

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 6 February 2024
7.30pm

Heath Quartet

Sara Wolstenholme violin
Juliette Roos violin
Gary Pomeroy viola
Christopher Murray cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) String Quartet in E flat Op. 64 No. 6 (1790)
*I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Menuetto. Allegretto •
IV. Finale. Presto*

Helen Grime (b.1981) String Quartet No. 2 (2020-1) *UK première*
I. • II. • III.

Interval

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) String Quartet in F (1902-3)
*I. Allegro moderato, très doux • II. Assez vif, très rythmé •
III. Très lent • IV. Vif et agité*

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It was one thing for **Haydn** to become father of the string quartet, begetter of the medium as a vehicle for heavyweight musical ideas; quite another for him to raise it to one of the 18th Century's highest artforms. Before the publication of his first string quartets in the mid-1760s, the genre was barely perceptible in the forest of chamber compositions for multiple instruments. Haydn's earliest quartets, products of his late twenties, were soon widely circulated around Vienna and beyond in professionally copied manuscripts. They were consumed by an audience of wealthy connoisseurs, Haydn's employer Prince Nikolaus Esterházy among the wealthiest of all, and reached a new market as they and their successors were taken up by publishers eager to profit from the composer's growing fame across Europe.

Following the death of Prince Nikolaus in 1790 and the household economies made by his son and successor, Haydn was excused from his former duties as Kapellmeister to the Esterházy court. He spent that autumn in Vienna, supported by a generous pension but uncertain of the opportunities his new-found independence might bring – at least until the impresario Johann Peter Salomon handed Haydn a lucrative contract to become the star attraction of a London concert series. His six Op. 64 quartets were written between September and Salomon's arrival in Vienna in early December, most likely in response to a request from the composer Leopold Kozeluch for a set of works to boost his recently established music publishing business.

The last of the Op. 64 collection reflects Haydn's absolute mastery of the string quartet, from the engagement of its four players in sophisticated dialogue to the formal ingenuity and inventive eloquence of each of its movements. The lyrical *Alllegro*, cast in sonata form, is built entirely from the material of its charming opening, a monothematic process developed and varied to defy any trace of monotony, while the *Andante* contains room for a tempestuous central section to offset its prevailing elegance. Haydn hints at the humour to come in the work's rondo finale with flashes of wit in the minuet and its folksy trio, before unleashing the contrapuntal cut and thrust and brilliant conclusion of the *Presto*.

Helen Grime began work on her String Quartet No. 2 in January 2020, the month in which a new pathogen began to wreak havoc worldwide. 'I was also newly pregnant with my second son at the time,' she recalls. 'By the time I was finishing the first movement, we had gone into a strict lockdown ... strange circumstances in which to be expecting a child.' The second movement was created 'with much intensity, partly because I now had extremely limited composing time with schools shut and no childcare, but also because of the shifting unknowns in the outside as well as in my own body. I have no idea if all of this has had a direct bearing on the music I wrote, but I definitely felt an urgency when composing and a

sense of purpose and focus that was now missing from so many other areas of life.' Grime wrote the work's third movement at the start of 2021, after the birth of her son and during the third national lockdown. 'There is a sense of release and the music is almost always serene in stark contrast to the intensity and more complex, chaotic textures and tempos of the previous movements.'

Grime's Second String Quartet, written for the Heath Quartet and co-commissioned by Wigmore Hall and the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, received its first performance at the New Mexico Museum of Art in August 2021. The piece opens with barely perceptible tremolos on viola and cello above which the violins fashion a sighing melodic figure that weaves its way through the first movement in various guises, notably in the shape of a recurring rhythmic riff and the three haunting chords that preface a final flurry of agitated semiquavers. The latter's energy spills over into the vivace second movement. Agitation and anxiety, never far from the music's surface, are here punctuated by islands of calm, deceptive moments of respite shattered by the explosion of rhythmic time-bombs or, later in the movement, nervy melodic decorations and relentless pizzicato passages. A shift to muted strings and lyricism marks the finale's turn towards introspection, as if the composer has stepped back to observe the fleeting passage of her thoughts and feelings.

Critical opinion ran for and against **Ravel's** String Quartet following its first performance in March 1904. Pierre Lalo felt that it came too close in its language and 'in all the sensations it evokes ... [to] the music of M. Debussy', a put-down for a young composer who became a target for Lalo's famously conservative reviews in *Le Temps*; in his assessment for the *Mercure de France*, Jean Marnold, meanwhile, declared the work to be a success and counselled his readers to 'remember the name of Ravel. He is one of the masters of tomorrow'.

'My String Quartet,' Ravel observed, 'represents a conception of musical construction, imperfectly realised no doubt, but set out much more precisely than in my earlier compositions.' While its second movement in particular displays Debussy's influence, the finished work is far too original in melodic invention and impressive in formal cohesion to be diminished by comparisons with the older composer's earlier String Quartet in G minor. Its many qualities include the first movement's pastoral charm, the irresistible energy of the scherzo-like *Assez vif* (launched by an inspired pizzicato idea) and the slow movement's contrasting episodes. The shifting meters of the finale's opening, which glide with seamless ease between passages in 5/8, 5/4 and 3/4 time, set the scene for a movement of ecstatic brilliance.

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