

The music

Joseph Haydn *String Quartet in D op20 no4*
Györgi Ligeti *String Quartet no1*
(*Metamorphoses nocturnes*)

INTERVAL

Ludwig van Beethoven *String Quartet no15 in A minor*
op132

The quartets in this programme are outstanding examples of the creative use of contrast – of speed, texture, mood, harmony – not only between movements but within them. This is particularly apparent in Ligeti’s single movement Quartet no1, but more of that later...

Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) *String Quartet in D op20 no4*
(1772)

1 Allegro di molto ~ 2 Un poco adagio e affettuoso ~ 3 Menuet alla zingarese ~ 4 Presto e scherzando

Presaged by his op9 and op17 sets, **Haydn**’s six quartets of op20 are generally considered to mark the coming of age of the string quartet medium. Written in Haydn’s fortieth year, while in the service of Prince Nikolaus Esterházy at the Esterháza Palace in rural Hungary, they are conceived as a free, adventurous “exchange of ideas with each player accorded a vital, distinct identity” (*Richard Wigmore*).

The *Quartet op20 no4* immediately confronts us with a contrast between the fast and buoyant tempo marking **allegro di molto** and the strange, halting music that actually starts the movement – four unison repeated notes like a soft drum beat, followed by a short answering phrase. This pattern is repeated several times with subtly shifting harmonic inflections and it is not until about half a minute into the movement that anything resembling an allegro is actually heard. Initiated by an energetic *arpeggio* in the first violin, it is almost immediately interrupted by a further version of the opening material and these two contrasting elements then continue in juxtaposition throughout the movement, the ‘drum beats’ often introducing an unexpected change of harmony or mood. Haydn continues to disconcert us by introducing the opening music in what appears to be the recapitulation early in the development section only to start the actual recapitulation rather surreptitiously a little later.

The following **adagio** is Haydn’s only variation movement entirely in the minor key. After the intense, lyrical theme, the first variation features second violin and viola, the next the cello and the last the first violin. The original theme is then restated shorn of repeats and is followed by an extraordinary coda in which the music appears to hesitate, fragment and eventually vanish into something resembling despair.

The **menuet** brings us back to life with a jolt, a raucous dance in the Hungarian gypsy manner so full of off-beat accents that only the most accomplished dancer could avoid falling over their own, or someone else’s, feet. In contrast, the trio, – a showcase for the cello – is entirely regular in its four-bar phrases. The final **presto e scherzando** continues in the gypsy vein with an exuberant sequence of unpredictable, contrasting motifs held together in a short sonata form structure. Like the first two movements it ends quietly but the mood this time is one of joyful exhaustion.

Györgi Ligeti (1923–2006) *String Quartet no1 (Metamorphoses nocturnes)* (1953/4)

We remain in Hungary for **Györgi Ligeti**’s *First Quartet*, but the Budapest of 1953 was a very different place to the Esterháza of 1772. What was common though was isolation. In Haydn’s case the geographical seclusion of Esterháza led him famously to write “I was cut off from the world... and I was forced to become original”. Ligeti’s quartet was composed under the repressive regime of the Hungarian Working People’s Party in which artists were cut off from developments in the West, so there arose a culture of ‘inner emigration’ where composers left their work in a ‘bottom drawer’, unperformed. Ligeti described the music of this period before his move to Austria in 1956 as ‘pre-historic’. The quartet was first performed in Vienna by the Ramor Quartet in 1958.

Ligeti described it as follows. “The first word of the subtitle *Metamorphoses nocturnes* refers to the form. It is a kind of variation form, only there is no specific “theme” that is then varied. It is, rather, that one and the same musical concept appears in constantly new forms – that is why “metamorphoses” is more appropriate than “variations”. The quartet can be considered as having just one movement or also as a sequence of many short movements that melt into one another without pause or which abruptly cut one another off. The basic concept... consists of two major seconds that succeed each other transposed by a semitone. In this *First String Quartet* there are certainly some characteristics of my later music, but the writing is totally different, “old-fashioned”; there are still distinct melodic, rhythmic and

harmonic patterns and bar structure. It is not tonal music, but it is not radically atonal, either. The piece still belongs firmly to the Bartók tradition ... yet ... I trust that the string quartet is still personal work”.

What this description doesn’t quite prepare the listener for is such a coruscating sequence of contrasting speeds, moods and textures throughout the quartet’s twenty-minute duration. It begins on a low cello C, then a chromatic line meanders upwards to reach four expressive notes on the first violin. These constitute the ‘concept’ described by Ligeti (initially G – A – G sharp – A sharp) which keeps its shape throughout the quartet, though its actual intervals vary. There then emerges a kaleidoscopic series of roughly 17 episodes including Hungarian peasant songs and dances, ironically fragmented waltzes, angry *pizzicatos*, aggressive repeated rhythms, breakneck *glissandi* and breathtaking *prestissimo* loops. As the piece eventually turns full circle, the viola then first violin and cello together return to the opening, in a moving conclusion. Perhaps the best advice for a first-time listener is to sit back, embrace the contrasts and enjoy the ride!

INTERVAL

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) *String Quartet no15 in A minor op132* (1825)

1 Assai sostenuto – Allegro ~ 2 Allegro ma non tanto ~ 3 Molto adagio – Andante (Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit) ~ 4 Alla marcia, assai vivace ~ 5 Allegro appassionato

Beethoven completed his *op132 String Quartet* in the summer of 1825, the second of his ground-breaking late quartets to be finished, in response to a commission from Prince Nicholas Galitzin, an excellent young amateur cellist from St Petersburg. It was first performed by the Schuppanzigh Quartet later that year and was favourably received.

As with the Ligeti *Quartet* a four-note motif, consisting of two pairs of notes, plays a crucial role. This time the notes are two pairs of semitones, the first rising, the second falling, separated by a minor sixth (G sharp-A, F-E). They are introduced by the cello and this melodic shape then rises through the other instruments during the **assai sostenuto** slow introduction. Rapid semiquavers from the first violin soon lead into the **allegro** proper which makes much use of the semitone intervals of the initial motif. The movement is unusual as the first subject, characterised by a dynamic dotted rhythm, and the second subject, a more lyrical

melody set against agitated broken triplets, are both stated three times in a variety of keys. After the first statement there is also a short development prefaced by a return of the slow introduction. The tone of the music remains serious throughout.

The succeeding *allegro*, a rather earnest minuet, succeeds in making much out of relatively little musical material, again rich in pairs of semitones. The contrasting trio opens with a delicately scored imitation of a musette, a small, rather elegant member of the bagpipe family. This is unexpectedly followed by the violent buffeting of a section in duple time before a return of the musette and then the minuet.

The **following movement**, by far the longest of the quartet, is its emotional heart. Beethoven had become worryingly ill with stomach problems in April 1825. His doctor sensibly implored him to forgo wine, coffee and spices. Beethoven obeyed, the change in diet seemed to work and a few weeks later he was back to composing. The gratefully heartfelt slow movement is thus entitled *A Hymn of Thanksgiving from a Convalescent to God, in the Lydian mode*. The Lydian is one of the old church modes which uses a scale from F to F, so that the fourth note of the scale is a semitone higher than it would be in a normal major scale – B natural rather than B flat. Its use, along with its subtly different harmonies, gives Beethoven's gentle melody a timeless, contemplative feel. This eventually moves into a livelier section in a normal D major marked *Neue Kraft fühlend (Feeling new strength)* in which the two violins dance airily around each other. A more syncopated version of the Lydian music returns, followed again by a D major section and finally by a yet more syncopated fantasia on the Lydian music marked *Mit innigster Empfindung (With the most intimate feeling)*. The movement ends in a rapt peace.

In one of this afternoon's most brutal contrasts, the mood is then rudely shattered by, in the words of composer Robert Simpson, the "cruel blandness" of a strangely halting little march which soon leads directly into a quasi-operatic recitative passage for first violin. This in turn transitions into the final movement, a lyrical but troubled *allegro appassionato* destabilised by its rocking accompaniment. The movement could be described as a sonata rondo (ABA – C – ABA) with dramatic and mysterious contrasting episodes. It reaches an agitated climax but eventually concludes in a hard-won A major affirmation.

Notes by Martin Cunningham

(Continued on insert) >>

Festival Patron: David Matthews

Grateful acknowledgements

We thank all those who have helped with the Festival or supported us financially and in other ways. Special thanks to the funding bodies, sponsors and supporters listed below, without whose generous help there would be no Festival.



The Hinrichsen Foundation

The Friends of the Little Missenden Festival

Little Missenden Parish Council

Little Missenden Parochial Church Council

Great Missenden, Little Missenden, and Hyde Heath Schools PTAs

The Michael Cox Fund

Laurette Read

Bluepepper Designs

The Festival Volunteers

Piano: **Fazioli 228** from **Jaques Samuel**

Tuner: **Jim Denton**

Flowers: **Rosemary Ladd**

Next year's Festival

The 2025 Little Missenden Festival will run from Friday 3rd to Sunday 12th October.

Festival website little-missenden.org

- See the full **2024 Festival Programme**
- **Book Tickets** (or phone 0333 666 3366)
- Be added to our **Mailing List** for next year's brochure
- Find out about the **Friends** or **Sponsorship**

Booking Information

- Email: tickets@little-missenden.org
- Phone: 01494 958148 between 11am and 8pm

General Information

- Email: contact@little-missenden.org

Little Missenden Festival Executive Committee

Chair: Dick Ware

Committee: Angela Bishop, Polly Buston, Martin Cunningham, John Glasson, Beth Neill, Liz Wager, Dick Wells, Rachel Wilcox

Programme Notes

BARBICAN QUARTET

Contrasts



3pm, Sunday October 13th, 2024
Little Missenden Church

64th Little Missenden Festival

The artists

Amarins Wierdsma *violin* **Kate Maloney** *violin*
Christoph Slenczka *viola* **Yoanna Prodanova** *cello*

The **Barbican Quartet** are an original voice on the international chamber music scene. Praised for their unique sound and their intensely personal and insightful performances, they explore both traditional quartet repertoire and contemporary music with great fervour.

In September 2022, the Barbican Quartet won first prize and several special awards at the 71st ARD International String Quartet Competition in Munich. This victory was preceded by their third prize win at the Bordeaux International String Quartet Competition four months earlier and by a first prize at the 2019 Joseph Joachim International Chamber Music Competition.

In June 2024 the Barbican Quartet released their debut CD, *“Manifesto on Love”*, on the *Genuin* label. *BR Klassik* lauded their recording as “tonally balanced and perfectly coordinated”, while the journal *Pizzicato* awarded the CD its Supersonic Award and praised their “exhilarating [...] interpretations that cannot leave you cold.”

The Barbican Quartet are regular guests at festivals such as Vibre! Quatuors à Bordeaux, Zeister Muziekdagen, the Montreal Chamber Music Festival, the Peasmarsh Festival, IMS Prussia Cove and Aldeburgh. Their performances have been broadcast on *BR Klassik Radio*, *NDR*, *NPO Radio 4* and *BBC Radio 3*.

This season will see the Barbican Quartet touring the USA and performing at festivals and concert venues across Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK. They currently hold the Nina Drucker Quartet Fellowship at the Royal Academy of Music in London, where they coach chamber music.

Amarins is grateful to the Dutch Musicals Instrument Foundation for their support. Kate plays a violin by Francesco Ruggieri (Cremona, 1685) on loan from the Canadian Canimex Group. Christoph plays a 2010 Bernd Hiller viola and Yoanna’s cello is a 1782 Giovanni Gagliano, also on loan from Canimex.

“The Barbican Quartet love to take risks in their playing and are not afraid to push boundaries. [...] Founded in 2014, the quartet has a distinctive style: with their very own sound, their emotional interpretations, but also in their programming.” *Marcus Stähler* in *“Album der Woche”*