

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 16 May 2022 1.00pm

## Gringolts Quartet

Ilya Gringolts violin

Anahit Kurtikyan violin

Silvia Simionescu viola

Claudius Herrmann cello



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

3 Pieces for string quartet (1914)

Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)

String Quartet No. 1 in D minor Op. 7 (1904-5)

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Chamber music had a significant part to play in **Schoenberg's** development as a composer. Living and working in his native Vienna, he could hardly escape the august history of the string quartet in the city. A C major quartet movement from 1894 marked the beginning of his long association with the genre, which Schoenberg deepened in 1897 with the completion of a four-movement work in D major. Couched in the idiom of the late Brahms, as well as that of his close friend and colleague Dvořák, the quartet quickly won the appreciation of the Wiener Tonkünstlerverein, though its members were equally swift to express their dismay when Schoenberg later submitted his string sextet *Verklärte Nacht* to the board.

They were doubtless disheartened by that work's seeming turn away from local practice, though others, including Mahler and his violinist brother-in-law Arnold Rosé, understood that Schoenberg's music was still rooted in those traditions. Like other artistic disciplines at the time, this was not so much a matter of revolution as it was evolution, even if the music was revolutionary enough to stoke the ire of the invariably conservative Viennese.

By the time he returned to writing string quartets in the summer of 1904, Schoenberg had been planning a work for nearly three years. Completed in September 1905, the First String Quartet Op. 7 continued down the path set by *Verklärte Nacht* and its even bolder orchestral successor *Pelleas und Melisande*. During its inception, the quartet had similarly programmatic aims, though it touched on more abstract thoughts, rather than following the narrative of a poem or play, with Schoenberg noting phrases such as 'rejection, defiance', 'desperation', 'enthusiastic strength to fight, development of fantasy, energy', 'greatest intoxication of the senses' and 'quiet happiness and the return of peace and harmony' in his sketchbook. Significantly, these were to remain private ideas, following the example of Mahler and his symphonies – Schoenberg had recently had something of a damascene experience at the first local performance of Mahler's Third – though it is possible to trace the moods in the music that arose.

Formally, the quartet adumbrates the structure of a complete sonata, responding to works by Liszt and Schubert, which he employed again in the First Chamber Symphony Op. 9, which had its first performance alongside that of the First Quartet at the Bösendorfer Hall in February 1907. Paul Stefan later remembered that 'many found the work impossible, and left the hall during the performance, one particularly humorously through the emergency exit'. In both scores, Schoenberg compressed the traditional four movements into one, offering a single, through-composed form. Unlike the 20-minute Chamber Symphony, however, the quartet occupies the same length as its Classical or Romantic predecessors, lasting some 40 minutes in total.

The first violinist takes the lead, as if harking back to those models, before the opening D minor 'movement' reveals much denser polyphony. At times, the players even seem to act

independently of each other, with the material in constant flux, here and in ensuing sections. Harmonically, matters quickly reach fever pitch, with any link to that tonal anchor stretched to breaking point. And while there are moments suggesting Schoenberg's 'greatest intoxication of the senses', as kinesis gives way to reflective pause, the underlying feeling of propulsion rarely relents.

A scherzo follows on immediately from the first section and is much more disarming, evoking the bucolic tropes of Haydn and Mozart, though it also has a polyphonic charge, juxtaposing the two violins with their lower-string counterparts. The harmonic language is also one that will knot more quickly than we might imagine.

Providing further contrast, though still linked to what has gone before, the adagio is bleaker, its eerie tremolos implying, though never quite defining, programmatic intent, before a final rondo slowly twists into life. Turning the material around once more, it eventually arrives at D major by means of a thrilling, if at times treacherous, road.

That journey would prove much shorter, though no less complex, as Schoenberg began his search for greater succinctness – 'my music must be *brief*, he wrote to Busoni in 1909, 'Concise! In two notes: not built but "expressed"!!' And it is a sense of brevity – and bravura – that is manifest in **Stravinsky's** *3 Pieces for string quartet* from 1914. By the time he wrote this trio of independent movements, revised four years later and then orchestrated with his *Etude pour pianola* as *4 Etudes* in 1928, Stravinsky was fully established as a composer and, moreover, a highly controversial one, following the 1913 première of *Le sacre du printemps*.

A terpsichorean vein likewise runs through the first of the pieces, which was later entitled 'Danse'. And it may well have begun life as part of an abortive theatrical collaboration with Cocteau, rather than Diaghilev, concerning the Old Testament figure of David. The dance's persistent ostinatos and constantly changing metre are familiar from Stravinsky's vernal sacrifice, though they equally look ahead to the percussive drive of *Les noces*.

The second piece, later titled 'Excentrique', has a no less idiosyncratic rhythmic profile. The mood throughout is pert if perverse, with Stravinsky juxtaposing though determinedly avoiding any development of the two principal motifs. Brief moments of Ravelian ravishment are quickly cut down, further underlining the contrariness.

Finally, this brief but notable triptych closes in an otherworldly state – this, the longest of the *3 Pieces*, was to be called 'Cantique' in the *4 Etudes*. There is a hint here of Stravinsky's later return to his Orthodox faith, as in the *Symphonie de psaumes* of 1930, as well as liturgical works such as his 1944-8 Mass, revealing the cerebral side of this seasoned *enfant terrible*.

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