

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 23 June 2022 7.30pm

Chiaroscuro Quartet

Alina Ibragimova violin

Pablo Hernán Benedí violin

Emilie Hörnlund viola

Claire Thirion cello

Cédric Tiberghien fortepiano

In memory of Peter Flatter

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Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quartet in C minor D703 'Quartettsatz' (1820)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Concerto No. 12 in A K414 (1782)

I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Allegretto

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 7 in F Op. 59 No. 1 'Razumovsky' (1806)

*I. Allegro • II. Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando •
III. Adagio molto e mesto • IV. Thème russe. Allegro*

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The 'Quartettsatz' (D703) was written in 1820, four years after Schubert's previous quartet and four years before the next one, the 'Rosamunde'. In the key of C minor, it was presumably to have been followed by three other movements – the composer wrote 37 bars of an A flat slow movement, plus a violin line of another four bars, then stopped. It is impossible to guess how the whole work would have developed, and maybe Schubert himself was unable to find a satisfactory way forward. The 'Quartettsatz' is in sonata form, yet it does not sound like a conventional first movement, being in 6/8 time and having a driven character, as if fleeing from a threat.

The piece opens with two strongly contrasted themes, though the accompaniment to the second, more lyrical one retains the nervous agitation that permeates the first. These ideas, however, constitute only the beginning of a sequence of at least five strongly characterised episodes. This long exposition (marked to be repeated) and its recapitulation take up the bulk of the movement. The development is comparatively brief and the coda lasts a mere 11 bars.

Having been dismissed from his position as a court musician in his native Salzburg early in 1781, Mozart made his way to Vienna. He arrived supremely confident that he could make a name for himself in the capital, especially given his prowess as a keyboard performer: 'This is undoubtedly the place where piano is king,' he wrote reassuringly to his father. Indeed, there was no shortage of work as a piano teacher to members of the nobility, especially tutoring the daughters of the great households. Nor did Mozart have much difficulty finding a publisher for his sonatas for violin and piano; and by the following summer he had achieved success with his singspiel *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*.

Orchestral music, including the piano concertos Mozart very much wanted to write and play, was a trickier proposition, since there was no established orchestra outside court circles, and no system of public concerts. He took the bull by the horns and published a newspaper advertisement on 15 January 1783: 'Herr Kapellmeister Mozart herewith notifies the highly respected public of the publication of three newly completed pianoforte concertos' which 'may be performed either with a large orchestra with wind instruments or merely *a quattro*, that is with 2 violins, 1 viola and violoncello.' These were offered exclusively by the presumptively self-styled 'Kapellmeister' to subscribers. But if Mozart expected a clamour of wealthy citizens at his door, he was to be disappointed.

Nevertheless he was able to perform the concertos (K413, K414 and K415) at various concerts in the city, either subscription events organised by himself or ones in aid of various charities. It is worth noting that the *a quattro* option was there from the start, and the composer fully expected some performances to be given without the optional wind parts. The A major K414 is conventional in its

outward form but full of progressive features such as the first movement's harmonic tensions created by numerous suspensions. The slow movement pays tribute to Mozart's former mentor Johann Christian Bach, who died early in 1782, the year the concerto was composed: a theme is quoted from an overture Bach supplied for Baldassare Galuppi's opera *La calamita de' cuori*. The *Allegretto* – while not lacking in gaiety – achieves a degree of grandeur unusual for a concerto finale of the era.

Early in 1807 a critic writing in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* declared 'Three new, very long and difficult Beethoven string quartets ... [are] attracting the attention of all connoisseurs. The conception is profound and the construction excellent, but they are not easily comprehended.' It was not just the critics and the listening public who found Beethoven's Op. 59 quartets perplexing. At their first rehearsal, the players grumbled that the music would be as impossible to listen to as it was to play.

Those first performers were the Schuppanzigh Quartet, its members employed by the Russian Ambassador to the Habsburg Empire, Count Andrey Razumovsky (1752–1836), who had commissioned the three quartets that now bear his name. Beethoven had not written any string quartets since the Opus 18 set published in 1801. In that space of time his music had undergone an immense change, and it is immediately apparent. The opening of Op. 59 No. 1 might seem gentle enough to us today – a hummable cello melody rises slowly and is taken up by the violin. But notice how the chug-along chords in the other instruments are reluctant to change harmony until the dissonance becomes too extreme. After many adventures this opening theme returns towards the movement's end as a shout of affirmation, before eventually regaining its original placid form.

The *Allegretto* opens with the cello tapping out a comically simple rhythm on one note. The movement is marked *sempre scherzando* ('as a joke throughout') and the Schuppanzigh players suspected the joke was on them: 'This is not music,' grumbled the second violinist. After such violent humour, the *Adagio molto e mesto* ('Very slow and sad') takes us into a different world, one of contemplation. We emerge from the realm of spirituality into the sunlight of the finale through an accompanied violin cadenza that ends in a trill – no mere bridging device, since the trill recurs later in the movement. Razumovsky stipulated that each of 'his' quartets should include a different Russian melody, and the composer duly obliged, hence the inscription *Thème russe* on the finale of Op. 59 No. 1.

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