

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 8 April 2022 7.30pm

## Modigliani Quartet

Amaury Coeytaux violin

Loïc Rio violin

Laurent Marfaing viola

François Kieffer cello

Supported by Pauline and Ian Howat

## Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quartet in C D46 (1813)

*I. Adagio - Allegro con moto • II. Andante con moto •  
III. Menuetto. Allegro • IV. Finale. Allegro*

String Quartet in D D94 (?1811-2)

*I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto • III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Presto*

Interval

String Quartet in A minor D804 'Rosamunde' (1824)

*I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Andante •  
III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Allegro moderato*

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In the years 1811–1813, **Franz Schubert** wrote a new string quartet almost every other month. He was in his mid-teens, in the latter stages of his education at an institution ominously known as the 'Stadtkonvikt', and the young composer did indeed refer to it as a prison. When he had been enrolled there in 1808 he had already been given a good grounding in the practicalities of music by his father, an experienced chamber musician. On his homecoming at each break from school, the family would play through the latest quartets, Franz's two elder brothers on violin, himself on viola and his father on cello. These early compositions therefore provided him with a valuable chance to experiment and hear the results immediately in unpressured surroundings.

It was an opportunity he took full advantage of – therefore the early quartets should not be judged as a 14-year-old boy's attempts to produce masterpieces of the string quartet genre. In fact he was thinking beyond the medium – thus the outer movements of D46 and D94 are full of orchestral textures. And rather than seeking to show an assured command of Classical form, Schubert starts reworking his material as soon as it is introduced. So in the exposition of D46 we have a chromatically intense slow introduction, a 'first subject' that doesn't settle in the supposed home key until it alights on a new theme, and a return to the introduction, this time in tempo, rather than a 'second subject'. He is also toying with unusual phrase structures: the ostensibly genteel slow movement of D46 has a theme built on five- and seven-bar phrases instead of the usual four-bar units.

The first movement of D94 is similarly unconventional (it was the second quartet he completed; the catalogue number is misleading). This quartet in particular heralds the arrival of a future symphonist. Bagpipe-drone effects set a pastoral atmosphere from the start (later disrupted in the first movement by violent key changes and upward-rocketing phrases that arrive out of nowhere and refuse to go away). We stay in the countryside for a supposed minuet and trio that would clearly be more at home in a barn than a ballroom. And the buzzing trills that worry the already restless finale might suggest a gathering swarm of bees! 'Restlessness' is a feature of these quartets, so packed are they with novelty and invention. But they do not deserve to be dismissed as student exercises. Schubert had already found an individual voice, and the quality of his material is unmistakable.

With the 'Rosamunde' Quartet we leave the schoolboy far behind and encounter Schubert aged 27, in what should have been early maturity. However, he would not live long beyond 30. One of the most quoted letters from any composer is one he wrote to his friend Leopold Kupelwieser in March 1824:

Imagine a man whose health will never recover and whose despair makes it worse rather than better; imagine a man, I say, whose brightest hopes have come to nothing, for whom the joys of love and

friendship offer only the deepest pain, whose desire for all that is beautiful (at least in any noble sense) is fading away; and ask yourself, is this not a wretched, miserable soul? 'My peace is gone, my heart is heavy, never, never again shall I find it' – this I can truly sing every day, for each night when I go to bed I hope I will never wake up.

The song quotation is from 'Gretchen am Spinnrade', which Schubert had composed at the age of 18. By 1824 he was spending prolonged periods in hospital. The syphilis he had contracted as a young man would claim his life just five years later.

Schubert's setting of Goethe's mournful text was composed in happier, healthier times – a reminder that an artist's personal circumstances do not necessarily dictate the character of the work produced. Indeed, in the same month that Schubert wrote so despairingly to Kupelwieser, he composed his Octet D803, one of his sunniest pieces. Nevertheless, in the A minor String Quartet D804 – heard for the first time in the month that he sent that despairing letter – he left several clues that this work sincerely reflects his melancholy brooding and lament for lost innocence.

The first is an allusion to 'Gretchen am Spinnrade' itself: the whirring of the spinning wheel, recreated in the piano part of that song, is evoked by the figuration that begins the quartet and permeates much of the opening movement. The *Andante* shares its melody with an entr'acte from Schubert's incidental music to the play *Rosamunde, Fürstin von Zypern* ('Rosamunde, Princess of Cyprus') by Helmina von Chézy. In the relevant scene, the title character is tending a flock of sheep – a classic metaphor for a simple, uncorrupted, pastoral life to which we cannot return. And a further self-quotation in the minuet makes the same point even more plainly: it is from 'Die Götter Griechenlands', a setting of Schiller's poem yearning for lost youth and the Arcadian world depicted in Grecian art.

Despite these melancholic allusions, the music of the 'Rosamunde' Quartet (a title applied to the work after Schubert's death) is more often bittersweet than lamenting or angry. Although the first movement in particular demonstrates Schubert's willingness to engage with the rigours of counterpoint, the quartet finds him less keen than usual to invite affinities with Beethoven's chamber music. Accordingly, the finale is no defiant challenge to fate, no declaration of victory. Rather it suggests that happiness can still be found in the present, if we do not dwell on what we have lost or what is to come.

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