



**Saturday March 2nd 2024, 7.30pm**  
**Clare Hall Dining Hall**

**Fitzwilliam String Quartet**

Lucy Russell violin  
Andrew Roberts violin  
Alan George viola  
Ursula Smith cello

Geoffrey Howard, speaker

For their 2023/24 Clare Hall series the Fitzwilliam is featuring a guest in each concert: continuing the quartet's journey through the riches of the piano quintet repertoire, in the company of resident pianist Patrick Hemmerlé, this compelling partnership is being extended for the current season to feature quintets with viola and cello as well, plus a speaker to introduce each of the seven "sonatas" which constitute Joseph Haydn's extraordinary meditations on Christ's final utterances from the cross. The quartet has felt honoured to be welcomed so warmly into the family atmosphere of the College, and these new collaborations are intended to further that inclusive spirit by involving FSQ friends and colleagues. For this evening's repertoire (as also for their Seven Last Words CD – and also for upcoming Beethoven recording sessions) the players have set up their instruments with gut strings, and will be playing at the slightly lower pitch of A=433 (as recommended by Sir George Smart in 1826) – this in an attempt to get nearer to the sounds and performing conventions that might have been familiar in those times.

**Quartet in F major, Op.135 Ludwig van Beethoven**  
**(1770 – 1827)**

Allegretto

Vivace

Assai lento, cantante e tranquillo

"Der schwer gefasste Entschluss":- Grave, ma non troppo tratto – Allegro

It would not have seemed inappropriate had Beethoven drawn his career to an apocalyptic close in 1823 with the *Missa Solemnis* and the "Choral" Symphony (No.9). Yet such a questing mind could hardly have sought rest at such a time of achievement. He evidently did not see the ninth symphony as his last, since another was planned (and started) – as also were other large scale works, including an oratorio. But among sketches for the Ninth was some material which later assumed significance: notably the main subject of the rejected instrumental finale, which eventually found its way to the corresponding point in the A minor quartet (Op.132). But there also appeared ideas specifically intended for a string quartet, such that soon after the first performance of the symphony (on 7th May 1824) a quartet in E flat (Op.127) was eventually begun – no doubt encouraged by an unfulfilled commission: it was in November 1822 when Prince Nikolas Galitzin (a wealthy Russian nobleman and patron of music, as well as the cellist of the St Petersburg Quartet) invited Beethoven to write him "one, two, or three new quartets, for which I should be delighted to pay you whatever you think adequate"! Three years later the E flat, A minor, and B flat quartets (Opp.127, 132 and 130 respectively) were all ready – but Beethoven only ever received the 50 ducats agreed for the first of them. This was probably completed in February 1825, nearly fifteen years after its predecessor (the F minor, Op.95), and marks the beginning of his total withdrawal into the private and intimate world of the String Quartet: from now until the end of his life he was to write for no other

medium (with the exception of a few vocal canons and two or three short piano pieces). So it was that with Op. 127 he turned his back on every “public” musical form: it is as if the creating of this work drew him into an inner region of utterly personal communion with quartet texture, but a place from which, two years and three quartets later, he emerged with Op. 135 as a Being somehow relieved and exorcised – rather akin to Samson, “Calm of mind, all passion spent”. Very little of the gloriously resonant sonorities and sweeping lyricism of Op. 127’s first movement will be found in the corresponding part of this F major quartet. Indeed, the first page of the score is so fragmentary it almost looks like Webern – the first subject, split phrase by phrase between the upper three voices, could even be seen as an early example of Webern-style Klangfarbenmelodie. Yet its smiling good nature belies an extraordinary underlying subtlety and originality. Searching for hidden depths here has too often led performers, listeners, and commentators alike into problematical culs-de-sac, for such disarming simplicity might not have been expected of the composer of the three gigantic masterpieces which preceded it (those Opp. 130-2 quartets). Neither would a Romantic notion easily accept this music as Beethoven’s last, although it is more likely that he was beginning to explore new avenues within the medium rather than settling for any pre-determined swan song. The Vivace scherzo might well be seen as being possessed of a maniacal streak, and the crazy ostinato and wild violin string crossings at its centre do support such a view; others may find this passage jubilant and exultant, rather than mad.... But clever exploitation of rhythm and dynamics (especially right at the end) still leaves an impression of intentional wit, however gruff. Once again (following Opp. 127, 131, 132, and also the Ninth) it is a set of variations which lies at the heart of the work, but here very much in line with the almost epigrammatic scale of the other movements: so utterly simple, so unutterably still. “Problems” do indeed surface in the finale, as suggested by the title (which might roughly be translated as “The Difficult Decision”). Although it is said that the famous question and answer which heads this movement (“Muss es Sein? Es muss sein! Es muss sein!”) referred originally to unpaid wages to his housekeeper, its origin lies more correctly in an attempt by a concert promoter to regain the composer’s favour, having neglected to subscribe to the first performance of the B flat quartet (Op. 130) – to which Beethoven laughingly responded with a canon on the “answer”. But the words may also have begun to assume an ominous significance for the already sick composer: a “poetic idea” which could even give a clue to his own thoughts about Life and Death. Whether this puzzling little prefix indeed suggests deeper metaphysical musings, or whether it really was no more than a personal joke, there can be little doubt that in the end Beethoven cheerfully accepts that “It must be!”.

## INTERVAL

**The Seven Last Words of our Saviour on the Cross, Op. 51 Franz Joseph Haydn  
version for string quartet (1787; Hob. XX/I:B) (1732 –  
1809)**

INTRODUZIONE *Maestoso ed Adagio*

SONATA I *Pater, dimitte illis, non enim sciunt, quid faciunt*

*Largo*

SONATA II *Amen dico tibi: hodie mecum eris in paradiso*

*Grave e cantabile*

SONATA III *Mulier ecce filius tuus, et tu, ecce mater tua!*

*Grave*

SONATA IV *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*

*Largo*

## SONATA V Sitio

Adagio

## SONATA VI Consummatum est!

Lento

## SONATA VII Pater! in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum

Largo

## IL TERREMOTO Presto e con tutta la forza

It is about fifteen years since I was asked by a clergyman in Cádiz to provide instrumental music for the Seven Words of Jesus on the Cross. It was then the custom, every year at Easter, to perform an oratorio in the cathedral of Cádiz, and the following arrangements must have contributed in no small measure to the effectiveness of the performance. The walls, windows, and columns of the cathedral were draped in black cloth, and only one large lamp, hanging in the centre, lighted the solemn darkness. At noon all the doors were closed; then the ceremony began. After a suitable prelude the bishop ascended the pulpit, pronounced one of the Seven Words, and followed it with his comments. When he had finished, he descended from the pulpit and fell on his knees before the altar. This pause was filled by music. The bishop ascended and descended a second time, a third, and so on, and each time the orchestra resumed at the conclusion of his discourse.

My composition must be judged in the light of these circumstances. The task of producing a succession of seven Adagios, each of which was to last about ten minutes, without wearying the listener, was no easy one; and I soon found that I could not keep to the prescribed duration. The music was originally without text, and in that form it has been printed . . . Thus wrote Haydn in his preface to the score of the 1801 version of *The Seven Last Words*. The work has a quite extraordinary history, in that he left us with no fewer than four different versions. The original commission from Cadiz, dating from around 1785, was for an orchestral work to provide the musical interludes depicting each of Christ's final statements and the Priest's meditations thereon; indeed it was described as such when first published (by Artaria) in July 1787: *Musica Instrumentale sopra le sette ultime Parole del nostro Redentore in croce o sieno sette Sonate con un Introduzione ed al fine un terremoto, per due Violini, Viola, Violoncello, Flauti, Oboe, Corni, Clarini, Timpani, Fagotti e Contrabasso composte dal Sig. Giuseppe Haydn*.

Presumably to afford greater circulation to what was obviously a somewhat obscure and bizarre form of musical work, Haydn then made a version for string quartet, and oversaw a further reduction for solo fortepiano. Some time later, returning from London to Vienna, he happened to hear an arrangement for voices and orchestra by Joseph Frieberth, the cathedral choirmaster in Passau, who had even gone so far as to compose his own recitatives for the occasion. Haydn kept a copy of Frieberth's work, and in 1795 set to work to produce his own oratorio setting. Although the main fruits of his collaboration with Gottfried van Swieten (*Die Schöpfung* and *Die Jahreszeiten*) were yet to be borne, he now called on his future librettist to make improvements to the Passau text; in doing so he may well have fired up both his own and van Swieten's imagination for their greater tasks to come: *Die sieben Worte* is in itself a magnificent prelude to Haydn's two glorious musical summits, particularly in its resourceful use of an orchestra far larger than the norm in his symphonies and contemporaneous masses – not to mention the pre-Leonore Beethoven. To the original orchestra for Cadiz he added clarinets and trombones throughout, with a contrabassoon for the newly composed *Introduzione* for wind band, which is placed between the fourth and fifth Words. Needless to say, the two smaller scale revisions cannot begin to compete with such magnificence, but they do provide special insight into the inner sanctum of the work: despite the reservations of the eminent Haydn scholar H. C. Robbins Landon, the quartet version has proven time and again to be no less valid for the public than the original or the oratorio. Indeed, we have also found it essential to study the

other versions, particularly the oratorio, where the word setting has often influenced our decisions with regard to phrasing and articulation – not to mention the extra insight the text inevitably offers. It goes without saying that an awareness of the original orchestration is an invaluable aid to projecting the array of colours implicit in the music – an obvious example being the horns near the beginning of Sonata VII. We have performed the work in a wide range of venues, from Cadiz itself, through cathedrals to tiny country churches across Britain, Europe, and America, concert halls ancient and modern, even radio studios in Manchester (BBC) and Washington DC (NPR). Wherever and whenever, it is always our first thought to try to recreate something relating to the atmosphere described by Haydn in his own remarks about Cadiz. Darkness is a prerequisite, as is also an inner resonance to the quartet sound – especially if the ideal cathedral-like acoustic is not available. We have also collaborated with a range of speakers from a highly austere Scottish Presbyterian priest to actors (including Peter Barkworth), TV personalities (John Suchet), clergy of a variety of denominations, poets, writers, fellow musicians, all of them revealing their own valid insights into the music and what it represents; and proving too that the Passion story, and Haydn's musical response to it, is as relevant and meaningful for non-believers as it is to Christians of whatever creed. On virtually every occasion we have found that what they have to say has a reciprocal effect on the musical performance itself, such that our reaction to text or spoken meditation before each "Word"; profoundly influences the very way we play. Nevertheless, it is always prudent to ensure that the musical and dramatic contrast between each of the pieces is clearly delineated, and particularly that the variety of tempo the composer demands is firmly underlined. The logic of when/why he chooses Adagio or Grave or Lento or Largo is not readily obvious, yet the range and scope he displays in a succession of eight slow movements is truly astonishing. It is not unlikely that when Dmitri Shostakovich was composing the six Adagios which constitute his fifteenth and final quartet – Shostakovich's "Six Last Words", perhaps? – the influence of this work may well have enabled him to achieve a similarly extraordinary range. After the tremendous drama of the Introduzione, its moments of extreme tenderness continue into the flowing Sonata I: the concept of "forgiving" could be no more imploringly expressed. Sonata II is characterised by a march-like tread, whose gravity must be balanced with enough movement to enable the lonely melodic lines to give of their poignancy – and truly to reveal a glimpse of Paradise in the final transformation into the tonic major key. The sheer "maternal" warmth and humanity of Sonata III similarly requires a gently flowing tempo, and the anguished desperation and sense of betrayal in Sonata IV can only be inhibited by drawing out the music unduly. Sonata V is notated with two minim beats per bar, and in observing this it is possible to achieve the most eerily spacious stillness in the pizzicato before the cries of anger and "thirst" burst upon us. There is also a strangely upbeat quality in this piece, which sits uneasily with its title, and yet which, after the monumental severity of Sonata VI's opening unisons, develops further into what can only be comprehended as sheer joy – underlined by Haydn's "joyful" key of G major at the end. Thereafter, the profound sense of reconciliation and acceptance in Sonata VII may be realised with a genuinely broad and spacious tempo, such that in attempting to portray the fury of the succeeding "earthquake" the inadequacies of four solo stringed instruments are slightly eased: inevitably it is impossible for a string quartet to recreate the sonic splendours of a full orchestra, but this awesome moment is not necessarily dependant on decibels alone.

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**Geoffrey Howard** was ordained as a priest in the church of England in 1986. Since then he has been in charge of the parishes of West Walton, Staverton, Helidon and Catesby. Since retirement, he has been taking an active part in the ministry of Trumpington and St James Church, Cambridge.

The original members of the *Fitzwilliam String Quartet* first sat down together, at Fitzwilliam College Cambridge, in October 1968 – as undergraduates during their inaugural term. Their first concert appearance took place in Churchill College the following March, ahead of their public debut at the Sheffield Arts Festival in June – making the Fitzwilliam now one of the longest

established string quartets in the world, and almost unique in having passed a half-century with an original player still on board (but latterly joined by both the Chilingirian and Brodsky Quartets – with our congratulations!). The present line-up combines founding member Alan George with a younger generation of performers: violinists Lucy Russell (herself celebrating 35 years in the group) and Andrew Roberts (son of the great pianist Bernard), along with former Zehetmair Quartet cellist Ursula Smith – who has also led a highly distinguished career as principal cello in various groups, including the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. International recognition came early for the FSQ, as the first group to record and perform all fifteen Shostakovich string quartets, drawing on the players's personal connection with the composer: he travelled to York to hear their performance of his thirteenth quartet, and this musical friendship (the composer's own word!) prospered through correspondence, and the presentation of his final two quartets – written in the years immediately following that visit. Sadly, a carefully planned trip to spend a week with him in Moscow was necessarily abandoned, following his death in August 1975. Benjamin Britten afterwards reported that his friend had told him the Fitzwilliam were his “preferred performers of my quartets”! Complete cycles were given in a number of major centres, including London, New York, and Montréal. A new recording of the last three quartets was specially released by Linn in October 2019, to celebrate “FSQ@50” year. Whilst their pre-eminence in the interpretation of Shostakovich has persisted, the authority gained has been put at the service of diverse other composers spanning six centuries, from the mid-16th to the present day. The quartet has appeared regularly across the UK, Europe, North America, the Middle and Far East, and Southern Africa, as well as making many award winning recordings for Decca, Linn, and Divine Art. A long-term ambition to record Beethoven and Schubert on gut strings – following the success of previous discs on historical instruments – was finally initiated during their 50th anniversary season, with recordings of Schubert's last four quartets (the A minor and D minor already available, the C minor and G major their first release post-lockdowns). Beethoven's Opp. 131 and 135 are scheduled to follow next week! Thus does the Fitzwilliam remain one of the few prominent quartets to play on older set-ups, yet simultaneously bringing about the addition of over 60 new works to the repertoire – as can be heard on perhaps their most novel disc so far: a jazz-fusion collaboration with German saxophonist/composer Uwe Steinmetz and former Turtle Island Quartet violinist Mads Tolling. After graduating from Cambridge in 1971 they immediately embarked on their first professional appointment, succeeding the celebrated Amadeus Quartet at the University of York. From there, the group built a niche for itself in concert venues around Yorkshire and the rest of the UK, at the same time joining a select company of aspiring quartets to have emerged under the guidance of Sidney Griller at the Royal Academy of Music. Having been Quartet-in-Residence at York for twelve years, at Warwick for three, at Fitzwilliam College Cambridge from 1998 to 2020, and at Bucknell (Pennsylvania, USA) since 1978, their university work now continues here at Clare Hall and at St Andrews – the latter incorporating their annual quartet course (“Strings in Spring”), which sits comfortably alongside their regular coaching weekend at Benslow Music (Hitchin). The quartet is very proud to have been granted its own annual chamber music festival in the famous “book town” of Hay-on-Wye – the 2024 event is entitled “Music and Friendship” and includes works which we hope will underline the Transformative Power of Music: there will be music by JS Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Samuel Barber, Dmitri Shostakovich, Alfred Schnittke, as well as collaborations with at least two contemporary composers. Do come along and join in the Friendship!

### **Forthcoming concert:**

Saturday March 16th, 7.30pm, Clare Chapel.

Continuum Choir, Harry Guthrie, direction. Lent in the Iberian peninsula, music by Victoria, Guerrero, Morales, Vivanco and more.

