WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 7 November 2026
7.30pm

This concert is supported by the Sir Jack Lyons Charitable Trust

Jerusalem Quartet
Alexander Pavlovsky violin
Sergei Bresler violin
Alexander Gordon viola
Kyril Zlotnikov cello

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet No. 17 in B flat K458 'The Hunt' (1784)
I. Allegro vivace assai • II. Menuetto. Moderato • III. Adagio • IV. Allegro assai

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

String Quartet No. 6 BB119 (1939)
I. Mesto – Vivace • II. Mesto – Marcia • III. Mesto – Burletta (Moderato) • IV. Mesto

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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The six string quartets that Mozart dedicated to his friend Joseph Haydn were indeed 'the fruit of long and arduous labour', as the composer proclaimed. Writing for four strings, a medium perfected by Haydn in his widely admired Op. 20 and Op. 33 sets, presented a special challenge; and Mozart took infinite pains with each of these masterpieces, which evolved over a period of more than two years.

After Leopold Mozart heard the last three quartets (K458, K464 and K465) at Wolfgang's Viennese apartment in February 1785, he wrote to his daughter Nannerl that they were 'a little easier [than the first three], but extremely well composed'. That judgement was surely prompted by the B flat quartet, K458, completed in the autumn of 1784. It is the most diatonic and extrovert of the set. The nickname 'Hunt' (not Mozart's own) was irresistibly suggested by the first movement's bounding 6/8 rhythms and imitation horn calls. But this being Mozart, there is subtle craft amid the alfresco vigour.

The second theme makes wittily inventive play with the little fluttering figure that later (after a new lyrical tune) runs amok in the development. The movement's climax comes in the coda, where Mozart realises the contrapuntal potential of the 'hunting' theme in a series of powerful canonic imitations. Irregular phrase lengths, discreet chromatic touches and *sforzando* accents lend pungency to the courtly *Menuetto*, placed second by Mozart. Next comes a rapt *Adagio* that draws much of its eloquence from its underlying harmonic tension. The finale, full of wit and rhythmic cunning *à la* Haydn, sports three subjects, the second a sort of compressed variant of the first, the third more lyrically expansive. In the development Mozart dismembers the first theme and works it contrapuntally, with exciting dramatic effect.

Bartók's musical idiom reached an extreme of dissonant modernism with his drastically concentrated Third String Quartet of 1927-8. Yet even here the counterbalancing pull of East European folksong meant that his music never tipped over into atonality. Like Bartók's works in other genres, his last three quartets, Nos 4-6, became progressively less harsh in their harmonic language, though no one would accuse them of being easy listening.

Bartók's final string quartet was commissioned by Zoltán Székely, leader of the Hungarian Quartet, and completed in November 1939. Its dominant moods of sadness and (in the *Marcia* and *Burletta*) sardonic bitterness reflect both the darkening political landscape and Bartók's own grief during the final illness of his mother, who died in December 1939.

Each of the four movements begins with the drooping Magyar-flavoured 'motto' theme, marked *Mesto* – sad – and heard at the outset on viola alone. The sonata-form *Vivace* that follows contrasts its wispy, skimming opening theme with a yearning melody that, again, suggests Magyar folk music. Bartók puts both themes through their paces in a continual process of transformation and development. While the first movement has a lightness of touch, tinged with wistfulness, the *Marcia* and *Burletta* trade on abrasive, percussive sonorities. Both open with an enriched version of the motto. The stomping outer sections of the *Marcia* contrast with a trio in which the viola, playing guitar-style pizzicati, imitates a banjo against a wailing high cello. In the savagely humorous *Burletta* the string ensemble seems to morph into a folk band, with violins initially playing in grating quarter-tones. Lyrical relief comes courtesy of a slower episode, begun by string trio (minus first violin) and based on variations of the two themes of the opening movement. The return of the opening section features Bartók's distinctive 'snap pizzicato'. For the finale Bartók expands the motto into a movement that suggests a profound personal sorrow. After nostalgically recalling themes from the first movement, the quartet ends in utter desolation, with one last, ghostly echo of the motto.

It was Debussy's revolutionary quartet of 1893 that inspired the young Maurice Ravel to embark on his sole string quartet. Ravel was an 'auditeur' in Fauré's composition class at the Paris Conservatoire, and on completing the Quartet in 1903 dedicated it to 'my dear master Gabriel Fauré'. The Paris première the following spring burnished Ravel's growing reputation. While the composer Pierre Lalo felt that the harmonies and sonorities were blatantly Debussyan, the *Mercure de France* noted prophetically: '…One should remember the name of Maurice Ravel. He is one of the masters of tomorrow.'

The Debussy parallels are most obvious in the 'exotic' scherzo, complete with flying pizzicato and tremolo effects – though whereas Debussy's scherzo evokes Balinese gamelans, Ravel's conjures the guitars and mandolins of his beloved Spain. Other parallels include the cyclic treatment of themes and a typically French delight in sensuous, shimmering sonorities. Yet the similarities are rarely more than skin-deep. With its elegantly sculpted lines, the opening movement is far more classical in spirit than Debussy's. Indeed, the luminous, gliding main theme could almost have been composed by Fauré. But while Ravel favours classically derived chord progressions, he gives them a novel twist with remote juxtapositions. Dissonance reaches its apogee just before the recapitulation, where first violin and viola sound the motto in D minor, *fff*, while second violin and cello insist on F sharp major.

There is a Russian flavour in the plangent theme for muted cello that begins the trio section of the scherzo, and in the slow movement's mournful viola melody, punctured by mysterious echoes of the motto. Alternating 5/8 and 3/4 metre, the truculent finale recalls the rhythmic games of the scherzo. More than anywhere else, Ravel often seems to be thinking orchestrally here. Rounding off the cyclic structure, the finale includes further transformations of the motto and reminiscences of themes from the slow movement. After the première Fauré praised the Quartet, but expressed misgivings about the finale. Debussy disagreed, allegedly remarking: 'In the name of all music's gods, and for my sake, don't fiddle with anything you've written here.' Ravel heeded his friend's advice.

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