coda. To hear all this for the first time, with four musicians who'd heard it for the first time themselves barely a week previously – well, we don't have to agree with Schuppanzigh's snap judgement, but we can feel for ourselves the force of the creative personality that inspired it.

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