

Total performance time: approximately 60 minutes, with no interval

Quatuor Agate

Adrien Jurkovic violin
Thomas Descamps violin
Raphaël Pagnon viola
Simon Iachemet cello

Luigi Boccherini (1743–1805)
String Quartet in G minor, Op.32 No.5
(1780) 22'

- i. Allegro comodo*
- ii. Andantino*
- iii. Minuetto con moto*
- iv. Allegro giusto – Capriccio ad libitum*

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*

Quatuor Agate was formed in 2016 and is based in Paris. All four members of the Agate are from the South of France, but it was their love for Berlin, and its rich and dynamic culture that brought them together as a Quartet. They studied at the Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eisler in Berlin with Eberhard Feltz, in Paris under the guidance of Mathieu Herzog, and with the Quatuor Ebène at the Hochschule für Musik in Munich. In 2021, they were prize-winners at the Young Classical Artists Trust International Auditions.

The Quartet is artist in residence at the Fondation Singer Polignac, resident at Pro-Quartet in Paris, and associate artist at the Festival la Brèche in Savoie. In 2016 they founded the CorsiClassic Festival with a mission to bring chamber music to areas of the island where it is rarely heard.

Over the last year Quatuor Agate has made its debut at Wigmore Hall and given recitals across Europe. It recorded with Frank Braley and Gabriel Le Magadure for release this spring (Naïve label) and also plan to record the complete Brahms string quartets.

Boccherini: String Quartet in G minor

Although Haydn was the acknowledged 'father' of the string quartet, it was Boccherini – his junior by a decade – whose earliest quartet was published first. Having left his native Italy as a teenager he spent almost his entire career at the Spanish court, employed both as virtuoso cellist and as official composer to the Prince, who required a minimum of 18 chamber works a year. Nowadays, Boccherini's reputation rests largely on the many quintets he wrote for himself to play with the Prince's favourite string players. But he also produced more than a hundred quartets, around half of which were short, two-movement works presented as 'opera piccola' or 'quartettini'. And although the others were conceived on a larger scale, this was not intended to imply superiority. As Boccherini put it, they were all cut from the same cloth.

Today we hear one of the 'opera grande', its relaxed opening seemingly at odds with the allegro marking. But this is an 'Allegro comodo' – a 'comfortable' allegro that – together with the minor key – creates a gentle, reflective mood, unbroken by a shift to the major for the subsequent Andantino. The pace moves on for a minuet and trio and then in the final movement, a hint of freedom with a cadenza for the violin marked 'capriccio ad libitum'.

Schubert: Quartet 'Death and the Maiden'

Schubert's 15 quartets span his entire creative life, and while the early works are rooted firmly in the Classical tradition of Haydn and Mozart, the later compositions represent a huge leap forward. From a texture hitherto dominated by the first violin, Schubert's part-writing became significantly more advanced, fully exploiting the individuality of each instrument and enabling them to interact in the ensemble as equal partners. He also sought to unify the works by using specific motifs and harmonies as a way of tying the movements together.

This was Schubert's penultimate quartet and the product of a troubled mind. Still well short of his 30th birthday, he had recently been diagnosed with syphilis and knew that he was dying. 'Think of a man,' he said, 'whose health can never be restored and whose enthusiasm for the beautiful is fast vanishing. And ask yourself if such a man is not truly unhappy'. He duly cast all four movements in a minor key, creating what a contemporary described as 'the most morose instrumental work in the Viennese repertory'. At its heart lies a set of variations based on a fragment of one of his songs, in which a terrified maiden is haunted by the spectre of Death. Much of the accompaniment to the song is – in effect – a funeral march, which Schubert quotes directly in the quartet, as Death reassures the Maiden that soon she will sleep softly in his arms. The only respite from the bleakness comes in the trio section of the third-movement scherzo but the anguish returns for the finale: here, Schubert writes an almost manic tarantella – traditionally, the dance of death.

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