

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 14 May 2022 7.30pm

Doric String Quartet

Alex Redington violin

Ying Xue violin

Hélène Clément viola

John Myerscough cello

CLASSIC *fm*

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Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

String Quartet No. 2 BB75 (1915-7)

I. Moderato • II. Allegro molto capriccioso • III. Lento

String Quartet No. 4 BB95 (1928)

*I. Allegro • II. Prestissimo, con sordino • III. Non troppo lento •
IV. Allegretto pizzicato • V. Allegro molto*

Interval

String Quartet No. 6 BB119 (1939)

I. Mesto - Vivace • II. Mesto - Marcia • III. Mesto - Burletta • IV. Mesto

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The outbreak of World War I placed **Bartók**'s folksong-hunting grounds out of bounds. Settled for the duration of the war in the Budapest suburb of Rákoskeresztúr, he returned to composition. The expressive language of late-Romantic Vienna had served him well in his First String Quartet of 1909 but by 1915 both his musical language and his personal reserve had deepened. The Second Quartet, begun that year and completed in 1917, is a work in which folk influences and personal emotion burn fiercely, but are channelled and directed by a Classical structure of unprecedented strength. Bartók makes his purpose clear with his very first bar, with its low cello note and quiet dissonance: a telling reference to Mozart's most famous quartet opening. This is a Classical quartet, the first mature product of the processes that would lead Bartók, ten years later, to the supreme formal mastery of his Third Quartet.

The five-note figure that follows from that opening is one of the cells from which the whole work grows. Bartók builds from it (like Haydn) a flowing, often impassioned, sonata-form first movement in which (again, like Haydn, but also like his beloved Transylvanian folk musicians) his ideas develop and grow far beyond the recapitulation. The central movement is a hot-blooded rondo in what one might easily hear as Bartók's most Magyar style were it not for the fact that its material was derived from a 1913 trip to Biskra in Algeria. Bartók conceded that 'the last movement is the most difficult to define'. From the frozen mists of the opening, the first movement's five-note motif rises and slowly uncoils over four linked sections, first to a small climax and then to a much more extended peroration before sinking once more to stillness and a *pizzicato* farewell. The quartet was premièred in Budapest on 3 March 1918, by the Waldbauer-Kerpély String Quartet.

Ten years separate Bartók's Third Quartet from his Second; less than a year separates his Third from his Fourth. He had good reason to be prolific. Progressively-inclined musical societies across Europe and America were now engaging Bartók as a performer of his own music, and he had become a regular guest at new music festivals - such as the ISCM (International Society for Contemporary Music) festival at Frankfurt in July 1927 at which he played his First Piano Concerto and heard, for the first time, Berg's *Lyric Suite*.

Bartók wrote his Fourth Quartet at home in Budapest between July and September 1928, and if the single-movement Third had seemed to strive for the most intense possible concentration; the Fourth expands into vivid new realms of musical colour and character. On one level, it was his most expansive musical structure yet: a five movement arc, with tautly-worked, propulsive outer movements framing a pair of brilliant scherzos, each with a completely distinctive colour. The first, played with mutes, is a thing of eerie buzzing and glinting half-tones; the second, played entirely *pizzicato*, punctuated by percussive twangs as the players let their strings snap against their fingerboards (the so-called 'Bartók pizzicato'), is unmistakably droll.

And at the heart of the whole piece is a slow movement like no other: a nocturne of the Hungarian plains, in which cello and then violin sing as if improvising; while the cosmos, lit by campfire sparks and hints of birdsong, seems to shimmer and rustle around them. 'The melodic world of my string quartets does not essentially differ from that of folksong' said Bartók. 'Only the framework is stricter'.

In the summer of 1939, Bartók accepted an invitation to spend some weeks with the conductor Paul Sacher in Saanen. Swiftly completing his *Divertimento* for Sacher's Basel Chamber Orchestra, he turned immediately to a commission for the violinist Zoltán Székely's New Hungarian String Quartet. The quartet he sketched out was to be his first in the Classical four movements, finishing with a brisk folk-dance finale. But the work that he completed back in Budapest in late November, and finally sent for publication in February 1940, was rather different - still in four movements, but with two mordant scherzos, and a slow finale. Something had led him to change his mind.

Outwardly a reserved and undemonstrative man, Bartók generally confined the markings on his music to simple descriptions of tempo. The fact was that throughout the autumn of 1939 Bartók's mother was terminally ill (the end finally came on 19 December). Meanwhile the political skies were darkening, and war broke out shortly after he began work on the quartet. Bartók sent the completed manuscript directly to Boosey & Hawkes in London, having severed his relationship with the Nazi-controlled Universal Edition in Vienna.

So the Sixth Quartet wasn't merely the first time he'd used the term *Mesto* ('sorrowful') since his Op. 1 (1904): he placed it, with unignorable significance, at the head of all four movements. And the same melancholy theme, subtly altered, introduces each of the quartet's first three movements before becoming the actual substance of the finale. The first *Vivace* is the brightest. Written in Bartók's extremely individual sonata form, its singing second subject, marked *con calore* ('with warmth') recurs throughout the work. The second movement takes the characteristic rhythms of the Hungarian *verbunkos* (a recruiting dance) and subjects them to a brilliant range of instrumental colours.

With the *Burletta* the humour moves from the sardonic to the savage, but the biting opening and the jarring quarter-tone dissonance of the melody that follows are offset by the quiet melancholy of a gentler central episode. The *mesto* theme comes to fulfilment in the slow finale - an expression of anguished sorrow, sinking slowly through haunted reminiscences of the first movement to quiet resignation, and final dissolution in an upward *pizzicato* chord. It was premièred by the Kolisch Quartet in New York on 20 January 1941, in the presence of the (now exiled) composer.

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