

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 7 June 2023
7.30pm

20 Years of the Modigliani Quartet

Modigliani Quartet

Amaury Coeytaux violin
Loïc Rio violin
Laurent Marfaing viola
François Kieffer cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in G Op. 54 No. 1 (1788)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Allegretto •
III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Finale. Presto*

Hugo Wolf (1860-1903)

Italian Serenade (1887)

Jean-Frédéric Neuberger (b.1986)

high altitude (2023) *UK première*

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 13 in B flat Op. 130 with Grosse Fuge Op. 133
(1825-6)

*I. Adagio ma non troppo - Allegro
II. Presto
III. Andante con moto ma non troppo
IV. Alla danza tedesca. Allegro assai
V. Cavatina. Adagio molto espressivo
VI. Overtura. Allegro – Fuga*

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By the late 1780s, **Joseph Haydn** was celebrated as one of Europe's finest and most popular composers. He returned to quartet composition to produce first Op. 50, dedicated to King Frederick William II of Prussia, and then a series of works associated with the violinist Johann Tost, a member of the Esterházy orchestra: Op. 54, Op. 55 and Op. 64. While often referred to as the 'Tost' quartets, not all of these were dedicated to him nor were they necessarily written with him in mind. Indeed, it seems with Op. 54 that it was the violinist's assistance in getting the scores published that was most significant.

From the opening bars of Op. 54 No. 1 it is clear, however, that the first violin is in the spotlight. As it embellishes the siciliano-inflected melody of the *Allegretto*, it ascends into its upper register; what seem inconsequential chromatic runs allow the harmonies to slip through regions far removed from the home key of C major. The minuet returns to a graceful melody in G major but occasional chromatic notes and the five-bar phrases question the underlying stability of the structure: could one dance to this? With each repetition of its theme the rondo *Finale* similarly becomes more unpredictable. The two-note figure that has continually interrupted proceedings does not provide the expected dramatic conclusion; instead, it fades away, all the instruments now in their upper registers.

Hugo Wolf composed relatively little while he was employed as a music critic by the *Wiener Salonblatt*, from January 1884 until April 1887. His scathing reviews did not make finding performers easier; when he approached the Rosé Quartet to play his music, the violist replied: 'we ... have unanimously resolved to leave the work for you with the doorkeeper of the opera house'. On deciding to resign from the *Salonblatt*, Wolf enjoyed a brief period of renewed creativity, producing a number of Eichendorff songs and what came to be known as the *Italienische Serenade* for string quartet (2-4 May 1887).

The première of the Serenade took place in Mannheim in May 1890. The previous month, as he revised the score, Wolf had referred to it as 'an Italian serenade'. Eichendorff's 1823 novella *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts* ('Memoirs of a Good-for-Nothing') might have provided him with the scenario. A young musician leaves his family home to venture across Europe. In Italy, he is enraptured by servants 'serenading their young mistress by torchlight'; later, more experienced musicians extol the pleasures of life on the road:

when we arrive and bring out our instruments we spread joy around us and when we stop at noon at some country mansion and blow a serenade in the porch, the maids dance and the master leaves the dining-room door ajar, the better to hear the music, and through the crack comes the clatter of plates and the smell of roast meat served among the cheerful bustle and the young ladies at table almost twist their necks off from craning to see the musicians outside.

Something of that cheerful bustle, of tuning up, occasional wrong notes, and trying tunes out in a freewheeling fashion, can be heard in Wolf's short *Serenade*. The cello's passionate outbursts are scarcely

heeded by the other instruments; the music whirls by as if on the breeze.

Beethoven's first sketches for his String Quartet No. 13 in B flat Op. 130 suggest he already had an ambitious conception for the work; it was to have a 'serious and heavy-going introduction' and end with a fugue. It ended up with six movements and, in its first iteration, concluded with the *Grosse Fuge*, a huge fugal movement that lasted almost as long as the rest of the piece.

Beethoven begins Op. 130 with contrasting ideas. A 'serious and heavy-going' introduction is followed by an *Allegro* that pursues two motifs: a scurrying figure heard initially played by the first violin, and a simple fanfare. *Adagio* and *Allegro* materials are in dialogue right up to the coda. The *Presto* movement is in constant motion, barely interrupted by an outburst from the first violin. The *Andante* is mysteriously two-faced: it has all the dynamic markings and phrasing of a serene slow movement but Beethoven marks it to be played *poco scherzoso*, a little playfully. The 'parody dance' *Alla danza tedesca* starts sweetly but then flails. The expressive heart of the piece is the *Cavatina*, in which the first violin begins as if to sing, yet its full voice proves hard to find. Violinist Karl Holz recalled Beethoven listening tearfully to this movement. Originally it was to lead straight into the finale, which begins with the presentation of four themes that become the material for the following multi-part fugue, a compendium of contrapuntal techniques interleaved with lyrical or dance-like episodes. What became known as the *Grosse Fuge* was described by the composer as 'tantôt libre, tantôt recherché' ('partly free, partly learned') – interleaved with lyrical and dance- or march-like sections that were received with incomprehension at the first performance of Op. 130, on 21 March 1826. On the advice of the publisher, Beethoven provided an alternative, shorter and lighter finale, and the *Grosse Fuge* was published separately as Op. 133. During the 20th Century, quartets began reinstating the *Grosse Fuge* as the finale of Op. 130, fulfilling Beethoven's laconic prophecy that 'It will please them some day'.

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In this piece, the writing of the string quartet is quite orchestral. The quartet is treated as one large instrument. It's called *high altitude* because it is primarily a sound study for the high register: in this register, the strings have a special light that I like very much, as do all the bright sounds (glockenspiel, vibraphone, cymbals, piano in the high register...). There are three major parts: a widely spaced chorale, which seems as if it must come from far away, leads to a piercing high melody that changes very gradually towards a conclusion in which the various gestures are heard before they are mixed. In the last two parts, the strings are increasingly played 'breath-like'; that is, very softly, tremolo-ing over or behind the bridge. These breathing sounds, on the border between sound and silence, gain more and more importance in the course of the piece until they cover the entire sound space.

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