WIGMORE HALL

Monday 9 December 2024
7.30pm

Quatuor Ébène
Pierre Colombet violin
Gabriel Le Magadure violin
Marie Chilemme viola
Yuya Okamoto cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in B flat Op. 76 No. 4 'Sunrise' (1797)
I. Allegro con spirito • II. Adagio • III. Menuet. Allegro • IV. Finale. Allegro ma non troppo

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

3 Divertimenti for string quartet (1936)
March. Allegro maestoso • Waltz. Allegretto • Burlesque. Presto

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 13 in B flat Op. 130 with Grosse Fuge Op. 133 (1825-6)
I. Adagio ma non troppo - Allegro
II. Presto
III. Andante con moto ma non troppo
IV. Alla danza tedesca. Allegro assai
V. Cavatina. Adagio molto espressivo
VI. Overtura. Allegro - Fuga

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In 1790, Joseph Haydn's employer Prince Nikolaus Esterházy died. Nikolaus's son Anton was less musical than his father, and thus had limited need of Haydn's services at Eszterháza. This gave the composer the freedom to spend long periods in Vienna, to travel – including two successful visits to London – and to work on commissions for new patrons such as Count Joseph Georg von Erdődy, who commissioned the six Op. 78 string quartets. Haydn wrote them in 1796–7. They have long been considered among his greatest and most ambitious compositions; his friend the English musicologist Charles Burney praised them for their 'invention, fire, good taste, and new efforts'. They are notable for their variety of musical forms, and for the equal prominence given to all four instruments.

The 'Sunrise' Quartet Op. 76 No. 4 derives its nickname from the first theme of the opening Allegro con spirito, in which the first violin soars in elegant arabesques over sustained chords. The second theme is essentially its 'mirror image', with a descending cello solo; in fact, this movement is a model of Haydn's ability to derive all his material from a single idea. Alternately contemplative and spirited, it contains lively conversation between the four instruments. A simple five-note theme supplies much of the musical material for the rapt Adagio. This shares several features with the Allegro con spirito, including soaring first-violin melodies. While the overall mood is tranquil, richly chromatic harmonies tinge some passages with melancholy.

The third and fourth movements are lighter in tone. The rhythmically vital outer sections of the Menuet bookend a rustic central trio whose octave doublings and cello 'drone' recall Central European folk traditions. Many listeners also perceive a hint of folk music, either Central European or English, in the Finale's cheerful main theme. Despite a stormy minor-key episode, good humour dominates in this movement – not least in the fleet-footed final section (coda), which brings the quartet to a delightfully witty conclusion.

In 1933, Benjamin Britten embarked on a work entitled *Alla Quartetto serioso*: *'Go play, boy, play'*. He intended it to have five movements, each portraying a friend from his schooldays. He completed three movements – 'PT', 'At the Party' and 'Ragging' – before setting the work aside. In 1936, he reworked its second and third movements in the *Three Divertimenti*, premièred on 25 February that year at Wigmore Hall. Britten was unhappy with its reception, noting the audience's 'sniggers and cold silence'. The piece would not be heard again until after his death. The astringent harmonies and insistent rhythms of the opening March – newly composed in 1936 – recall the music of Stravinsky, whom the young Britten much admired. *Glissandi* (slides) and *pizzicati* (plucked notes) give it an ironic air. The ensuing Waltz is contrastingly melodious, with much instrumental dialogue. While there are brief bursts of agitation, the overall mood is gently nostalgic. The fiery closing Burlesque is characterised by tremolos (rapid alternations between two notes), abrupt dynamic contrasts and swirling *moto perpetuo* figuration, and ends the work in high drama.

By 1819, Ludwig van Beethoven was generally in poor health and almost completely deaf. At the same time, he was embarking on a period of remarkable creativity. During the next five years he produced a string of masterpieces including his last three piano sonatas, the *Missa solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony. He then turned his attention to a genre he had last explored in 1810: the string quartet.

The String Quartet No. 13 in B flat Op. 130 was the third of a set (with opp. 127 and 132) commissioned by the Russian aristocrat Prince Nikolai Galitzin, a keen amateur cellist. Beethoven began work on the piece around June 1825 and finished it around December the same year, four months later than he had anticipated. This was largely due to the complexity of the quartet's finale, the Grosse Fuge. (The term literally means 'grand fugue'; a fugue is a piece in which a reiterated theme – the subject – is accompanied by increasingly elaborate countermelodies). At the private première of Op. 130 on 21 March 1826, the Grosse Fuge challenged performers and listeners alike, with one critic terming it 'incomprehensible'. Beethoven was subsequently persuaded to publish it separately and to write a new finale, lighter in tone. Tonight, however, we hear Op. 130 as he first intended.

Unusually for its period, the quartet is in six rather than four movements. The mysterious opening Adagio juxtaposes pensive triple-time sections with lively, duple-time ones. Abrupt shifts in tempo and dynamics and adventurous harmonies give it a quasi-improvisatory air. A scurrying Presto follows – one of Beethoven's shortest movements. The contrastingly expansive third movement features a graceful flowing melody passed between the players. *Pizzicato* passages provide an element of humour; indeed, Beethoven instructed the movement should be played *poco scherzoso* (a little playfully). Grace and wit also characterize the fourth movement, a rustic German dance with waltz-like outer sections and a strongly accented central episode. The ensuing Cavatina contains one of Beethoven's loveliest melodies, which unfolds in the first violin over richly textured accompaniment. According to Karl Holz, the second violinist in Op. 130's première, this movement never failed to move the composer to tears.

The closing Grosse Fuge has been described by broadcaster John Suchet as the 'marathon of the String Olympics'. Over some 15 minutes of music, Beethoven transforms both his main fugal subject and a secondary one in almost every way imaginable: they are played loudly, quietly, sped up, slowed down and even backwards, with ever more complex accompaniment. While the overall mood is tense, even combative, the piece ends in a surprisingly optimistic mood which Beethoven's biography Marion M. Scott hailed as 'the ultimate triumph of [the] spirit'.

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