

CONTEMPO QUARTET

Bogdan Sofei and Ingrid Nicola, violins - Andreea Banciu, viola - Adrian Mantu, cello

CLIFDEN - 23rd March at 8pm - Station House Theatre - *presented by Clifden Arts Society*

DUN LAOGHAIRE - 24th March at 8pm - Pavilion Theatre

PORTLAOISE - 25th March at 8pm - Dunamaise Arts Centre

CASTLEPOLLARD - 26th March at 7pm - Tullynally Castle - *presented by Derravaragh Music Association*

BANTRY - Sunday 27th March at 3pm - St Brendan's Church - *presented by West Cork Music*

Josef Haydn [1732-1809]

Quartet in D major Op.76 No.5 [1798]

1. *Allegretto*
2. *Largo – Cantabile e mesto*
3. *Menuetto – Allegro*
4. *Finale – Presto*

Jennifer Walshe [1974-]

Minard/Nithsdale [2003]

for string quartet, two boomboxes and a torch

Franz Schubert [1797-1828]

String Quintet in C major D956 [1828]

1. *Allegro ma non troppo*
2. *Adagio*
3. *Scherzo, Presto - Trio, Andante sostenuto*
4. *Allegretto*

The Contempo Quartet is the resident quartet of the Galway Music Residency and was RTÉ's Resident Quartet from 2014 until 2019. Praised as a "fabulous foursome" (Irish Independent) and noted for performances which are "exceptional" (The Strad) and "full of imaginative daring" (The Irish Times), RTÉ ConTempo Quartet has forged a unique place in Irish musical life.

Since its formation in Bucharest in 1995, the quartet has performed more than 1,800 concerts world-wide in 46 countries, including prestigious venues such as Wigmore Hall; Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris; St Martin-in-the-Fields; Berliner Philharmonie; Palazzo del Quirinale, Rome; Carnegie Hall and the Opera House Tel-Aviv. ConTempo have had the honour to meet and play in front of world personalities such as Prince Charles, Nelson Mandela, Pope John Paul II, EU Ministers, Michael D. Higgins, Hollywood stars and Nobel Prize winners. The ensemble has won a record of 14 international prizes (including Munich, Rome, Berlin, Prague and London) and worked alongside artists of the highest calibre including Emma Johnson, Yuko Inoue, Hugh Tinney, Chen Zimbalista, Jérôme Pernoo, Peter Donohue and Martin Roscoe. Collaborations with other distinguished quartets have also been a feature, such as the Amadeus, Arditti, Vanbrugh, Casals and Endellion.

Christopher Marwood, cello, graduated from Cambridge University in 1983 and went on to study at London's Royal Academy of Music and Conservatorium Maastricht. Cello teachers included Florence Hooton, David Strange, Ralph Kirshbaum, William Pleeth and Radu Aldulescu. His chamber music mentor for several years was Emmanuel Hurwitz.

As cellist of the Vanbrugh Quartet for 32 years, Christopher Marwood enjoyed a busy career performing throughout Ireland and touring worldwide. He co-founded the West Cork Chamber Music Festival in 1996 and remains director of the Festival's masterclass programme. He is director of the National String Quartet Foundation, planning and raising funds for more than fifty concerts annually. He teaches at MTU Cork School of Music and at the Royal Irish Academy of Music and continues to perform both as soloist and as chamber musician. His recent CD of works by Boris Tchaikovsky was nominated for the 2019 International Classical Music Awards.

PROGRAMME NOTES

Josef Haydn [1732-1809]

Quartet in D major Op.76 No.5 [1798]

By the time he wrote his opus 76 Quartets, Joseph Haydn was over sixty, widely traveled, and probably the most renowned living composer in Europe. After thirty years of a cloistered existence as the court composer at Esterhazy, he "went public" upon the death of his patron, Count Nicholas, in 1790; assisted by the impresario Johann Peter Salomon, he made his name enduringly in London and in Vienna. This shift had a palpable effect on his compositional style. In his last twelve symphonies, and his last four sets of string quartets, the gestures and the sound-sense are more robust and self-assured as the composer plays to the public concert-hall; while the composer sacrifices none of his capacity for innovation and surprise, we feel that we have left the arena of experimentation and discovery that characterized the Esterhazy years.

In fact, the six opus 76 Quartets were not written for the public, but were commissioned by the Hungarian Count Erdödy, who enjoyed having them to himself for two years (in the meantime, Haydn cannily sold them to two separate publishers in London and Vienna). As a set, they are unquestionably the most popular and most often performed of his many quartets, and some would say his greatest quartet masterpieces as well. Number five follows on the heels of three giants: number two, the "Quinten", number three, the "Emperor", and number four, the "Sunrise", all relatively traditional works in regard to form and key structure.

This fifth quartet, then, is more of a maverick quartet. The first movement is cast not in the usual “sonata allegro” form, with its emphasis on momentum and drama, but rather in a kind of variation form that uses alternation between major and minor, with a fleeter, more buoyant coda. Despite some stormy, turbulent writing in the minor section, the movement as a whole gives an impression of lightness and grace.

By contrast, the extraordinary slow movement becomes the emotional and substantive center of the work. Marked “Cantabile e mesto” – songful, sad – the movement is cast in the exotic key of F-sharp major, a key that seems to lift off the ground, to occupy a separate plane quite distant from the more friendly and ordinary D major of the preceding movement. This is gliding, exalted music, hymnlike but also tender and intimate. This music evokes, partway, the world of “The Seven Last Words of Christ”, Haydn’s earlier masterpiece, but here there is no bowing of the head in resignation; if anything, the entire movement occupies some afterlife, free already of any restraint.

With the minuet, we are back with jolly Papa Haydn, playing his usual tricks: sudden dynamic changes and contradictions of the expected $\frac{3}{4}$ meter rule the day. The cello counters with a more shadowy texture in the minor-key Trio. Then comes the Finale, which begins, startlingly, with movement-ending chords and pauses – a trick, perhaps, picked up from London’s unruly public spaces, a way of getting attention for what is to follow? This movement is distinguished by its accompanimental device: an rapidly repeated interval shared by a pair of instruments, over which the lighthearted main melody is played out. One of the most joyous and fun-loving finales of his entire output, there is no end to the high jinks to be heard here: games of leapfrog, passages that dwindle to almost nothing, outbursts of mock-rage, surprise arrivals, and finally a triumphant, exuberant ending. *Misha Amory*

Jennifer Walshe [1974-]

Minard/Nithsdale [2003]

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The sounds I am interested in often include those which are normally considered flawed, or redundant. In working with sounds for a piece, I often find them to be affiliated with some sort of emotional, social or physical situation. (For example, the sound of people who want to shout forcing their argument into a whisper so as not to wake the children or the neighbours.) My job is to remove as much information as possible about these situations, in the same way that a person in a picture can be isolated by cutting off parts of the picture, or painting over the other figures in it. I don’t want the situation to be readily apparent. Of course, sound does not exist in a cultural vacuum, and this process of removing information can never be absolute – each listener will have their own unique associations which they bring to the piece. As a composer, I try to cloud and mute these associations, abstracting and distilling the sounds from their extra-musical affiliations; what bursts through and resonates with the listener is where the piece lives.

In minard/nithsdale, this abstraction occurs in different ways – the string players all play with pieces of card threaded through their strings, so the sounds produced are rich in metallic overtones, rhythm becomes muddled and no definite pitch can be discerned; straight-forward melodies are played out of kilter; organic electronic sounds are juxtaposed with mechanical acoustic sounds.

Franz Schubert [1797-1828]

String Quintet in C major D956 [1828]

Schubert's last years were a race against time. He knew he was fatally ill and this clearly heightened the emotional perceptions of his inspired romantic imagination. He died on 19th November 1828, after a ten-day illness. During the last days he was often delirious, but when he was lucid he spent his time

correcting proofs of *Winterreise*. In the two previous months he had completed the last three magnificent piano sonatas in C minor, A major and B flat; the thirteen songs that make up *Schwanengesang*; the joyous *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen* that brings clarinet and soprano together; and, as if that were not enough, this overwhelming quintet. There seems to have been no commission for these works, just a desperate need to keep writing while he still could.

Schubert undoubtedly knew the Mozart string quintets with the two violas, and that composer's tactic of dividing his quintet into two trios. Schubert chose instead the extra cello and divides his ensemble into two quartets, which gives the single extra instrument a disproportionately more powerful effect. He was particularly taken by the luminous quality of the cello's top string, as is wonderfully demonstrated by the first movement's second subject, where the two cellos duet serenely high above the viola's bass line. The extra bass instrument also gives him more freedom to explore the lyrical potential of the cello, as well as giving rein to the richer tenor textures, as in the *Adagio* where the theme is played by the second violin, viola and first cello.

The long-breathed opening is deep with mystery, soon to be dispelled by a greater sense of urgency. A triplet figure arises as the signature of this new momentum, and drives the music to the expected cadence, where a harmonic twist moves to the unexpected key of E flat, an inspired preparation for the gorgeous melody of the second subject. This begins in the two cellos, then the violins, and finally the first violin and the viola. The exposition is rounded off by a new march-like idea, which dominates the development that follows the exposition repeat. The extended and emotionally intensified development culminates in the driving triplets that led to the second subject, and a seamless return to the opening material and the recapitulation. The coda manages to encompass both the power and the mystery of the opening, before this huge twenty-minute movement is finally closed.

The timelessness of the work's opening is echoed and intensified by the otherworldly *Adagio*. The impression of calm is constantly undermined by the first violin's decorative comments, but each time reaffirmed by the pulsation of the plucked cello. This finally erupts in the F minor middle section, where we experience some of the terror and anguish that Schubert knew so well. The driving triplet rhythms from the first movement mutate into dark and bitter foreboding, which the warmth of the main theme only manages to calm after a long struggle. The return to the Elysian Fields of the opening is accomplished as the F minor mode collapses exhausted, and the familiar strains re-emerge with greatly elaborated decorations. Eventually the cello pizzicatos return, and the utter peacefulness of the opening is almost recovered in music of unearthly beauty.

The primeval physicality of the Scherzo's peasant dance comes as a brutal shock after so much introspection. There is an unquenchable joy in living in this music, an earthy power that generates a short-lived but all-consuming elation. The Trio is the absolute opposite, a despairing travail through the valley of the shadow of death, which reminds us of that other winter's journey he wrote about, and looks forward to his own death two weeks later. The return of the Scherzo has this time an element of frantic desperation.

The finale is a procession of dances from the wild Hungarian melody at the beginning to the gorgeous Viennese lilt of the heart-warming second subject. Schubert wrote literally hundreds of dances for dance-crazy Vienna, and he exults here in his skill. But even here the demons lurk in moments of threatening quiet and bursts of frenetic energy. The final section is Schubert at his most exuberant driving the music to a thunderous and dramatic finish. *Francis Humphrys*

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