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LEONKORO QUARTET

Thursday 12 August, 7.30pm
Djanogly Recital Hall

PROGRAMME

String Quartet in G minor, D173

Franz Schubert

String Quartet No.1, 'The Kreutzer Sonata'

Leoš Janáček

Interval

String Quartet in F, Op 59 No 1

Ludwig van Beethoven

There is a Sennheiser Infrared enhanced hearing system in the Djanogly Recital Hall, please ask for a headset from our front-of-house staff.

PROGRAMME NOTES

String Quartet in G minor, D173

Allegro con brio

Andantino

Menuetto. Allegro vivace

Allegro

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

As a boy Schubert played viola in a family string quartet with his two brothers on violin and their father on cello. Naturally, string quartets feature heavily among his teenage compositions. He wrote eleven of his fifteen completed quartets between about 1810 and 1816, as well as a number of isolated single movements.

He composed the G minor Quartet in March, 1815. This was a particularly productive year, in which he also produced his Second and Third Symphonies, the Masses in G and B flat, and some 150 songs, among other things. Although he was, by now, is a very experienced composer, he was still finding his individual voice: the song 'Gretchen am Spinnrade' (Gretchen at the spinning-wheel), generally acknowledged to be his first fully mature masterpiece, was written only the previous October. So it is not surprising that the G minor Quartet should have echoes of Haydn and Mozart alongside Schubert's own creative personality.

The forceful opening theme establishes both the first movement's main key, G minor, and its rhythmic drive and energy. It then gives way to the gentler second theme – a dialogue between the two violins, over oscillating figures on the viola and the cello's pizzicato bass line – in the related major key, B flat, as Schubert's contemporaries would have expected. The unusually short development section focuses exclusively on the second theme, which emphasises the first theme's sturdy character when it returns at the recapitulation – the climactic point at which the music normally works its way back to the key it started in. But it returns in B flat, and we move to G minor only when the second theme comes back, which itself would normally be expected to return in G major. It all adds up to an early example of Schubert's fascination with exploring unusual key relationships, one of his music's most distinctive characteristics.

The second movement begins in an easy-going frame of mind, and sounds as though it is going to be a theme and variations. In fact, the theme returns unchanged in between a series of episodes in which it is given very free and wide-ranging treatment.

Although Schubert gives the third movement the already outdated heading 'minuet', this propulsively energetic music has more in common with the Austrian *ländler*, the rustic precursor of the waltz, than with eighteenth-century drawing-room elegance.

The spirit of Haydn is particularly evident in the finale, a rondo in which rhythm, again, provides a powerful source of energy.

String Quartet No.1, 'The Kreutzer Sonata'

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

Adagio/Con moto

Con moto – meno mosso

Con moto – vivo – andante

Con moto – adagio – più mosso

It seemed that entirely new impulses, new possibilities, were revealed to me in myself, such as I had not dreamed of before. Such works should be played only in grave, significant conditions, and only then when certain deeds corresponding to such music are to be accomplished.

The narrator of Tolstoy's short novel *The Kreutzer Sonata* has just heard the Beethoven violin sonata in question played by his wife and a visitor to their home. The performance inflames the husband's possessive jealousy and precipitates his murder of his wife. Tolstoy's denunciation of unbridled passions and the situations which encourage them (including, in his view, music) has been dismissed by Janáček's biographer, Mirka Zemanková, as "a rather pathetic, misogynistic product of his old age", but in the composer's hands it became a protest against tyrannical male attitudes towards women. "I had in mind a poor woman, tormented, beaten, battered to death", he wrote to Kamila Stösslová, the young woman who inspired in him the strange, virtually one-sided relationship which was the dominant emotional force of his last ten years or so.

The quartet was written in 1923, in response to a request from the Czech Quartet (whose second violinist was the composer Josef Suk, Dvořák's star pupil and son-in-law). In 1907 Janáček had composed a piano trio based on Tolstoy's story. This is now lost, but it is believed to have quoted from Beethoven's sonata. It seems likely that the quartet re-worked some of the trio's material (without the Beethoven quotation, if any), but such earlier music as it may contain has been thoroughly assimilated into Janáček's uniquely personal late style, with its abrupt, vivid contrasts, short pithy motifs and folk-like melodies.

The impassioned two-bar motif which opens the quartet alternates with a springing polka tune. Two new ideas follow this opening section: a flowing lyrical theme for the three upper instruments in turn, and a lively arpeggio figure based on the opening motif and divided, at first, between the two violins. A quiet echo of the opening motif brings this turbulent movement to a close.

Polka rhythms also play a major part in the second movement. Contrast is provided by two ideas. The first is a slowly descending figure played by the viola, second violin and first violin in turn, with the bow next to the bridge to give a hard, glassy sound. The second, heard against a persistent triplet figure, is a short melodic phrase that will become increasingly passionate as the movement proceeds.

The third movement begins with a searing passage of dialogue between the gentle opening theme, marked 'leggiero, paventoso' (lightly, fearfully), and a savage repeated

figure which is a speeded-up version of its last four notes. These same four notes are stretched into a new figure, the main idea of the anguished central section. The movement ends with a brief recollection of the opening. The quiet, muted opening of the finale brings back the opening motif from the first movement, alternating with a melancholy theme for the first violin. Elements from both these ideas combine in a new theme played first by the viola. Through a series of abruptly contrasted episodes, the music reaches its tempestuous climax in yet another new variant of the first movement's opening motif, before its unexpectedly brief, understated conclusion.

String Quartet in F, Op 59 No 1

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Allegro

Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando

Adagio molto e mesto –

Thème Russe. Allegro

Beethoven's three 'Razumovsky' Quartets, Op 59, take their collective title from Count Andreas Razumovsky, Russian Ambassador to Vienna, who commissioned them in 1806. An amateur violinist, he maintained at his palace a resident quartet, in which he occasionally played second violin. He had enthusiastically supported Beethoven since the publication of his Op 1 Piano Trios in 1795, and in commissioning a new set of quartets he no doubt expected him to build on the achievement of his six quartets, Op 18, of 1798-1800, in developing the Viennese quartet tradition. The Op 59 quartets, though, left many listeners and players bewildered. In the intervening years Beethoven's musical language had experienced the volcanic upheavals of the 'Eroica' Symphony and the 'Appassionata' Sonata, and the stylistic transformation they left in their wake naturally affected the new quartets.

In terms of its expanded time-scale, the first of the 'Rasumovsky' quartets stands in a similar relationship to the Op 18 quartets as the 'Eroica' Symphony does to Beethoven's first two symphonies. The spacious opening, with its broad, unhurried melody passing from cello to first violin tells us straight away that this is going to be an epic journey, unprecedented in the quartet repertoire. The second theme begins quietly, low on the first violin before beginning a steady climb. The opening section culminates in a short, strange passage of dialogue between high- and low-register chords. The music then seems to return to its opening, a conventional 'exposition repeat'. The cello, however, has other ideas, landing on an unexpected G flat that sends the music skittering off through all kinds of twists and turns. But for all the ingenuity with which Beethoven leads us around his network of garden paths, the music retains its air of both poise and lightly-worn *gravitas*.

This gives way to dry, deadpan humour in the second movement. Again, the cello takes the lead, unaccompanied this time, setting up a distinctive repeated-note rhythmic pattern which is as important as the main theme itself (when Beethoven eventually

decides to let us hear it). Instead of a conventional scherzo-and-trio design, this is a full-scale sonata-form movement of quirky originality, full of sudden stops and starts and abrupt silences, with the texture often pared down to a single melodic line broken up between two or more instruments.

Beethoven's inscription on the sketches for the third movement – “a willow or acacia over my brother's grave” – has given rise to considerable speculation. Was he thinking of Franz Georg, who had died in childhood, or another Ludwig, who had died before the composer was born? Could it even be a reference to Caspar Carl's recent marriage to Johanna Reiss, a match Beethoven thoroughly disapproved of (after Caspar died in 1815, Beethoven began a protracted legal battle with Johanna over custody of her son, Karl)? Whoever was in his mind, the music is profoundly introspective ('mesto' = 'sad'), with wide expressive leaps in its main theme. But at the end the mood evaporates, with the first violin suddenly taking flight in a cadenza-like passage, leading without break into the finale.

Count Rasumovsky had asked Beethoven to include a Russian tune in each of the quartets. But having chosen a tune for the finale of this quartet, Beethoven then bends it to his own purposes by running it at double speed and starting it in F major, only allowing it to return to its original modal D minor after the first four bars. It is not until the end of the movement that we hear it at its original speed, but then Beethoven dismisses the whole affair with an eight-bar *presto* passage of unanswerable finality.

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LEONKORO QUARTET

Jonathan Schwarz – Violin
Amelie Wallner – Violin
Mayu Konoe – Viola
Lukas Schwarz – Cello

The Leonkoro Quartet, founded in Berlin in 2019, is framed by brothers Jonathan and Lukas Schwarz on first violin and cello, with Amelie Wallner on second violin and Mayu Konoe on viola. Leonkoro means 'Lionheart' in Esperanto and alludes not coincidentally to Astrid Lindgren's children's book about two brothers which juxtaposes the grave reality of death with a large and heartfelt yearning for comfort and solace - a sentiment addressed by much string quartet repertoire.

In March 2022, the Leonkoro Quartet won the Jürgen Ponto Foundation Music Prize, in April the First Prize and all the repertoire prizes at the Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition and in May, First Prize at the Vibre! Bordeaux International String Quartet Competition. Shortly thereafter, the quartet became a BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist, and in November, won the Merito String Quartet Award.

Last month, the quartet released its debut album, featuring music by Ravel and Schumann. In the 2023/24 season, the Leonkoro Quartet will make debuts at the Berlin Philharmonie, Flagey Brussels, Het Concertgebouw Amsterdam and Vienna Konzerthaus, and will appear at the String Quartet Biennale Paris.

Jonathan Schwarz plays a Cremonese violin by Girolamo Amati II (1696) generously loaned to him by Emmanuel Jaeger through ProQuartet. Amelie Wallner plays a Vincenzo Postiglione violin, generously provided by a private donor. Mayu Konoe's viola is privately owned. Lukas Schwarz's cello is by Carlo Tononi, Venice (c. 1720) loaned by the Beare's International Violin Society.