

NATIONAL STRING QUARTET FOUNDATION – SPRING SEASON 2024

# PIATTI QUARTET

*Michael Trainor & Emily Holland, violins - Miguel Sobrinho, viola - Jessie Ann Richardson, cello*

**WATERFORD** - Wednesday 6th March at 7.30pm - Waterford City Hall - *presented by Waterford Music*

**SLIGO** - Thursday 7th March at 7.30pm - Methodist Church, Wine St. - *presented by Con Brio*

**WEXFORD** - Friday 8th March at 8pm - Grantstown Priory - *presented by Music for Wexford*

**CORK** - Saturday 9th March at 1pm - Triskel Christchurch

**DUBLIN** - Sunday 10th March at 12pm - Hugh Lane Gallery

**Felix Mendelssohn** [1809-1847]

**Quartet in E flat major Op.12** [1829]

1. *Adagio non troppo – Allegro non tardante*
2. *Canzonetta: Allegretto*
3. *Andante espressivo*
4. *Molto allegro e vivace*

**E.J. Moeran** [1894-1950]

**String Quartet No.2 in E flat** [date uncertain]

1. *Allegro moderato ma ben marcato*
2. *Lento – Vivace – Allegretto – Andante – Allegro vivace*

**Charlotte Harding** [1989]

**'Iorsa'** [2023]

**Antonin Dvorak** (1841-1904)

**String Quartet No 12 in F ('American') Op 96** (1893)

1. *Allegro ma non troppo*
2. *Lento*
3. *Molto vivace*
4. *Finale: vivace ma non troppo*



## PIATTI QUARTET

The distinguished Piatti Quartet are widely renowned for their 'profound music making' (*The Strad*) and their 'lyrical warmth' (*BBC Music Magazine*). Since their prizewinning performances at the 2015 Wigmore Hall String Quartet Competition, they have performed all over the world and made international broadcasts from many countries.

Since their inception they have always had projects in the recording studio with critically acclaimed releases through Linn, Somm, Champs Hill, Hyperion, Delphian, Nimbus and NMC record labels. Their wide-ranging discography and repertoire is thanks to their enthusiasm and curiosity in collaborating with a broad range of artists including some of the most recognisable names in classical music such as Nicky Spence, Julius Drake, Michael Collins, Barry Douglas, Janina Fialkowska, Melvyn Tan, Ian Bostridge, Katherine Broderick, Adam Walker, Simon Callaghan and the Belcea Quartet. Accolades in 2023 include Gramophone's 'Editor's Choice for the Month' with NMC, a five-star review from BBC Music Magazine with Delphian and in 2022 they were nominated for 'Recording of the Year' with both Limelight and Gramophone for their collaborative disc on the Hyperion label.

Historical research into quartet music that has been undiscovered or deserves to be better known has led to the premiere recording of Ina Boyle's (Ireland) SQ in E minor, and performances of lesser-known quartet gems by Ralph Vaughan Williams, E.J. Moeran, Rachmaninov, Ireland, Haas, Ulmann, and Durosoir.

The quartet's name is dedicated to Alfredo Piatti, a 19th Century virtuoso cellist who was a professor at the Royal Academy of Music (the alma mater of the founders of the quartet) and also a major exponent of chamber music and contemporary music of his time.

## PROGRAMME NOTES

**Felix Mendelssohn** [1809-1847]

**Quartet in E flat major Op.12** [1829]

Felix Mendelssohn wrote his earliest chamber music as a teenager — three piano quartets, the string octet, the first viola quintet and his first two string quartets — and it is unquestionably the greatest teenaged chamber music ever written. Not only was this boy a creative prodigy of the highest order, but he was born into a wealthy and cultured Berlin family, and from an early age was surrounded by some of the leading literary and artistic lights of his time, so that the seeds of his talent found fertile ground in which to develop.

His Quartet in E-flat, opus 12, is his first published quartet, and is extraordinary for its dramatic scope. This is the work of a composer with staged, even operatic spectacle on his mind, rather than instrumental concert music. It is customary to view Mendelssohn as the "classicist" of his generation, the one who observed the bounded forms and structures and wrote exquisite, inspired music within those bounds. However, in this quartet (and its companion quartet, opus 13), there is a sense of pushing the envelope in regard to form and expression. One hears this most obviously in the frequent bursts of recitative in the first violin part — in the first, third and fourth movements — where it steps outside the normal, steady pulse of the proceedings and makes a more personal, solitary utterance. Dramatic in a different way, but just as affecting, is the sighing gesture that opens the piece, a clear paraphrase of the opening to Beethoven's "Harp" Quartet. Beethoven had died only a year or two before, and one can hear in Mendelssohn's music a valediction, a farewell, to the older composer. Further echoes of Beethoven's quartet can be heard throughout this first movement, but it does not share the strong, brilliant sensibility of the "Harp"; in Mendelssohn's music, a gentle yet ardent muse is at work, sometimes fiery but never muscular.

Later in the first movement, a brooding, dark melody appears in the second violin. Mendelssohn expressly delays the introduction of this idea until the development section, a later-than-customary point to introduce new material, subverting again our expectations of how a concert piece should progress: the opera is before us once more, and an ominous character has appeared out of the blue onstage. This character will continue to stalk the music, appearing near the end of the first movement and again in the finale, a shadow hovering at the edge of consciousness.

Possibly the most famous work in the young composer's output is his Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream, an enraptured response to the Shakespeare comedy which Mendelssohn had read in Schlegel's translation. The second movement of this quartet could well have been written under the spell of the same play: hushed throughout, it has a tiptoeing, charmed quality replete with short quick bowstrokes and plucked strings. The elfin, poised feeling of the minor-key main section contrasts with the quicksilver flutter of the major-key Trio section, the prancing fairies versus the winged ones.

With the third movement we are back in the operatic realm, where the first violin sings an intimate and fervent aria. Despite its strict formal underpinnings, this movement unfolds almost as a stream of consciousness; and despite its brevity, it covers an enormous emotional range. There is the hushed but deeply felt opening; the second phrase, more florid and leading to a state of much greater agitation; a brief recitative that brings us momentarily back to the state of the opening; and then the same cycle, played out on a larger, more intense scale. After the second, more intense recitative, there is a tender, brief coda and a momentary, cadential calm. Barely have we exhaled when the calm is shattered by the two opening chords of the Finale.

This final movement is perhaps the most arresting example of how Mendelssohn departs from the received formats for an instrumental chamber work. First of all, it opens not in the home key of E flat major, which would be customary procedure, but rather in c minor. This lends an enormous dramatic charge to the music, and is a significant innovation; although Beethoven (Eroica Symphony, quartets opp. 127 and 130) and Schubert (Cello Quintet, Piano Sonata in B flat) had tried it on as a brief introductory gesture, Mendelssohn in this quartet chooses to extend the foreign key center through almost the entire movement, before relenting and returning to E flat at last in the coda. The mood of the movement, as if in reaction, is turbulent, unsettled, even anguished at times. About midway through the movement, old melodies from the first movement start to be heard, and in the coda, they take over completely, so that we seem to have returned, nostalgically, to that earlier, gentler world. In doing this, Mendelssohn is treating us to an early example of a cyclical form, an ultra-Romantic conceit that anticipates Wagner and his imitators, but which here evokes the simple, beautiful feeling of being welcomed back into a loving childhood home. *Note by Misha Amory*

**E.J. Moeran** [1894-1950]

**String Quartet No.2 in E flat** [date uncertain]

Born in 1894 in Heston, England, Ernest John Moeran (known as Jack to his friends) learnt the violin and piano and studied composition at the Royal College of Music in London with Charles Stanford and John Ireland. His studies were cut short by the outbreak of war and whilst serving in the Norfolk regiment in France he received a severe head injury which led to a metal plate being inserted into his skull. The injury was to affect him for the rest of his life. While recovering, he was stationed in Ireland and became particularly interested in his Irish roots – his father was Dublin born. Moeran grew very fond of Kenmare where he often went for musical inspiration. He died there in 1950.

The String Quartet in E flat was discovered in Moeran's papers after his death and was published in 1956. There is some debate as to when this work was composed. In style it seems to pre-date his other string quartet of 1923, yet its unusual two movement structure has led some commentators to think that it must have been written at the same time as the two movement Oboe Quartet (1946), when Moeran himself referred to 'concocting another

string quartet'. The first movement, in conventional sonata form, has a very 'English' feel, with the clear influence of Vaughan Williams. In the second movement, a slow opening soon becomes lively and scherzo-like taking us on a musical journey to Ireland through reels, airs and the final jig, in which it is hard not to get up and dance! *Note provided by the Carducci Quartet*

**Charlotte Harding** [1989]

'Iorsa' [2023]

Glen Iorsa lies to the west coast of Arran - a beautiful and rugged isle in North Ayrshire, Scotland. Sparse and wild, elements of the earth and sky seem intertwined in suspension; trails of cloud drift over the hanging valleys, whilst streams of water thread through the fuzzy heather. When isolated in the vast landscape, and lost within its frozen sense of time, you can't help but be drawn into your own thoughts and recollections. It's a place to cry out. A place to listen.

**Antonin Dvorak** (1841-1904)

**String Quartet No 12 in F ('American') Op 96** (1893)

The American Quartet, like the New World Symphony, was written whilst Dvorak was living and working in America. He had come to the United States in 1892 to head the National Conservatory of Music at an annual salary of \$15,000 - 25 times what he was paid in Prague - thanks to the enthusiastic patronage of Mrs Jeanette Thurber, the wife of a millionaire grocery wholesaler. After the railway investment bubble burst in April 1893, her husband was bankrupted and Mrs Thurber was unable to pay Dvorak reliably and he returned home in 1895.

Mrs Thurber had hired Dvorak to help fulfil her dream of creating a national American style of Art music. The National Conservatory admitted unusually large numbers of poor and black students whose repertoire of folk music sat well with Dvorak's own inspiration from his native Bohemia. Dvorak believed the way forward for American music was not to follow the Europeans, but to draw from its traditional music stylistic features such as pentatonic melodies, drone accompaniment and obstinate (ostinato) rhythmic repetition.

The 'American' quartet, together with the E flat String Quintet op 97, was composed in the summer of 1893 in the small town of Spillville, Iowa. Dvorak had gone there immediately after finishing the New World Symphony to escape the New York heat and to enjoy the company of its colony of fellow Bohemians and of his wife and children who had come over from Prague for the summer.

Dvorak, a viola player himself, gives the viola the opening pentatonic theme, in a way that is reminiscent of the opening of Smetana's 'From my life' quartet. The equally memorable, mainly pentatonic second theme, played quietly on the first violin, has a nostalgic feel. So does the second movement's plaintive opening theme with its rhythmically ostinato accompanying figure. The viola spends most of the second movement playing variants of this figure, while the second violin and cello are at times liberated to indulge in the glorious melody.

While composing, Dvorak was inspired and probably pestered by the repeated call of a 'red bird, only with black wings' – the Scarlet Tanager. Dvorak made its call the basis of his third movement. In imitation of the persistent bird, the theme is played over and over again in various guises and at different tempi. The last movement romps home echoing Dvorak's inscription at the end of the score: 'Finished on 10 June 1893 in Spillville. I'm satisfied. Thank God, it went quickly.' *Chris Darwin*