

Wethersfield Chamber Concerts

5 May 2013 – 3.30pm

HEATH QUARTET

Violin - Oliver Heath | Violin - Cerys Jones | Viola - Gary Pomeroy | Cello - Christopher Murray

PROGRAMME NOTES *by John Woollard*

JOSEF HAYDN (1732 – 1809) – String Quartet in G major, Op. 77, No. 1, Hob.III:81

1. Allegro moderato
2. Adagio
3. Menuetto. Presto
4. Finale. Presto

Josef Haydn is perhaps best known for the fact that he wrote at least 104 symphonies, nearly all of which are still featured in concert programmes, but his staggering output also included 45 piano trios, 62 piano sonatas and 68 string quartets. Perhaps somewhat overshadowed until recently by his disciple, Ludwig van Beethoven, he now is beginning to re-emerge as the consummate musician and composer that he was. He can justly lay claim to the title of father both of the symphony and the string quartet, but also did much to change the position of the composer. Both he and Mozart started their careers in the 18th century tradition as servants of rich nobles and churchmen. Haydn broke the mould. By the time this quartet was written he was established in his own right, touring Europe and writing music for commissions from impresarios such as Salomon in London. In particular his visits to London were a huge success. Audiences flocked to Haydn's concerts; he augmented his fame and made large profits, thus becoming financially secure.

1799 quietly witnessed a great turning point in the history of the string quartet. With Mozart gone, both an elderly Haydn and a young Beethoven were simultaneously

working on a new set of string quartets: Haydn's last and Beethoven's first and for this noteworthy "passing of the baton", the composers shared a common patron. A young Prince Lobkowitz commissioned both composers around the same time. Beethoven's Op. 18 was published at the end of 1801, Haydn's Op. 77 in early 1802. It is no surprise that Haydn's last quartets are often called "Beethovenian" just as Beethoven's first quartets may be called "Haydnesque." Together, they comprise a great high water mark of the mature Viennese style before Beethoven's middle period expansion. And just as Beethoven's quartets are "early", close to Haydn as a model, Haydn's final quartets represent his own most modern, consolidated and polished efforts in the form with many forward looking aspects, and were so influential on Beethoven, even looking forward another thirty years with pre-echoes of the music of Mendelssohn.

In summary, this "late" work of Haydn's shows absolutely no diminution of craft, creativity or energy. Apparently as a conscious choice, Haydn chose to quit on a high note leaving yet another exemplar of a genre he largely invented and surely perfected. This work and its companion Op. 77 work are the last string quartets he finished, though he still had another ten years of life ahead.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770 – 1827) - String Quartet in C major, Op. 59 No. 3, "Rasumovsky"

1. Andante con moto - Allegro vivace (C major)
2. Andante con moto quasi allegretto (A minor)
3. Menuetto (Grazioso) (C major)
4. Allegro molto (C major)

Without Haydn's example, Beethoven might have found it much more difficult to carve out his pre-eminent position as a composer in early 19th Century Viennese life. By the time he started work on his Op. 59 quartets, Mozart had already been dead for 14 years, whilst Haydn was still very much alive and composing, providing much ceremonial and large scale ecclesiastical music for the city.

Beethoven's middle period, sometimes called his 'heroic' period, began with a huge spiritual crisis around 1801: he realized, or finally admitted to himself and close friends, that he was going deaf, a disability that was disastrous professionally (much of his living was earned as a pianist), but that also - and in the end just as significantly - caused him to withdraw from social life. His emergence from this crisis was by means of a compositional development: to a

series of grand 'public' works that would cement his reputation as Europe's most celebrated composer of instrumental music: the Eroica symphony, the 'Waldstein' and 'Appassionata' piano sonatas all come from this period; and so too do the three quartets Op. 59 - which were written around 1805-6.

Haydn may well be regarded as the father of the string quartet, but when he stopped composing quartets in 1799, he passed the baton to the younger composer, who then developed the form out of all recognition. The idea of the string quartet, its unprecedented prestige in the Western canon, is inescapably associated with Beethoven, who dedicated himself to the medium with peculiar intensity at three separate periods of his life, and who in the process created a body of work that all subsequent composers felt (some more willingly than others) they were obliged to emulate. The Beethoven quartets have long been regarded, by listeners and players alike, as the pinnacle of the repertoire: never to be played or talked about without

a sense of reverence for one of the weightiest monuments of our culture.

The Viennese knew that they were in the presence of genius when they encountered Beethoven's work, but they did not fully understand it. Whilst it might be common nowadays to regard modern composers as incomprehensible, we blame the composer for our lack of comprehension. Viennese audiences tended to blame themselves for not being equipped to fully understand Beethoven's message. What's striking is how far back this reverential attitude goes. Of course, there are famous stories of the incomprehension some of Beethoven's early audiences felt; but, remarkably and quite unusually for the period, the lack of understanding was very often assumed to be the fault of the audience rather than the piece in question. The message was plain: these works were complicated for a reason; they were not entertainment; and they needed to study them in order to understand them. This attitude, which was common to most of Beethoven's instrumental works, gradually spread

through Europe in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and was fuelled rather than dampened by the composer's death in 1827. In short, Beethoven's most famous works were powerful drivers in enormous changes in the ways music was performed, listened to and written about; Amongst these were the decisive emergence of silent, attentive listening; the parallel emergence of instrumental music as more serious than vocal music; an increasing sense that a certain strand of this instrumental music, now commonly called 'classical music', was spiritually uplifting and morally superior; a new hierarchy between the composer and the performer, one that saw the latter as merely a vehicle to express the thoughts of the former; and an increased attention to, and reverence for, the score as a repository of the 'work'. Beethoven's work simply marks the decisive emergence of 'our' classical musical world, with its concert going, its silent listening, and all the rest. That is why Beethoven is such an icon – not just for the quality of his music but also because he set the parameters by which classical music has developed over the last 200 years.

----- Interval -----

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847) – String Quartet No. 5 in E flat major, Op. 44 No. 3

1. Allegro vivace
2. Scherzo: Assai leggero vivace
3. Adagio non troppo
4. Molto allegro con fuoco

Mendelssohn benefited hugely from the way in which music had developed as a result of Beethoven. A grandson of the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, Felix Mendelssohn was born into a prominent Jewish family, although initially he was raised without religion and was later baptised as a Reformed Christian. Mendelssohn was recognised early as a musical prodigy, but his parents were cautious and did not seek to capitalise on his talent. He came from a solidly middle class and well respected Berlin family and his Jewish descent did not limit his horizons. No one would have considered the neatly dressed, mild-mannered Mendelssohn a colossus.

His music was not “colossal.” The time he lived in was not good for such colossal ideas. People wanted to maintain the status-quo. After years of warfare and financial instability, people became more conservative in their politics, their ideas, their issues. Rather than debate the humanitarian issues of the Napoleonic Era, they were more concerned about fashion or how to make a good enough living to leave money and property to their sons, about having their daughters married to good men who could provide for them.

Rather than deeper, intensely personal issues like “the meaning of life,” people discussed what material things could give their life meaning. Rather than looking for adventure, men sought lives in business rather than the military. People didn't want that kind of excitement in their lives.

Mendelssohn took great advantage of the new order. Instead of taking up a position as the servant of a great lord or King, he was able to carve a career for himself as both a composer and a conductor. He associated with royalty not as an equal but certainly not as a lowly member of the household. He regularly visited England where he was highly regarded and met Queen Victoria and her musical husband Prince Albert, who both greatly admired his music. He worked as a composer, conductor and pianist, holding positions that even today still exist such as the Chief Conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. Mendelssohn lived a comfortable life. His music sounds comfortable, but it is also as much a part of the age Mendelssohn lived in. The “Biedermeier” age in Germany – very similar to the Victorian Age in England later in the century – was an era when people didn't express their emotions in public. It was a “comfortable” age when you wanted stability, not adventure. People didn't want to take risks because you might lose what you had. Rather than being emotional, they were sentimental.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

The Heath Quartet was formed in 2002 at the Royal Northern College of Music under the guidance of Dr. Christopher Rowland and Alasdair Tait, with whom they continued their studies at the Reina Sofia in Madrid. They were Leverhulme Junior Fellows at the RNCM from 2008 to 2010, and Senior Fellows at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama from 2010 to 2012. The Quartet have undertaken residencies at the Banff Centre in Canada and the Britten-Pears School, Snape Maltings, and have studied at IMS Prussia Cove with András Schiff and Erich Höbarth. Other teachers have included Ferenc Rados, Isabelle Charisius and members of the Lindsay, Smetana, Takacs and LaSalle Quartets.

Next Season

Next season's concerts will be on 27 October, 3 November & 17 November.

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