

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 3 May 2024  
7.30pm

## Chiaroscuro Quartet

Alina Ibragimova violin

Benjamin Marquise Gilmore violin

Emilie Hörnlund viola

Claire Thirion cello

Christian Poltéra cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 8 in E minor Op. 59 No. 2  
'Razumovsky' (1806)

*I. Allegro • II. Molto adagio •*

*III. Allegretto - Maggiore, Thème russe •*

*IV. Finale. Presto*

*Interval*

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quintet in C D956 (1828)

*I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Adagio •*

*III. Scherzo. Presto - Trio. Andante sostenuto •*

*IV. Allegretto*



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Count Andrey Kirillovich Razumovsky (1752-1836) was the Russian ambassador to the Court of Vienna. Described as 'an enemy of Revolution but a friend of the fairer sex', he was also – until his luxurious Viennese palace was destroyed by fire in 1814, at the height of the Congress of Vienna – a devoted patron of **Beethoven's** music. His household string quartet, led by the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, was widely regarded as the finest of its sort in the world, and its playing profoundly influenced Beethoven's quartet style.

Those influences can be found all over the three string quartets Op. 59 that Razumovsky commissioned from Beethoven, and which Beethoven completed in 1806. The no-nonsense opening chords of the E minor second quartet's brusque, intensely worked first movement suggest well-founded confidence in the performers, as does the way the cello soars free in the *Molto adagio* to make the music seem to float. Joseph Linke, the cellist of Razumovsky's quartet, was generally reckoned to have the noblest tone in Europe ('Linke played splendidly', commented Beethoven approvingly after a later performance of Op. 59 No. 1). The real point here, though, is the emotion it conveys; Carl Czerny claimed that Beethoven conceived this slow movement while contemplating a starlit sky.

The same goes for the brilliant, dancing melody with which the first violin launches the *Finale*; clearly written with Schuppanzigh in mind. And then there's the whirling, feather-light figuration with which Beethoven surrounds the 'Thème russe' that he quotes at the centre of the third movement – the Russian national hymn *Slava Bogu* (familiar today from Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov*), inserted as a compliment to Razumovsky.

A creative compromise? Anything but. That the three 'Razumovsky' quartets broke new ground for the string quartet was widely recognised: 'Three new, very long and difficult Beethoven quartets...are attracting the attention of all connoisseurs', reported a critic in 1807: 'They are profoundly thought through and admirably worked out, but not to be grasped by all'. Perhaps not by all, indeed. But writing for artists he admired, and a patron of profound and far-reaching taste, Beethoven's vision expanded to match. He knew he'd be understood.

On 25 September 1828, **Schubert** moved lodgings – on doctor's orders – to the fresh air of his brother's house in the Viennese suburb of Neue Wieden. A week later, on 2 October, he wrote to the publisher Probst that 'I have composed, among other things, three Sonatas for pianoforte solo...and finally turned out a Quintet for 2 violins, 1 viola and 2 violoncellos...If perchance any of these compositions would suit you, let me know'. Somewhere around this time, it's known that Schubert played the viola in a performance of Beethoven's Quartet in C sharp minor Op. 131 – and that it sent him 'into such transports of delight and enthusiasm that all feared for him'. He took a walking tour with three friends to Haydn's grave at Eisenstadt; but on 31 October his health took a turn for the worse. On 4 November he

booked a course of counterpoint lessons with the composer Simon Sechter; a fortnight later, he was dead. His unpublished manuscripts were sold, ten days later, to the publisher Diabelli & Co – who did nothing with the Quintet until it was premièred, on 17 November 1850, by Georg Hellmesberger's string quartet. It was finally published in 1853, with the designation Op. 163.

So we're unlikely to find any first-hand explanation of why Schubert chose to write for the unusual combination of string quartet plus a second cello. C major is traditionally the brightest and sunniest of keys – but the brighter the sunlight, the darker and more pronounced the shadows. Within the quintet's very first chord we feel the chill as a minor-key cloud obscures that sun.

The instrumental shadings in this huge arching first movement are infinite. The two cellos, in octaves, form a sonorous bass as the *Allegro* finally takes hold; bars later, they unfold the glorious, singing melody of the second subject as the sweetest imaginable tenor duet. When in the recapitulation the duet returns, the viola, duskier and cooler, has taken the place of the second cello. Barely perceptibly, the shadows are lengthening.

In the E major *Adagio*, violin, viola and cello sustain their rapt, endless song as if hovering in mid-air; barely tethered to earth by the second cello's *pizzicato* below and the birdlike fragments of melody far above. It's almost too fragile to withstand the drama and pain that Schubert throws at it in the movement's F minor central section. A pounding, symphonic hunting-Scherzo suddenly halts for a *Trio* section of a near-static solemnity. And a jaunty dance-tune finale slows to complete immobility, as the matched pairs of instruments languish sensuously in descending phrases. Schubert ends with one final ambiguity. His very last expression mark, written over the final note, was scrawled in such a way that it could be either an accent, or a *diminuendo*. Defiant shout or dying fall – it's forever open to the interpreters.

What's unambiguous is that few chamber works have touched more people, more deeply, than Schubert's String Quintet. 'From the lyrical and dramatic point of view', wrote Walter Willson Cobbett, 'nothing so ideally perfect has ever been written for strings than this inexpressibly lovely work'. Arthur Rubinstein, the cellist Alfredo Piatti and Benjamin Britten all requested that its *Adagio* be played at their memorial services. And the violinist John Saunders (1867-1919) went one better – he had six bars of the first movement's cello duet inscribed on his gravestone in Norwood Cemetery, along with two lines from Shakespeare:

*So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

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