

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 8 July 2024
1.00pm

Elias String Quartet

Sara Bitlloch violin
Donald Grant violin
Simone van der Giessen viola
Marie Bitlloch cello

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quartet in D minor D810 'Death and the Maiden' (1824)
*I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto • III. Scherzo.
Allegro molto • IV. Presto*

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

3 Pieces for string quartet (1914)
I. • II. • III.

Scottish folk music *arranged by Donald Grant*



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Memory embedded in culture is being sounded all the way through this programme, in different ways. The Schubert quartet recalls the composer's setting of a poem by Matthias Claudius (1740-1815) that, being in dialogue, gives voices to the two figures in an image that goes back in German art to the early sixteenth century. Stravinsky's work - explicitly not a string quartet but a group of three character pieces - sets itself against the great quartet tradition only to embody older, specifically Russian, histories of folk dance and chant. Finally another folk spirit, from nearer home, comes bounding out in arrangements by the Elias Quartet's Duncan Grant.

Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' Quartet, dating from 1824, takes its name from the composer's own eponymous song quoted in its slow movement, but the theme of death is omnipresent. We might even hear it right at the start, in one of the most arresting openings in the whole quartet repertory: D, held *fortissimo* in bald octaves, then shaken. The shaking triplet recurs (as it will throughout the movement), but the storm subsides - at least until the main theme gets going, driven by syncopations and rising inexorably into the upper octave. There is another, greater easing in the approach to the second subject, a barcarolle in F major, the triplets now ubiquitous in 12/8 metre. Still, though, the feverish gallop is there as subtext. (The human subject of the original poem is not on horseback, but we might wonder if Schubert was also recalling the desperate ride of another poem he had set, Goethe's *Erlkönig*.) Plunging on, the exposition revisits the barcarolle in a more strained state and closes with an emphatic cadence. The development becomes more anxious as the need nears for the beginning to return. Once engaged, the recapitulation moves swiftly to the barcarolle, in D major, and on, towards a coda of interrupted calm. The movement ends in exhaustion.

Here the song steals in - or, rather, the funeral-march accompaniment to the song, remade from its original D minor into a theme in G minor. There are five variations, of which the first might seem to be enacting the victim's weakness and pleading. In the second, the melody is taken by the cello; the third bursts in with an insistent rhythm again suggestive of horseback riding. Alleviation comes with a variation in the major, though with some tugs of anxiety. The final variation then seems to resume everything: brilliance from the first violin, song from the cello and propulsive rhythm. At the end, the theme attains D major, but this is a precarious blessing.

Swinging in with bare harmony and notes running over the barline, the *Scherzo* has a raw dash. Its trio is in the major, but the same elements are there, a little under cover, and slips into the minor cannot be avoided.

For his finale, where more driving speed is required, Schubert provided a fierce, whirling dance, a dance of death, in 6/8 rhythm. Contrasting material soon appears, radiant and in chords. The dance, however, quickly intervenes, and the music develops as a life-and-death struggle. This is all run a second time, with variation. When a third cycle has just

begun, the tempo increases for a race to the finish, the dance and its insistent D minor triumphant.

In the spring and early summer of 1914, awaiting the opportunity to return to St Petersburg to collect materials for use in a ballet based on a Russian peasant wedding (*Les noces*), **Stravinsky** kept his hand in by writing these pieces for string quartet. The commission came - though seemingly only after the first piece had been composed - from the Flonzaley Quartet, an ensemble supported by a US banker, Edward J de Coppet, and named after his Swiss summer home. The quartet duly gave the first performance the following year, in Chicago.

The first piece may have been a remnant from another ballet project, brought to the composer by Jean Cocteau, who was imagining a set of dances for King David before the Ark of the Covenant. However that may be, the piece is polyrhythm in a nutshell. Over a drone (the viola's open D string bowed right through) three lines proceed quite independently: a rudimentary melody in G repeated over and over by the first violin; an abrupt four-note scale descending to C sharp, coming from the second violin at not quite regular intervals; and a seven-beat accompaniment from pizzicato cello and viola, again repeating regularly. A musical machine is set going, and stops.

Part of Cocteau's plan for his ballet on David was to give the piece, musically and scenically, the character of music hall, a genre cherished by many composers at this time - especially in Paris - for its comic, quirky, light, popular spirit and the total antithesis it offered to high Romanticism. Debussy had pictured a music-hall comedian in one of his piano preludes; Stravinsky did the same in his second quartet piece, which he based on the clowning of Little Tich. Only four feet six inches tall, Little Tich (real name Harry Relph) was as much acclaimed in Paris as he was in his native England, his stock-in-trade being the antics he got up to in a pair of vastly elongated shoes, enabling him to lean over at precipitous angles or jump up on point. (A one-minute film made in Paris, *Little Tich et ses Big Boots*, can be seen on YouTube.)

The finale - entirely different, entirely homophonic - is a hymn without words, looking forward to the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*. Stravinsky orchestrated the pieces soon after and gave them titles: *Danse*, *Excentrique* and *Cantique*.

From the incense-smoked gold of the last, we turn in a steep westerly direction to a piece by a member of this afternoon's quartet, **Donald Grant**, who has roots as much in Scottish traditional music as in regular classical. *Helen's Tune*, which he wrote to a commission from Helen Crabbie, presents a running solo melody that is developed by the quartet in alternation with two counter-themes, the first skipping off from the start of the main theme upside-down, the second with its melody in the two violins. The piece comes with a new short introduction.

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