

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 7 May 2022 7.30pm

Doric String Quartet

Alex Redington violin

Ying Xue violin

Hélène Clément viola

John Myerscough cello

CLASSIC *f*M

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This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

String Quartet No. 1 BB52 (1908-9)

*I. Lento • II. Poco a poco accelerando all'allegretto •
III. Introduzione. Allegro - Allegro vivace*

String Quartet No. 3 BB93 (1927)

*I. Prima parte: Moderato • II. Seconda parte: Allegro •
III. Recapitulazione della prima parte: Moderato • IV. Coda: Allegro molto*

Interval

String Quartet No. 5 BB110 (1934)

*I. Allegro • II. Adagio molto • III. Scherzo. Alla bulgarese •
IV. Andante • V. Finale. Allegro vivace*

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On 17 March 1910, **Béla Bartók** performed with the Waldbauer-Kerpély String Quartet at an all-Kodály concert in Budapest. Two days later, Bartók's own First Quartet received its première. These two concerts would come to be called 'the double birthday of Hungarian Music', and for Bartók himself, they marked an arrival of sorts. In 1908, shortly before he commenced writing the First Quartet, he had broken off a relationship with the violinist Stefi Geyer. He called the lamenting first movement of the quartet his 'funeral dirge' for their love.

So Bartók's First Quartet is simultaneously a self-portrait of a young genius striving towards his own creative voice and a reserved, serious man candidly expressing deep emotion. The first movement is a searching, tortuously chromatic *Lento*, expressive after the manner of Wagner, or the Schoenberg of *Verklärte Nacht*. The movement opens in the form of a canon; a more declamatory central section over a grinding cello drone-bass is a first taste of the visceral, earthy expressiveness so characteristic of the later Bartók.

The central *Allegretto* begins in the manner of a highly chromatic waltz, but develops in sonata form. Linking the *Allegretto* and the final *Allegro vivace* is an *Introduzione* in the form of an instrumental recitative - a question-and-answer exchange between violins and *parlando* cello that evokes Beethoven's famous instrumental dialogue in the Ninth Symphony. Bartók's ultimate answer to the question is no less significant: an explosively rhythmic, high-speed Hungarian folk-dance finale with a fantastic, dancing central *fugato*. Kodály, Bartók's lifelong friend, described the First Quartet as 'an intimate drama, a kind of "return to life" of one who has reached the brink of the abyss', but the overall effect is of energy channelled and finally released: an artistic arrival.

Bartók wrote his Third Quartet at home in Budapest in just three weeks in September 1927. The quartet quickly acquired a wholly unmusical notoriety: Bartók entered it in a string quartet competition run by the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia, and in October 1928, after an extended judging process (the panel included the conductors Fritz Reiner and Willem Mengelberg) it was announced that he'd won joint first prize with the Italian composer Alfredo Casella. The Budapest newspapers erroneously reported that he'd been given the full \$6000 prize (in fact, the sum of money involved was considerably less). 'You can hardly imagine the sensation this caused in Pest,' wrote Bartók to a friend. 'From the beginning I told everyone that the amount would not be so great, but of course in vain'.

The quartet was premièred at Wigmore Hall on 19 February 1929 by Bartók's long-standing champions, the Waldbauer-Kerpély Quartet. 'As a mathematical proposition, it is astonishingly clever,' wrote one British critic. 'As a musical entertainment it contains not one bar of melody'. Yet any listener who enjoys Haydn's quartets should respond to this work. It's basically an extended sonata-form structure, with all the contrast (but also unity) that implies. The First Part is itself in three parts - a quiet canon from which the

work's basic three-note motif gradually rises to a powerful statement by all four instruments; an interlude of shimmering *sul ponticello* 'night-music' and crunchy *martellato* chords; and a brief reprise of the opening mood, the three-note motif blossoming into a folk-like, lyrical melody.

A sharp pizzicato chord launches the Second Part - a flying folk-dance scherzo. Sudden *ponticello* hushes and rattling *col legno* rhythms add astonishing new colours to the ensemble sound. The *Ricapitolazione* that follows re-evokes the mood and thematic flavour, rather than the exact notes of the First Part; the *Coda* does the same for the Second Part. 'I do not like to repeat a musical thought unchanged,' wrote Bartók; but so organic is his musical thinking in the Third Quartet that he barely needs to. It's unified in the way a tree is unified.

Beethoven had Prince Razumovsky; 20th-century quartet composers had Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, the wealthy American heiress who, over a long life, acquired a global reputation as a patron of chamber music. She approached Bartók by telegram in June 1934, and everything suggests that he worked quickly and at high intensity - though not before taking a walking holiday in the South Tyrol, and visiting the Venice Biennale on the way back to Hungary. He completed the Fifth Quartet between 6 August and 6 September 1934, and it was premièred at the Library of Congress, Washington DC, on 9 April 1935 by the Kolisch Quartet - best-known for its close relationship with Schoenberg. Bartók tried (unsuccessfully) to listen by radio from Budapest.

But Bartók's path, by now, had diverged almost completely from his Central European peers. 'There was a time... that the direction seemed to be absolutely the atonality of the Austrians,' he'd told a Dutch newspaper earlier that year. 'I myself have never worked this way, and it's unlikely that you'll find anyone who does in Hungary. Our folklore sources are still prolific'. And they're vividly on display in the brilliant central *Scherzo Alla bulgarese*, around which Bartók pivots the structure of his Fifth Quartet. Like his Fourth Quartet and (a decade later) the Concerto for Orchestra, the Fifth Quartet has a broad, spacious form (it's his longest string quartet), and like them it goes out of its way to communicate its intentions. What could be more arresting - more clear - than the hammered motif that opens the first movement, and then returns to close the circle, at the end of the headlong folk-dance *Finale*?

But clarity doesn't imply a lack of complexity; and two shimmering, rustling nocturnes frame the central *Scherzo* - pregnant with atmosphere and emotion. Both expire unto silence. And what of the comic 'barrel organ' episode which (in another anticipation of the Concerto for Orchestra) briefly contradicts the *Finale*'s climactic hammer-blows? *Allegretto con indifferenza* is Bartók's marking; but then, he never liked to give too much away.

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