

NATIONAL STRING QUARTET FOUNDATION - SPRING SEASON 2024

SOLAS QUARTET

Katherine Hunka and Marja Gaynor, violins - Cian Ó Dúill, viola - Aoife Nic Athlaoich, cello

CASTLEBAR – Wednesday 17th January at 8pm – Linenhall Arts Centre

TULLAMORE – Thursday 18th January at 8pm – Esker Arts Centre

ROSSCARBERY – Friday 19th January at 8pm – St. Fachtna's Cathedral - *presented by Barrahan Music*

CORK - Saturday 20th January at 1pm -Triskel Christchurch

DUBLIN – Sunday 21st January at 12pm – Hugh Lane Gallery

Matthew Locke [1621-1677]

Curtain Tune from *The Tempest* [1674]

Fanny Mendelssohn [1805-1847]

String Quartet in E flat major [1834]

1. *Adagio ma non troppo*
2. *Allegretto*
3. *Romanze*
4. *Allegro molto vivace*

Katherine Hunka

Pass The Hat [2023]

Old Wedding March (trad) arr. Marja Gaynor [2023]

Lord Mayo (trad) arr. Marja Gaynor [2023]

Alexander Borodin [1823-1887]

String Quartet No.2 in D major [1881]

1. *Allegro moderato*
2. *Scherzo. Allegro*
3. *Notturmo (Nocturne): Andante*
4. *Finale: Andante – Vivace*



SOLAS QUARTET

Founded in 2020, the Solas Quartet features four of our most exciting musicians. This is their third tour for NSQF.

Born in London, **Katherine Hunka** has been the leader of the Irish Chamber Orchestra since 2002 and regularly directs from the leader's chair. She is a Lecturer at the MTU Cork School of Music and Artistic Director of ConCorda, a course for young chamber musicians.

Originally from Finland, **Marja Gaynor** is a Cork-based violinist and viola player. She specialises in Baroque music and is a member of Irish Baroque Orchestra and Camerata Kilkenny, recording and touring with both groups regularly. She teaches violin and chamber music in MTU Cork School of Music

Cork born viola player **Cian Ó Dúill** has performed with the Vanbrugh, Carducci and Calino String Quartets, the Fidelio Trio, the Avalon Ensemble, Chroma and the Crash Ensemble. He is currently head of Orchestral Studies at MTU Cork School of Music.

Dublin born **Aoife Nic Athlaoich** enjoys a versatile career performing on both modern and baroque cello. As well as her position as principal cello with the ICO, Aoife is sub principal cellist with the Irish Baroque Orchestra. She teaches at MTU Cork School of Music and at the Royal Irish Academy of Academy

PROGRAMME NOTES

Matthew Locke [1621-1677]

Curtain Tune from *The Tempest* [1674]

Matthew Locke was an English composer, known mostly for his compositions for the theatre. He was appointed as court composer for King Charles II, preceding Henry Purcell in the job. Purcell's style may have been influenced by that of Locke's, and the two men were family friends - Purcell wrote an ode to Locke after his death.

'Curtain Tune' is the best known musical number from *Tempest*, a real kitchen sink of an opera elaborately staged at Duke's Theatre, London in 1674. The text was from a version of Shakespeare's play adapted by John Dryden and William d'Avenant and reworked for the opera by Thomas Shadwell. Shadwell used several composers to assemble the music, including Locke, who was responsible for the incidental music. 'Curtain Tune' precedes the opening of Act 1, depicting calm seas turning stormy. The piece is remarkable, not just musically, but for being the first English score with the composer's marking of dynamics instructions - with the likes of "soft" and "lowder by degrees" (sic). *Marja Gaynor*

Fanny Mendelssohn [1805-1847]

String Quartet in E flat major [1834]

Fanny Mendelssohn, the older sister of Felix, was a prolific composer, a skilled pianist and a respected hostess of a flourishing Berlin salon (a fashionable gathering of notables, such as artists or statesmen, held at the home of a prominent individual). Fanny and Felix shared a common music education and developed an unusually close sibling relationship. When she was a child the family encouraged Fanny's involvement in music, not just as a performer but as a composer, but as she matured into womanhood her father let her know unequivocally that, while she had great musical talent, she would do best to focus on being a wife and mother. In a letter to her in 1820 he stated, "Music will perhaps become his [Felix's] profession, while for you it can and must be only an ornament".

To create a musical outlet for herself, something that would not conflict with her role as wife and mother, Fanny took over the Sunday musicales for which the Mendelssohn residence had become famous. These blossomed under her direction with many famous artists and even full orchestras performing at the fortnightly concerts. She arranged the programmes, composed much of the repertoire, played the piano, and organised a small choir which she rehearsed on Friday afternoons. She married the famous court painter, Wilhelm Hensel, in 1827. He was always very encouraging and supported her prolific compositional efforts – an oeuvre of more than 400 works including lieder, piano and organ pieces, chamber music, cantatas, dramatic scenes, an oratorio and an orchestral overture.

Fanny's music reflects her deep reverence for both Bach and Beethoven as well as a strong influence from her brother. It exhibits a fine craftsmanship and lyricism typical of the post-Classical Mendelssohnian style, combined with her own experimental and inventive approach to form and content.

The String Quartet in E flat major was composed in 1834. This imaginative and elegantly lyrical work was Fanny's only one in the genre and acknowledges her debt to the quartets of Beethoven. Opening with an Adagio ma non troppo, the implicitly serious and dark tone of the initial phrases immediately establishes a mood of quiet anguish, reinforcing Fanny's characteristically passionate nature. As the music progresses sudden emphatic chords further darken the ambient mood, accentuated by single plucked notes from the cello. Throughout the movement the key of C minor remains the guiding harmonic force until near the closing section which moves into the official home key of E flat major. The ensuing Allegretto in 6/8 time serves as a scherzo and is not unlike the famed "elfin" scherzos of her brother, but Fanny's music betrays a darker aspect as reflected in the C minor tonality. A dynamic central section abounds in very clever and impassioned counterpoint before a return to the opening section. The next movement is a plaintive yet poignant Romanze, cast in G minor, the key which Mozart chose for exploring deeply personal conflicts. The form is a free "interpretation" with frequent ventures into distant keys, modelled on late Beethoven. The concluding Allegro molto vivace is in sonata form; the assertive opening theme alternates with a dreamy rocking figure, reinforced by tremolo-like gestures from the lower strings before the piece ends briskly and emphatically. Having struggled her entire life with the gender constraints imposed by social convention, Fanny Mendelssohn finally decided to publish some of her music only one year before her early death at the age of 41. Until very recently, historians had limited her importance to the fact that her diaries and letters are valuable source material for biographical studies of her brother Felix. The true extent of her musical contribution has only been appreciated in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. *Elizabeth Dalton, 2020*

Katherine Hunka

***Pass The Hat* [2023]**

I wrote *Pass The Hat* in September 2023 for the Solas Quartet. I wanted to compose something that was energising and entertaining and not without its challenges. This short piece is about the power dynamics within any group. The hat, which appears to have a life of its own, insists on perilous virtuoso solos when worn. It is not quite clear whether the hat is something to be coveted or feared. *Katherine Hunka*

Old Wedding March (trad) arr. Marja Gaynor [2023]

Lord Mayo (trad) arr. Marja Gaynor [2023]

"Old Wedding March" is a Finnish tune I learned from fellow students during my college years in Lahti - we were young and eager to play Finnish and Irish traditional music, just for fun. It is known by many names, among them 'Finnish March', 'March from Ostrobothnia' and 'Napoleon's March'. The first written version comes from a collection of folk tunes by musicologist Ilmari Krohn, published in 1975, though the tune is doubtless much older. I have adapted and arranged the beautiful melody a few times over the years for different ensembles. This simple version, with little nods to klezmer harmonies and church organs, is newly written for this Solas Quartet tour.

We have paired it with an Irish march or air, known as 'Lord Mayo'. The tune is very old, and sometimes credited to harper Daithi O Murchaid, who enjoyed Lord Mayo's patronage. There are associated lyrics, also attributed to O Murchaid, but the tune is mostly known in its instrumental form. The earliest written version comes from 1724, in John and William Neal's "A Collection of the Most Celebrated Irish Tunes". I have based this arrangement on the melody played by uilleann piper David Power. *Marja Gaynor*

Alexander Borodin [1823-1887]

String Quartet No.2 in D major [1881]

Alexander Borodin was a remarkable man. Always interested in and talented at music, he spent most of his career as an academic chemist. He became a Professor in St Petersburg in 1864 and conducted important research in organic chemistry. Tall and good looking he spoke four European languages and was an ardent advocate of women's rights and education. In 1872 he helped found the first University course in Russia for female doctors. He had a passionate marriage to an eminent pianist, Ekatarina Protopopova. They had no children themselves but adopted children in need. He also composed some of the most glorious music of the second half of the nineteenth century.

Borodin was one of the Mighty Handful of Russian composers who laid the foundations for the later achievements of Russian music. Most of them composed little chamber music but for Borodin it was a lifelong interest. He started to compose and play chamber music at home while a teenager. He played the cello while his best friend played the violin. They both played the piano.

The Second Quartet, composed in the summer of 1881, was dedicated to his wife to celebrate twenty years of marriage. All four movements are in sonata form. The first movement opens with the mellifluous main theme on the cello. The first violin takes over and the two instruments pass the theme back and forth until the violin introduces the more robust second subject. This is then played by violin and cello together. All the instruments interplay a four note motif as the opening comes to an animated conclusion. The development begins again on the cello which is answered by the violin. The viola also takes part in the thematic development and finally the second violin as well. The music slows for the start of the recapitulation. The movement ends quietly with the viola repeating the four note motif.

The Scherzo is built around a busy first subject where the first note of each bar is strongly emphasised. The second theme is a glorious waltz-like tune played by both first and second violins. The harmonies here (and in other parts of the quartet) mix lushness with astringency. At times it almost sounds like Mahler.

The famous (and much copied) third movement is a wonderful Nocturne. The sumptuous opening tune is introduced by the cello with a throbbing second violin and viola before being taken up by the violin. The second theme begins with an upward scale followed by a descending sequence of trills. This is played by the violins in turn. In the development the upward scale is used as an introduction to the main theme which is now played by all four instruments. After the viola has had its turn, Borodin constructs a canon with the cello leading and the first violin following a beat behind. He repeats this idea with the first violin leading and the second violin again a beat behind. The viola and cello provide a tremolo and pizzicato accompaniment respectively. The effect is wonderfully passionate and romantic. It is hard not to think of lovers lying entwined on a warm summer night (of which more below).

The Finale begins with a brief slow introduction made up of two different phrases. The first is played by the violins; the second, a more serious motif, by the viola and cello. The movement proper begins introduced by pizzicato cello and taken up by all the instruments in turn almost like a train gathering speed. The slow introduction returns at the beginning of the development, the viola and cello playing the first vivace and the two violins playing the second andante. Finally the slow introduction returns for a final time played by all four instruments in unison at the start of the recapitulation.

Russian critics have constructed a programme for the whole quartet. They argue that the cello stands for Borodin and the first violin for Protopopova. The first movement describes their meeting, the second with its waltz like theme their courtship. Their passion is consummated in the third movement and in the finale, what? Normal life resumes perhaps.

It is true that in the first and third movements the cello often introduces themes which are then taken up by the first violin. But this does not invariably happen and it does not happen at the climax of the third movement. If you are writing a quartet for your wife on the occasion of your wedding anniversary, the inclusion of a passionate and romantic slow movement seems quite natural. The marvel here is quite how romantic and passionate the third movement actually is. The rest of the quartet is abstract music. The whole quartet is beautifully constructed and is one of the great pieces of chamber music of its time.

This quartet was the last major work Borodin completed. After all he had plenty of other things to do. He died six years later of a sudden heart attack at a ball in St Petersburg. He had the good manners to complete an energetic waltz before dying almost immediately. Protopopova died six months later. Although Borodin's scientific work is not entirely forgotten, his music and, especially this Second Quartet, will continue to delight audiences for a very long time. FH

