

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 9 May 2024
7.30pm

Jerusalem Quartet

Alexander Pavlovsky violin
Sergei Bresler violin
Ori Kam viola
Kyril Zlotnikov cello

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in E flat Op. 76 No. 6 (1797)
*I. Allegretto - Allegro • II. Fantasia. Adagio •
III. Menuetto. Presto • IV. Finale. Allegro
spirituoso*

Paul Ben-Haim (1897-1984)

String Quartet No. 1 Op. 21 (1937)
*I. Con moto sereno • II. Molto vivace • III. Largo e
molto sostenuto • IV. Finale. Allegro commodo*

Interval

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

String Quartet in G minor Op. 10 (1893)
*I. Animé et très décidé • II. Assez vif et bien
rythmé • III. Andantino, doucement expressif •
IV. Très modéré*



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Celebrating three decades of international acclaim, 20 published CDs (mostly with Harmonia Mundi) and extensive performance tours around Europe and North America, the Jerusalem Quartet returns to Wigmore Hall. Out of its vast repertory of traditional quartets, from Haydn and Beethoven to Bartók and Shostakovich, it has chosen to commence today's performance with one of Haydn's 'strangest' quartets, and conclude with Debussy's masterpiece. The surprise of the programme is Paul Ben-Haim's quartet.

Joseph Haydn is the best retort to the claim that geniuses are never recognised in their own lifetime. His six 'Erdődy' quartets Opus 76 were published in 1799, when Haydn was already lauded as Europe's leading composer, and they garnered immediate recognition and praise. Haydn's contemporary, the English music historian Charles Burney (1726-1814), described these quartets as 'full of invention, fire, good taste and new effects, and seem the product, not of a sublime genius who has written so much and so well already, but one of highly-cultivated talents, who had expended none of his fire before'. The set's popularity was achieved despite (or perhaps because of) its many irregularities and eccentricities, its mixture of sophisticated and folk-like elements and its violation of contemporaneous norms, many of them established by Haydn himself in earlier works. All that said, the final work in the set – the Quartet in E flat Op. 76 No. 6 – stands out; Richard Wigmore described it as 'in some ways the strangest' of the six. It opens with a variations-and-fugue movement, a formal model that would only become conventional in the 19th Century. Even prior to the fugal section, polyphony is a major feature of this movement.

The second movement, titled *Fantasia*, is based on an ostensibly simple theme which seems at once serene and full of longing. The constant disconsolate quest for the home key (B major) lends the movement a somewhat archaic feeling; the Haydn scholar H C Robbins Landon compared it to Henry Purcell's string fantasias. The third movement seemingly returns to more familiar Haydnesque territory, in a light, scherzo-like minuet, but the trio section is treated in a polyphonic manner reminiscent of the more 'archaic' opening movements. The sense of sophisticated humour continues into the *Finale*. Haydn, ever the trickster, keeps misleading his listeners as to what the metre is and where the downbeat might be.

Paul Frankenburger – composer, pianist and conductor – was one of the first Jewish musicians to escape his native Germany soon after the Nazis' rise to power. He settled in the British Mandate of Palestine in 1933, when he Hebraized his surname to **Paul Ben-Haim**. His String Quartet No. 1 Op. 21, one of the first quartets written in British (Mandatory) Palestine, marked his return to creative activity after the cultural shock, and cemented his status as a pioneering figure in the local Jewish community. By 1937, Ben-Haim had been joined by dozens of other Jewish-European musicians who, like him, escaped fascist Europe, and who also sought to forge a new, local musical language. His German-based style combined French-impressionist models with newfound

Eastern and Jewish-Sephardic influences that he gradually cultivated in his new homeland. Yoel Greenberg notes that the concluding rondo *Finale*'s theme has 'a distinctive Jewish flavour to it, though it is hard to pin down its origin: is it Eastern European? Oriental? Or perhaps an innocent mixture of identities?' In later years, Ben-Haim viewed this movement as a prophetic lament over the looming Holocaust; certain passages within it bear an unnerving resemblance to Jewish-tinged movements that Shostakovich would compose several years later in response to the Nazi atrocities.

One of the formal models for Ben-Haim's quartet was **Claude Debussy's** String Quartet in G minor Op. 10. Both works model their respective composers' conscious and deliberate (if partial) rejection of Germanic norms. Debussy's quartet is one of his earliest large-scale instrumental works – part of his overall transition into an independent composer: it was during these years that Debussy gradually abandoned his work as a commissioned arranger, and began composing works that he genuinely wanted to write, such as the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* and tonight's Quartet. As he departed from established norms towards his use of modal and whole-tone scales, the work initially attracted a mixed reception: some critics hailed it as a major breakthrough and others, including fellow composer Ernest Chausson, were more reserved.

The first movement of this four-movement quartet opens with two contrasting themes – one bold and impassioned, the other more subdued. The immediate transition between them might have been one source of Chausson's critique: Debussy defies here the traditional, 'Germanic' requirement for a 'connective tissue' between the two themes, for a series of developing variations that turns one theme into another. For Debussy, however, this constituted a new, more flexible aesthetic. The initial theme recurs throughout the quartet, seemingly adopting César Franck's cyclical methods.

However, the Debussy scholar Roger Nichols argues that Debussy's approach is fundamentally different: rather than leading to a dramatic, goal-oriented development of the basic theme, he offers a more nuanced, impressionistic transformation. The *pizzicati* in the second, scherzo-like movement – one of many features which Ravel would later borrow from Debussy – may have been inspired by the gamelan music which Debussy encountered at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris. This is followed by a melancholy, nocturne-like movement; several contemporaneous critics also noted the presence of Russian influences. This spirit of reverie carries into the slow beginning of the finale. However, a subtle disturbing figure, reminiscent of the first movement, gradually releases its aggressive character, unleashing a movement which some writers have compared to the 'savagery' of later composers like Bartók and Janáček. As the finale proceeds, its thematic connections with the opening movement become increasingly apparent.

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