

WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 6 October 2025
1.00pm

Kleio Quartet

Juliette Roos violin
Katherine Yoon violin
Yume Fujise viola
Eliza Millett cello

- Edward Elgar** (1857-1934) String Quartet in E minor Op. 83 (1918)
I. Allegro moderato • II. Piacevole (poco andante) • III. Allegro molto
- Anton Webern** (1883-1945) 5 Movements for string quartet Op. 5 (1909)
I. Heftig bewegt • II. Sehr langsam • III. Sehr lebhaft • IV. Sehr langsam • V. In zarter Bewegung
- Joseph Haydn** (1732-1809) String Quartet in D Op. 50 No. 6 'The Frog' (1787)
I. Allegro • II. Poco adagio • III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Finale. Allegro con spirito



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Elgar's sole String Quartet had its première at Wigmore Hall on 21 May 1919. Written alongside his justifiably renowned Cello Concerto and the Piano Quintet, with which the Quartet shared its first performance, Op. 83 forms part of a premature clutch of 'late' works. Following the death of Elgar's wife, Lady Alice, in April 1920, there were to be painfully few new projects thereafter, aside from the composer's abortive attempts to write his Third Symphony and a first opera. The sketches for both show no dimming of inspiration, though the depressive composer's self-confidence had clearly faded.

The Quartet is another matter. While it likewise demonstrates that Elgar was never going to produce 'anything violently chromatic or cubist', to use his own words, he was readily exploring fresh ideas in 1918. The first movement is a flowing creation that rarely touches the ground. Its inventive combination of pastoral modalities and Brahmsian chains of thirds, as in that composer's Fourth Symphony (in the same key), perpetuates the sense of rootlessness. Rhythmically, too, the first and second subjects – the latter tending towards a slightly more untrammelled major key – evade expectation. This may be music on the doorstep of disillusionment, but inspiration is still in reach.

The *Piacevole* (*poco andante*) has a salon-like temperament – or at least one in search of the salons of lost time – harking back to the ease of *Chanson de Matin* (quoted briefly) and *Salut d'Amour*. Alice, to whom the latter was dedicated, likened the Quartet's middle movement to 'captured sunshine', with the 'sound of bees and insects on a hot summer's afternoon'. Elgar may well have heard the same at Brinkwells, the thatched Sussex cottage where the work was written, though we would be forgiven for perceiving darker clouds too. Nonetheless, there is vigour enough in the Quartet's Finale, a jauntier, more jagged recollection of the headlong energy of the *Serenade for strings* Op. 20 or the *Introduction and Allegro* Op. 47. But where those turn-of-the-century works promised future wonders, including Elgar's oratorios, symphonies and concertos, the propulsion here is a (near) last gasp of glory.

String quartets were a recurrent feature of **Webern's** lessons with Schoenberg in Vienna at the beginning of the 20th Century. Given the genre's unparalleled tradition in the Habsburg imperial capital, as demonstrated by the last work on this afternoon's programme, this was hardly surprising. But unlike Webern's *Langsamer Satz* and the early quartet of 1905, written during an intense study of Beethoven's output, and which were also influenced by his favourite poems and paintings, the 5 *Movements for string quartet* Op. 5 of 1909 are brutally concise. Not for nothing did Schoenberg describe the music of his most doctrinaire pupil as 'a novel in a single gesture, a joy in a breath'.

There were, however, more personal reasons behind the force of Webern's music at the time. Its expressive potency derived from his grief over the death of his mother, with an air of anguish hanging over the score. It is, in effect, the chamber equivalent of his 6 *Pieces for orchestra* Op. 6, also written in 1909 and including a funeral march. No such description is accorded to any of these movements for string quartet, though their impact is no less acute.

The first, 'moving violently', is a condensed sonata form, juxtaposing stabbing gestures with more mournful sounds. The latter continue in the second movement, where persistent dissonance gives way to consolation. The balm proves premature, however, with the skittish *Scherzo* constituting the work's brief but unsettled central section. The fourth movement could even be a slowed-down version of the third, rung out over the course of two whispered minutes, before the Finale offers the most grief-stricken movement of all, its song never reaching lyrical realisation.

Haydn's Op. 33 quartets proved so popular when they were first released by the Viennese firm Artaria that the publishers were keen to secure another set of six. The order came through in 1784 though it was not until three years later that Haydn finally delivered the works. Dedicated to Frederick William II of Prussia, they were intended to thank the monarch for his gift of a ring, which had, in turn, been a token of gratitude for a copy of Haydn's 'Paris' Symphonies. 'I can think of no better and more fitting way to show my thankfulness to His Majesty (and also in the eyes of the whole world),' the composer wrote, 'than by dedicating these six quartets to him.'

The final and, indeed, most famous quartet in the group has long been known as 'The Frog'. The name was not Haydn's own but referred to the composer's repeated use of bariolage technique in the Finale, with its quivering, string-crossing effect reminding 19th-century listeners of a croaking frog. We may overlook such a tag, though it points to Haydn's rich imagination in a work intended to cap the 'Prussian' set in style.

The first movement is a case in point, with its rhetorical flourishes and wonderfully fulsome scoring. You never really know where it is going to go next, as with the expressive *Adagio* that follows. While this second movement may have more marked air of solemnity, it does not preclude visits to a dizzying array of tonal centres. The ensuing *Menuetto* opens in courtly form, though is immediately trailed by a series of 'Scotch snaps'. As the dance continues, it becomes evident that few would dare take to the floor, given the trip hazards Haydn puts in place. And then he closes with the (presumed) amphibian, who not only croaks but also ducks and dives throughout the wonderfully ribald Finale.

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