

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 8 November 2021 7.30pm

Takács Quartet



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in F minor Op. 20 No. 5 (1772)

I. Allegro moderato • II. Menuetto • III. Adagio • IV. Fuga a 2 soggetti

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

String Quartet No. 2 'Intimate Letters' (1928)

I. Andante • II. Adagio • III. Moderato • IV. Allegro

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 15 in A minor Op. 132 (1825)

*I. Assai sostenuto - Allegro • II. Allegro ma non tanto •
III. Molto adagio • IV. Alla marcia, assai vivace - Più allegro •
V. Allegro appassionato - Presto*

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The string quartet can aspire to the purest and most distilled form of musical abstraction, but it is also capable of conveying the most intimate, even confessional details of a composer's life. Goethe may have described Beethoven's quartets as 'four intelligent people conversing among themselves', yet as well as conveying erudite exchange between equals, the quartet can be intensely dramatic, pinning the innocent listener to their seat by the force of its concentrated theatricality.

Haydn was 40 when he composed the six quartets Op. 20, in 1772. He had been working for the wealthy Esterházy family for more than a decade and took up the position of Kapellmeister – music director – at the palace of Esterháza in rural Hungary in 1766. This grand Rococo building was often compared to Versailles, but it was far from Vienna's rich musical culture and social life. As Haydn discovered, the resulting sense of isolation meant that he was obliged 'to become original', and the Op. 20 quartets fully embody that spirit of innovation. His earlier quartets had been gallant pieces designed to evoke the mood of the aristocratic salon and its cult of elegant conversation. Now, though, he produced a series of compositions which seemed closer to the spirit of what would become known as *Sturm und Drang* ('storm and stress') – a literary movement of the 1760s and 1770s which emphasized the extremes of human emotion and the primacy of an individual's subjective experience. Two of the slow movements in the set are marked *affettuoso*. Literally, this term can be translated as 'tenderly' or 'affectionately', but it also hints at the 18th-century theory of passions (what is known as the *Affektenlehre* in German). The Quartet No. 5 in F minor is the most emotionally charged of the group, conforming to many of the expectations of the quartet genre, yet extending and challenging them too. The harmonic language of the first movement is unusually rich, and can one really imagine anybody dancing to the minuet that follows? The slow movement is a lilting *siciliana*, whose key of F major seems more philosophical than impassioned. The finale is an austere fugue, illustrating how Haydn not only intuited the coming of Romanticism, but honoured the legacy of the past too.

Haydn's influence on later composers was immense. Beethoven studied the Op. 20 quartets before embarking on his first quartets, and Brahms revered them so much that he even acquired Haydn's manuscript. Another composer to have used the quartet as a means for conveying acutely felt psychological drama was **Janáček**, who once claimed that 'a pure musical note means nothing unless it is pinned down in life, blood and locale'. There is certainly plenty of 'life, blood and locale' about his String Quartet No. 2, written in 1928 and premièred a month after the composer's death that August. Its subtitle – 'Intimate

Letters' – refers to the more than 700 letters that Janáček had exchanged over the previous decade with his beloved muse, Kamila Stösslová. It was an uncanny relationship – he was 63 when they met in 1917 at the Moravian spa town of Luhačovice, and she was just 25. Janáček's feelings may have been unreciprocated, but the creativity that Stösslová unleashed in him was overwhelming – she inspired not just 'Intimate Letters', but also his final three operas, *Kát'a Kabanová* (1921), *The Cunning Little Vixen* (1924), and *The Makropulos Affair* (1926). There is no explicit programme as such to the quartet, which adopts the four-movement structure employed by composers from Haydn onwards. Rather than the work's command of structure and musical motif, what stands out most is its sense of heightened physicality. As he wrote to Stösslová, it was imbued with 'the fragrance of your body, the glow of your kisses'. It was, he confessed, 'a work as if carved out of living flesh. I think I won't write a more profound and truer one.'

Although a late work, Janáček's 'Intimate Letters' has all the vigour of youth. Similarly, the five 'late' quartets that **Beethoven** wrote in 1825–6 attest to a powerful and endlessly inventive commitment to new forms and ideas. Like 'Intimate Letters', the Quartet No. 15 in A minor Op. 132, can be read autobiographically, at least in part. Beethoven planned the work in four movements, but in the winter of 1824–5, he fell ill with a serious intestinal illness. When he returned to his sketches, he extended the work to five movements, placing an extended *adagio* at its heart. Subtitled 'Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der Lydischen Tonart' ('Holy Song of Thanksgiving of a Convalescent to the Deity, in the Lydian Mode'), this third movement comprises hymn-like sections, juxtaposed with more graceful outpourings of lyricism that are marked, appropriately enough, *neue Kraft fühlend* ('with a feeling of new strength'). That strength can be felt in the quartet's other movements too. The opening *Allegro* (prefaced by a short sustained slow introduction) is grand and ambitious, testing the very limits of classical sonata form. The second movement is a minuet and trio that has something of Haydn's genial charm. How, though, was Beethoven to follow the sublime beauty of his 'Holy Song of Thanksgiving'? His solution was as daring as the 'Holy Song' itself – a brief march whose brusque insouciance brings us defiantly back to the world of ordinary humanity. A recitative-like section recalls the finale of the Ninth Symphony and, indeed, the quartet's finale is based on material originally intended for that grand symphonic work. Cast in rondo form, it moves towards a radiant A major, completing the quartet's journey from illness to health, darkness to light.

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