

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 7 November 2022
7.30pm

Supported by Pauline and Ian Howat

Belcea Quartet

Corina Belcea violin
Charlotte Juillard violin
Krzysztof Chorzelski viola
Antoine Lederlin cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in C Op. 20 No. 2 (1772)

*I. Moderato • II. Capriccio. Adagio - Cantabile •
III. Menuetto. Allegretto - Trio •
IV. Fuga a 4 soggetti. Allegro*

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 8 in C minor Op. 110 (1960)

*I. Largo • II. Allegro molto • III. Allegretto •
IV. Largo • V. Largo*

Interval

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

String Quartet in G minor Op. 10 (1893)

*I. Animé et très décidé • II. Assez vif et bien rythmé •
III. Andantino, doucement expressif • IV. Très modéré*



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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 flourish to the title page: a little picture of a smiling sun. It was a printer's stock image; a piece of 18th-century clip-art, if you like. But to this day, the six quartets (dating from 1772) that we now know as Haydn's Op. 20 are still referred to as the 'Sun' quartets.

And none is sunnier than the second, cast in the bright, open key of C major. Haydn leads off with a striding cello solo, supported by viola and second violin: this quartet begins as a trio. And throughout the first movement, the instruments peel off into smaller groups; interacting, re-forming, and seizing on mock-Baroque curlicues as the material for lively conversational exchanges. Then, in the *Capriccio* that follows, Baroque order is restored – except it isn't. The first violin gets its song eventually, but the mood never really settles. A bright, flowing minuet (with a distant echo of bagpipes) restores the balance – except here, again, the central *Trio* section tips over into something darker and more subversive.

What can it all mean? Haydn offers one answer in the heading of his finale: 'Fugue with 4 subjects'. Baroque musical learning doesn't get more solid and scholarly than a well-written fugue. Why, then, does he head off in the tempo of a spirited jig? And why, until barely 32 bars before the end, does he direct that everything be played at a whisper (*sotto voce*)? Over the final bars of the manuscript, Haydn scribbled a punning latin tag on the whole notion of a fugue: *Sic fugit amicus amicum* ('Thus one friend flees another'). What, he's having a laugh? Relax: you're among friends.

In the summer of 1960, **Shostakovich** found himself nominated as Chairman of the Russian Composer's Union. There was one proviso – that he abandon his lifelong refusal to join the Communist Party. In tears, Shostakovich confessed all to his friend Isaak Glikman: 'They have been hounding me, they have been pursuing me'. At the end of June 1960, he cracked under the pressure, and signed up.

The next month, he was dispatched to East Germany – officially, to score a film on the bombing of Dresden. Instead, between 12 and 14 July, he wrote a new string quartet dedicated (with one eye on the authorities) 'To the victims of fascism and war'. He also purchased a large quantity of sleeping pills. A worried friend later removed them from his coat pocket – but to anyone who knew Shostakovich, the motivation behind this Eighth Quartet was self-evident. Shostakovich wrote to Glikman:

When I die, it's unlikely that anyone will write a quartet dedicated to my memory. So I decided to write it myself. You could write in the title page 'Dedicated to the composer of this quartet'.

Although Shostakovich's earlier quartets had been laced with irony and self-quotation, none of them was as nakedly autobiographical as the Eighth. Beginning and ending in bleak melancholy, it encompasses terrified rage (the pounding *Allegro molto*), bitter, pitch-black humour (the waltz-like central *Allegretto*) and deep, inward sorrow (the fourth-movement *Largo*). Shostakovich himself described its hidden narrative:

The main theme is the monogram D E s C H [D, E flat, C, B natural – the very first notes heard], that is - my initials. The quartet makes use of themes from my works and the revolutionary song 'Tormented by Grievous Bondage'. My own themes come from the First Symphony, Eighth Symphony, [Second] Piano Trio, [First] Cello Concerto and *Lady Macbeth*. There are also allusions to Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* and Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony...On arrival home, I have tried playing it twice, and have shed tears again.

The quartet was premièred on 2 October 1960 in Leningrad, by the Beethoven Quartet. It entered the repertoire that same night.

'Music on the points of needles,' declared César Franck, when **Debussy's** String Quartet was premièred by Eugène Ysaÿe's quartet at the Salle Pleyel, Paris on 29 December 1893. Debussy wore his influences with pride, and the Quartet reveals the sort of music that appealed to a young French composer of unusual sensibility in the last decades of the 19th Century. Grieg's impassioned G minor Quartet (1878) was an inspiration, and Franck's cyclic technique offered Debussy a way of conferring formal logic on his ideas. Wagner, Russian nationalism and the Javanese gamelan that Debussy had heard at the 1889 Paris Exhibition are all present in the mix.

But Debussy's Quartet is more than the sum of its (distinctly flavoursome) ingredients. Paul Dukas heard its second performance, the following May, and noted that Debussy 'unquestionably belongs to the class of composers who see music not as a means but as an end, and who consider it less as a catalyst of expression than as expression itself'. Debussy's real achievement in the Quartet was in establishing what (as we now know) would become the characteristic atmosphere of his mature music: lush textures, ultra-subtle tone-colours and soaring rhapsodic passages, all expressed in a beautifully controlled form. And the Quartet is 'pure' music, concerning itself principally with expression and form. In that respect (if no other), Dukas likened Debussy to Mozart.

Debussy ties the whole Quartet together with the trenchant (*'très décidé'*) opening motif – a technique borrowed from Franck but with a theme closer to the opening motif of Borodin's Second Symphony. The transformations that follow, though, are pure Debussy. The theme dances over *pizzicato* accompaniment in the outer sections of the second movement, and sings ecstatically over shimmering trills at the movement's centre. It's changed almost beyond recognition in the *Andantino* (a muted nocturne, as exquisite as anything Debussy ever wrote) and is proudly assertive, once more, in the finale - the last in a series of transformations that, as Dukas put it, are 'captivating in their unexpected grace'.

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