

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 8 June 2025
7.30pm

Doric String Quartet

Maia Cabeza violin
Ying Xue violin
Emma Wernig viola
John Myerscough cello

Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

Fantasia a4 No. 6 in F Z737 (c.1680)

Fantasia a4 No. 7 in C minor Z738 (c.1680)

Fantasia a4 No. 8 in D minor Z739 (c.1680)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 16 in F Op. 135 (1826)

*I. Allegretto • II. Vivace • III. Lento assai, cantante
e tranquillo • IV. Grave, ma non troppo tratto – Allegro*

Interval

Henry Purcell

Fantasia a4 No. 9 in A minor Z740 (c.1680)

Fantasia a4 No. 10 in E minor Z741 (c.1680)

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

String Quartet No. 2 in C Op. 36 (1945)

*I. Allegro calmo, senza rigore • II. Vivace •
III. Chacony. Sostenuto*



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When **Henry Purcell** entered his 14 Fantasies into a catalogue titled *The Works of Hen; Purcell, A.D. 1680*, he was just 20 years old. It is perhaps surprising that this collection has been compared to *The Art of Fugue*, the compendium with which the aged JS Bach summed up his knowledge of counterpoint, leaving it unfinished at his death 70 years after Purcell wrote down his Fantasias. But there are similarities. Neither collection specifies instrumentation; neither appears to have been written in anticipation of a particular performance; and both put the seal on a departing style of composition while elevating it to a new level.

These works of Purcell are 'consort music', that is, designed for a group of instruments of the same family, such as the 'chest of viols' that had once been an essential possession for any well-off musical household. By Purcell's era the style was considered old-fashioned. But from today's perspective the Fantasies pave the way for the later string quartet genre (especially the four-part examples we hear tonight), which formed a bridge between domestic music making and concert performance. There are already intimations of an outward-looking, listener-aware sensibility in the expressive dissonances in which Purcell delights. These 'modern' sonorities were surely among the aspects that intrigued the young Benjamin Britten, who in the 20th Century became a leading champion of his 17-century predecessor.

This quartet is the last completed composition by **Ludwig van Beethoven**. It is not quite the last music he wrote – the alternative finale to the Op. 130 Quartet was to follow, allowing the *Grosse Fuge* to stand alone. And of course there were sketches for works that would never reach fruition, so we should not think of it as the composer's intended final testament. However, it is a remarkably apt summing-up of Beethoven's career. Although its outlines and proportions are thoroughly classical, the work's substance is wondrously fresh, the detail intricate.

The first movement comprises a wealth of short, motivic ideas that have strong individuality, yet they fit together as perfectly as the components of a mosaic. The tempo marking – *allegretto* rather than *allegro* – speaks of moderation and civility rather than high drama. The *Scherzo* brings increased energy, but in the form of vigorous games, not tense confrontation.

Periodically throughout his career Beethoven turned to hymn-like themes for his slow movements. The *Lento* of this quartet uses rapt four-part harmony that emulates the sounds of a church organ or choir. In the middle section, for the first time in this work, we experience doubt and pain – but the benediction that follows is overwhelming, sublimely consoling.

And then the finale, with its title 'The difficult resolution'. Over its opening phrase Beethoven wrote 'Muss es sein?' (Must it be?). In recitative the question is asked more urgently and intensely until we reach the

allegro with a shout of 'Es muss sein!' – again the words were written into the manuscript. The difficult question returns at the movement's climax, but it is turned away with humour and grace. In the twinkling of an eye, the movement, the Quartet and the composer's career are brought to the simplest, most harmonious and complete resolution one could possibly imagine.

If 1945 was a momentous year for the world, it was also a personal turning point for **Benjamin Britten**. His career breakthrough came in June, with the première of his opera *Peter Grimes* – a critical and box-office triumph. The next month he went through Europe on a tour of the newly liberated Nazi concentration camps, playing for the inmates in a duo with Yehudi Menuhin. Inevitably the experience had a profound effect on both men as artists and as people.

As he strove to reconcile this juxtaposition of euphoria and horror in such a short space of time, Britten tackled two important commissions: the song cycle *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne* and the Second String Quartet. They were performed on successive nights at Wigmore Hall as part of the commemoration of 250 years since the death of Purcell: the Quartet on the exact date of the anniversary, 21 November, the songs on Britten's 32nd birthday, 22 November.

The Quartet honours Purcell and the qualities Britten most admired in his predecessor: 'clarity, brilliance, tenderness and strangeness', as he put it. There is a direct reference to Purcell at the work's very beginning, a drone sounded by the viola while the other instruments spin out the first theme. If anyone was in doubt about the deliberate allusion to Purcell's *Fantasia upon One Note* (Z745), Britten spelt it out by placing that work as the eighth side of the 78rpm record set of the Second Quartet made by the all-female Zorian Quartet, who had given the first performance of his new work. Britten himself played the viola drone in the Purcell piece. As in some of Mozart's quartets, a third subject grows out of the first two in this opening movement. That, at least, is one way to analyse a structure that combines elements of sonata and variation form.

A wiry, nervous scherzo is followed by a final movement longer than the other two put together. Britten labels this passacaglia *Chacony* in a further explicit nod to Purcell, who favoured the form and that terminology. The 'ground' (repeated theme) is first sounded in unison. The succeeding variations are organised into four groups, said by Britten to examine in turn the theme's harmonic, rhythmic, melodic and formal properties. The first three groups are rounded off with cadenzas for individual players; the final restatement of the unison theme is punctuated by 21 tonic chords, one for each of the variations we have heard.

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