

Fiora Quartet II

Deniz Şensoy violin
Isabella Todes violin
Elena Accogli viola
Marion Portelance cello

Jessie Montgomery (b.1981)
Strum (2006, rev. 2008)

8'

Fiora Quartet is a Britten Pears Young Artist for 2024/25, here for a two-week residency on the Chamber Music in Residence course.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)
Quartet in F minor, Op.95, 'Serioso' (1810-11)

20'

The Fiora Quartet was founded in 2021 at the Royal College of Music and has become a dynamic and versatile ensemble. Mentored by the Sacconi Quartet from 2021 to 2023, the Fiora was awarded second prize in the RCM String Quartet Competition, selected for the RCM String Quartet Platform scheme in the 2023/24 season and was a semi-finalist in the Royal Over-Seas League competition.

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)
Quartet in F (1903)

30'

The Quartet's collaboration with renowned musicians include a side-by-side Shostakovich concert with the Brodsky Quartet, a Quartetto di Cremona showcase concert, and appearances at the Chipping Campden Festival, Sacconi Festival in Folkestone, and RCM Chamber Festival. The Quartet has also participated in public masterclasses with the Chiaroscuro and Marmen quartets.

In 2022, the Fiora Quartet was selected as one of three groups representing the UK in ANAM's Quartetthaus event, a collaboration with the Royal Albert Hall, and in 2024, it performed at exclusive events hosted by Van Cleef & Arpels at Highgrove House.

Jessie Montgomery: *Strum*

Jessie Montgomery grew up on Manhattan's Lower East Side at a time when artists of all kinds were flocking there, creating what became a hotbed of artistic experimentation. It was a vibrant and stimulating environment in which her parents – both performers – were active participants. The effect on their daughter was profound and the deeply felt music she was to produce later has been described as 'turbulent, wildly colourful and exploding with life'.

Montgomery conceived *Strum* in 2006 as a tribute, she says, to 'American folk idioms and the spirit of dance and movement', beginning with what she calls 'fleeting nostalgia' which soon transforms into 'ecstatic celebration'. The dance element is unmistakable from the start, as is the inspiration for the title, which refers to the 'strumming' effect in the pizzicato plucked strings.

Although *Strum* clearly combines elements of classical music with folk idioms, Montgomery says she did not deliberately set out to create a 'cross-cultural' mix. Her focus, she says, was primarily on instrumental colour and the various ways in which melodies and rhythms blend into each other. She scored the original for string quintet with two cellos, using the full range of the instruments to give the work a truly expansive sound quality. The version we hear today was arranged two years later.

Beethoven: *Quartet in F minor, 'Serioso'*

When Beethoven was writing this quartet in 1810, he was effectively living in a war zone. Napoleon's troops were laying siege to Vienna and he was working against the constant sound of gunfire. The composer was also battling his own demons, including a failed love affair, a serious lack of money and worst of all, his rapidly worsening deafness. He told a friend that he would long ago have chosen suicide, had he not believed the act to be a sin. 'For me' he said, 'life is poisoned forever.'

Little wonder that he chose 'Serioso' to describe his F minor quartet, using it both to describe the third movement and as an overall title. He completed the work early in 1811 and seems immediately to have recognised not only its radical nature but also the effect it might have on a general audience, warning that that the piece was intended purely for 'a small circle of connoisseurs' and was 'never to be performed in public.'

This was prescient: much of the writing is as advanced as any in his extraordinary late quartets but these did not appear for another 15 years. Given the bafflement with which the later pieces were greeted, the composer was wise to issue the 'Serioso' with a health warning.

Beethoven's troubled state of mind is clear throughout, albeit with occasional repose during the often heartfelt Allegretto, but the real surprise comes at the very end. Here, inexplicably, Beethoven suddenly turns the mood on its head and rounds off this intensely emotional work with an almost comic, Haydnesque coda. It is a moment that has baffled critics ever since but as one of them put it: 'no bottle of champagne was ever uncorked at a better time.'

Ravel: *Quartet in F*

Ravel completed his only string quartet in 1903 – exactly a decade after the publication of the one by Debussy which Ravel readily admitted having used as his model. The classic, four-movement structure, the reappearance of certain themes throughout the quartet and – most notably – the second movement pizzicato section: all are common to both pieces and led initially to charges of plagiarism. These were justly refuted by Ravel who had actually come up with something very much his own. He drew on all kinds of non-traditional influences including jazz and Asian music, as well as exploiting unconventional playing techniques, such as the use of mutes and bowing on the fingerboard, to create unique harmonic colours. Ravel inscribed the quartet: 'to my dear master, Gabriel Fauré'. Fauré, however, had reservations, particularly about the finale which he called 'stunted, badly balanced, in fact – a failure'. Debussy, on the other hand, was impressed. 'In the name of the gods of music' he told Ravel, 'do not touch a single note you have written in your Quartet.'

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