

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 16 May 2022 7.30pm

Calidore String Quartet

Jeffrey Myers violin

Ryan Meehan violin

Jeremy Berry viola

Estelle Choi cello

In Memory of Peter Flatter

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet in F Op. 96 'American' (1893)

I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Lento •

III. Molto vivace • IV. Finale. Vivace ma non troppo

Huw Watkins (b.1976)

String Quartet No. 2 (2021-2) *world première*

I. Allegro molto • II. Andante lento • III. Allegro molto

Commissioned by Wigmore Hall

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 1892, **Dvořák** moved from Prague to New York City to become Director of the National Conservatory of Music. He quickly became highly engaged in the idioms of American folk music, and believed that its pentatonic melodies, drone accompaniments and rhythmic repetition should form the basis of American concert music's development.

He practiced what he preached: within two years, he had completed his famous Symphony No. 9 'From the New World' and his 'American' Quartet. Dvořák's gift for melodic writing means both are almost overflowing with memorable lines, none quoting American music directly, but with pentatonic scales skilfully woven into his own, more European musical language.

The quartet was written swiftly whilst visiting the significant Czech community of Spillville, Iowa, and he wrote: 'I wanted to write something very melodious and simple, and always kept Papa Haydn before my eyes'. The two themes of the first movement are both pleasingly pentatonic, and memorable enough to undergo considerable development. The writing is often quasi-orchestral, with tremolos and interlocking accompaniment figures suggesting a much larger ensemble than the four players on stage.

The tearful second movement is a slow, evocative back-and-forth between the first violin and the cellist. After the midway mark, the two violins join together in an impassioned, yearning duet. There is something of the Iowa prairie here – Dvořák wrote, 'It is strange here. Few people and many empty spaces...sometimes it is extremely bleak, enough to make a person despair'.

A scherzo follows, alternating rhythmically charged music in F major with more exploratory music in F minor. One development of the original music sees a high trilling violin imitate the scarlet tanager, a songbird local to Spillville. Finally, a bright *Finale*, again with distinctive 'American' pentatonicism. The music is radiantly cheerful throughout – no more so than in the thrillingly exuberant coda.

Unlike many modern composers, **Huw Watkins** has never been afraid of the hallowed genre of chamber music, nor been shy of 'generic' titles: his catalogue includes a Piano Trio, Piano Quartet, and Piano Quintet, a Horn Trio and a String Trio. This is maybe no surprise for a composer whose craft so often involves simply seeing the creative potential in small cells of notes – simple chords, scales, melodic shapes – and turning them around, spinning them like yarn to create larger tapestries. Titles like these signal the raw materials at the composer's disposal – what can I do with *these* particular instruments? What tapestries can I weave?

String Quartet No. 2 opens with the first violin dancing above single pitches. The movement goes by at fantastic speed, but it is not 'fast' music as we conventionally think of it, especially once slower melodies join underneath: it never feels hurried, instead darting and swooping like a bird in flight. There is much that recalls Britten, particularly the way individual lines, larger phrases and whole sections build then subside like waves.

The dancing, darting triplets that zipped by in the first movement initially seem to have been slowed to a gentle sway in the second,

but things accelerate and intensify as the movement goes on, as threes become fours, fives, sixes. Even when the opening music returns, it now brings forceful, angular contributions from the first violin, and an ambiguous conclusion on an uneasily blurred G major chord.

The final movement again moves at considerable pace, our tour guide an infectious skipping motif heard at the opening. There are fewer troubles in this finale, which, whilst certainly not without drama, is always swept along by the euphoric joy of four musicians willing each other on, racing each other over varied terrain towards the finish line.

Beethoven had already changed the landscape of quartet writing once before: the length and technical demands of his Op. 59 quartets made them suddenly unsuitable for the amateur market which dominated chamber music sales. His five late quartets were a step further still, and have acquired a quasi-religious aura – formidable utterances of great, quasi-spiritual profundity and compositional audacity.

None more so than Op. 130. A strange, mysterious exposition is interrupted by a flurry of semiquavers. It tries again, again interrupted, but this time the semiquavers gather enough steam to break off on their own. This contrast of tempi pock-marks the remainder of the movement – a strangely relaxed development, before a hugely unstable end, full of extraordinary handbrake turns.

Three character pieces follow – appealing miniatures in B flat minor and G, flanking an *Andante* that is pleasant rather than profound. The *Cavatina* fifth movement, however, forms the quartet's expressive heart. The first violin takes the aching melody, with poignant contributions from the second. Around two thirds of the way through, there is a striking, touching passage marked '*beklemmt*' ('oppressed, heavy of heart'), where the violin seems to struggle through fragments of a half-forgotten melody.

There is an enormous, intoxicating excess about the *Grosse Fuge* that follows: to finish a divertimento-type quartet with a vast, highly dissonant and intransigently experimental double fugue, comprising more than a third of the quartet's length, was an audacious statement even for a composer prone to making them. Beethoven had become increasingly fascinated by fugal writing, ranging from the elegant and relaxing to the strenuous and violent. This emphatically has both types, ranging across a grand, multi-movement structure – first crashingly dissonant, then sweetly melodious, then menacing, dancing, dissolving into chords and finally ending in triumph.

In the end, Beethoven (not often one to take advice) was persuaded by his publisher to replace the *Fuge* with a shorter, more jocular finale. It is the *Fuge*, however, that is the more lasting (not to mention imposing) monument. Igor Stravinsky described it as 'an absolutely contemporary piece of music, that will be contemporary forever'.