# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

# Borodin Quartet at 80

## Sunday 12 January 2025, 3pm
## Queen Elizabeth Hall

Classical music has always had reinvention at its core. Throughout our programme, we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – capture that trailblazing spirit with works that broke the mould across the ages and brand-new approaches to timeless classics.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

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**Repertoire**

**Brahms** String Quartet in A minor, Op.51 No.2 32'

*Interval*

**Tchaikovsky** String Quartet No.2 in F, Op.22 37'

**Performers**

Borodin Quartet

*This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes, including an interval.*

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## Johannes Brahms (1833–97)

### String Quartet in A minor, Op.51 No.2

1 *Allegro non troppo*
2 *Andante moderato*
3 *Quasi Minuetto, moderato*
4 *Finale: Allegro non assai*

It is thought that there were several string quartets among the pile of manuscripts that the 20-year-old Johannes Brahms showed to composer/conductor Robert Schumann and his wife, pianist/composer Clara Schumann, in 1853, on the suggestion of his friend, violinist Joseph Joachim. That meeting caused such excitement for the Schumanns that Robert would go on to hail Brahms as the great new hope for German music in his magazine *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* – a celebratory article that, in turn, would cause a great deal more self-consciousness for the already self-critical younger composer.

It took around two decades from initial conception for Brahms to release his First Symphony into the world in 1876, so concerned was he to live up to lofty earlier examples of Beethoven, whose spirit he felt hovering over his shoulder. It was just three years earlier, in 1873, that the 40-year-old Brahms had allowed his first two string quartets to be performed. His friend Max Kalbeck claimed that the composer had previously destroyed no fewer than 20 quartets, considering their music unworthy of him, before allowing the Op. 51 siblings to survive (though it's not clear how accurate that estimate is). Tonight's quartet, though later numbered Op.51 No.2, was actually the first of the pair to be premiered. Perhaps, as with his First Symphony, Brahms similarly felt the presence of the great quartet composers of the past – Beethoven again, but also Haydn, Mozart and Schubert – and the expectation that he should live up to the examples they had set.

There's certainly a mood of joy tinged with melancholy in the Op.51 No.2 Quartet that seems to nod, perhaps consciously, to Schubert's earlier quartets. But it's another composer – JS Bach – who was a more overt influence on the piece, whose music teems with interweaving contrapuntal lines and layered melodies in canons, even if those earlier techniques speak through the richer, more complex musical language of Brahms' own times.

And it was another influential musical figure – again, Brahms' friend and supporter Joachim – who would directly infiltrate some of the Quartet's music. He had adopted as his life motto the phrase *Frei, aber einsam* (Free, but lonely): in other words, a true artist would devote themselves freely to their art, unhindered by the shackles of romantic relationships, but thereby enduring the inevitable solitude. Ironically, Joachim would go on to marry contralto Amalie Schneeweiss in 1863. Brahms, who never married, countered Joachim's somewhat despondent perspective with his own motto *Frei, aber froh* (Free, but happy).

Both mottos – translated into music as the notes FAE and FAF – crop up time and again throughout Brahms' Op.51 No.2 Quartet: the opening theme of the expansive first movement, for example, contains the notes FAE as its second, third and fourth pitches. It's more than simply a clever musical code: Brahms breaks down his longer melodies into smaller cells, which he transforms as the music progresses, providing a sense of endless organic development. The first movement's brighter second main theme has a distinctively Viennese sweetness to it, and after a stormy central development section, both themes return before the players interrupt each other in a turbulent, often tense closing coda.

Brahms' song-like second movement seems to overflow with lyricism, though it's interrupted by a stormier central interlude. The composer marks his third movement as 'quasi minuetto', but it hardly feels like a dance. Instead, the violins and viola seem ghostly voices heard above a rustic, droning cello, with a scampering middle section bringing contrasting brightness. The finale, finally, has a definite dance-like feeling – one that's sometimes wild, exuberant and definitely Hungarian. Its muscular opening theme returns again and again, changed and developed each time, before the music seems to be heading for an optimisic, major-key close – only for a sudden injection of energy to propel it to its mischievous, minor-key ending.

## Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–93)

### String Quartet No.2 in F, Op.22

1 *Adagio – Moderato assai*
2 *Scherzo: Allegro giusto*
3 *Andante ma non tanto*
4 *Finale: Allegro con moto*

At almost precisely the same time that Brahms was allowing his two quartet offspring out into the world, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was working speedily and furiously on his own String Quartet No.2. It came together in a remarkably short space of time – during December 1873 and January 1874 – and, after a private performance in the Moscow apartment of pianist, conductor and composer Nikolai Rubinstein, it received its public premiere on 22 March 1874. 'I regard it as my best work,' Tchaikovsky later confided to his brother Modest. 'No other piece has poured forth from me so simply and easily. I wrote it almost at one sitting.'

The piece has a sometimes joyfully larger-than-life character, leading to suggestions that Tchaikovsky was directly inspired by the traditional Russian Christmas celebrations happening around him while he created it. The performers and small invited audience at its inaugural private airing (mostly) loved it. The question remains, then, as to why Tchaikovsky's String Quartet No.2 isn't better known, or more frequently played.

Perhaps it is simply because we more readily associate Tchaikovsky with ballet music, concertos, symphonies, and even operas than with chamber music. In truth, his chamber output isn't huge (three quartets, the string sextet *Souvenir de Florence*, a piano trio, and a few short pieces for violin and piano). Furthermore, this quartet comes from relatively early in Tchaikovsky's career, although not long before pieces we're more familiar with today: two years before *Swan Lake*, for example, and one before the First Piano Concerto. At that time, Tchaikovsky was in Moscow, where he'd moved from St Petersburg in 1866 as Professor of Harmony at the Moscow Conservatory, which Rubinstein had recently co-founded.

But there is also the accusation – not unjustified – that Tchaikovsky was at heart an orchestral composer, and that in his chamber music, he simply shrank down his larger-scale thinking for more intimate forces. That at least was Rubinstein's own reaction on first hearing the Quartet No.2. According to Tchaikovsky's friend Nikolai Kashkin, Rubinstein bluntly told him the quartet's musical style wasn't right for chamber music, and that he couldn't understand the piece.

There are passages that may still raise eyebrows today because of their sheer richness, and because of Tchaikovsky's lavish exploitation of a string quartet's sonic possibilities. Even the opening movement begins daringly – with a slow introduction full of audacious, strident dissonances, one that quickly transforms into what's virtually a soliloquy for the first violin. The subsequent faster section has a pensive, somewhat melancholy melody, later followed by a second main theme that's quicker and more energetic, with a scurrying accompaniment from the lower instruments. When this theme returns near the close of the movement, however, it's on a scale that pushes the boundaries of what a quartet is capable of, though the music ends in quiet resignation.

Tchaikovsky plays witty rhythmic games in his second movement, swapping sometimes unpredictably between two- and three-beat bars, though the stabler, waltz-like central section provides respite. His intense, sometimes anguished slow movement maintains its mood of deep pathos almost throughout, despite a surprisingly carefree central episode. Tchaikovsky saves his remaining energy, however, for the dancing flamboyance of his exuberant finale, whose hectic, joyful and richly imagined closing moments may have offered just the sort of extravagant music that raised Rubinstein's doubts.



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