

Total performance time: approximately 120', including an interval of 20 minutes

Takács Quartet

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Edward Dusinberre violin

Harumi Rhodes violin

Richard O'Neill viola

András Fejér cello

Joseph Haydn (1732–1809)

String Quartet in F, Op.77 No.2, Hob.III:82 (1799) 26'

i. Allegro moderato

ii. Menuetto. Presto ma non troppo

iii. Andante

iv. Finale. Vivace assai

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912)

5 Fantasiestücke, Op.5 (1895) 23'

i. Prelude

ii. Serenade

iii. Humoresque

iv. Minuet

v. Dance

INTERVAL

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

String Quartet No.14 in D minor, D. 810, 'Death and the Maiden' (1824) 40'

I. Allegro

ii. Andante con moto

iii. Scherzo. Allegro molto – Trio

iv. Presto

Joseph Haydn was the grand old man of quartet writing by the time he reached his Op.77, originally intended as a set of six but which ultimately numbered only two, after the completion of *The Seasons* had taken its toll on his energies. But what a way to end his quartet journey (only Op.103 followed, and it remains a fragment); the set was commissioned by the arts-loving Prince Lobkowitz, who had also had the foresight to commission Beethoven's first quartets, Op.18.

Haydn had developed the string quartet into a chamber equivalent of the symphony in terms of seriousness, and transformed it into a conversation between equals. Those elements are very much evident throughout his final completed quartet. There's a *bonhomie* to the opening Allegro moderato, a swagger in its step, Haydn immediately showing the sophistication of his writing in the way that the opening idea is immediately repeated, but with a new accompaniment. But he saves up the real shock value for the development section, dragging a brief motif excised from the opening theme through myriad keys, each one remoter than the last. Equally extraordinary is the way he then recovers himself, making the whole sound entirely inevitable. He follows this with a movement described as a Menuetto, but with the scherzo-ish tempo of Presto ma non troppo ('fast, but not too much'). Stylistically it behaves like a *scherzo*, teasing the ear with its mix of duple and triple time. The Trio is in total contrast: a chorale-like affair in the distant key of D flat major. The slow movement is a gentle Andante that sets off with a suave grace, the first violin seizing the limelight, accompanied by cello. As it unfolds, we realize it's the kind of hybrid form of which Haydn was such a master, melding variations with rondo. As he begins to elaborate the theme, there's a passage in which the cello falls silent, and the first violin takes flight, cushioned by the second violin and viola – a magical piece of scoring. The first violin soars in increasingly elaborate figuration until, finally, we get a reminder of the main theme, the four instruments equals once more. We end in D major, so the thrust back into F major for the finale startles, as Haydn loved to do. And he ends his last-ever completed quartet with a rondo, the obsessive main idea fooling the ear so you're hard put to identify where the barlines fall, with the tomfoolery continuing right to the close, with its jokey false endings.

Elgar described him as 'far and away the cleverest fellow going among the younger men'. Who? **Samuel Coleridge-Taylor**. And he put his money where his mouth was, recommending him to the Three Choirs Festival, where his *Ballade* for orchestra was premiered in 1898. Music seems to have poured out of him – he produced swathes of works until his tragically early death aged 37. He'd initially been taught violin by his grandfather and attended the Royal College of Music as a teenager, studying with Charles Villiers Stanford, no less. He was barely 20 (and still a student) when he wrote the *Five Fantasiestücke*, Op.5. Britain was not exactly known for its chamber music at this point, but it's interesting that Stanford's Second and Third Quartets date from around the same time. Maybe that had an influence on Coleridge-Taylor's choice of medium.

Certainly, his expertise as a string player is evident throughout the five pieces. There's a Slavic quality to the Prelude, and a certain rhythmic freedom, offset by a more reflective section, before ending soulfully. A Serenade follows, and its focus around alto and tenor textures (and prominent viola writing) perhaps hints at Brahms, but there's a sophistication all his own in the way he lightens the texture, *pizzicato* cello underpinning a conversation between the three other strings. The dashing Humoresque has a whirring vigour, contrasted with a brief inner section that rocks gently. There's contrast, too, in the Minuet and Trio, the former winsome and confiding, the latter with a major–minor twisting of harmonies that is very effective. The last piece, simply titled 'Dance', is full of pulsing energy, Slavic colourings and a prevarication between major and minor until the very last moment.

Like Coleridge-Taylor, **Franz Schubert** was a string player, writing his first quartet aged 16 for the family ensemble, and following it with more than a dozen over the next few years. But then came something of a crisis of confidence: this was, after all, early 19th-century Vienna, where Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven loomed large.

By the time of 1824 and the so-called 'Death and the Maiden' Quartet, Schubert's life had seen more than its fair share of suffering. Although it's a dangerous game to tie biography and output too closely, there's little doubt that the onset of syphilis in 1822–3 was devastating, for it was nothing less than a death sentence for a man barely into his twenties. Maybe this sense of mortality prompted his choice of song on which to set the slow movement's variations: Matthias Claudius's confrontation between Death and a young woman, with a final line in which Death promises 'you shall sleep softly in my arms'. In his song setting, Schubert conjures a sense of obsession as much through repetitive rhythm as anything else. Significantly, the original is in D minor, a key that Mozart used so effectively in the Commendatore's music in *Don Giovanni*, an opera Schubert knew well. For the quartet, however, he transposes that song fragment on which the variations are based to G minor. This is essentially to create variety within a work that is otherwise entirely based around D minor. That sense of unrelenting 'minor-ness' is another remarkable aspect of this quartet. The moments where Schubert does venture into the major are all the more potent for their rarity: in the fourth variation of the Andante con moto and the third movement's Trio, yet in both, any hints of hope are quickly snuffed out.

Another remarkable aspect is almost symphonic scale of the quartet, yet throughout Schubert gives it a sense of unity: the opening bare octave and following triplet motif dominates, and every time we hear that triplet, whatever the context or dynamic, it unsettles the mood. That nervous energy continues through the dance-of-death finale, too, a *saltarello* in which Schubert pushes the players to extremes, especially in the final bars, which are marked *prestissimo* (as fast as possible) and conclude the work with a crashingly bleak resolution in D minor.

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