

THE VANBRUGH & FRIENDS

Keith Pascoe and Marja Gaynor, violins
Simon Aspell and Ed Creedon, violas
Christopher Marwood and Maria O'Connor, cellos

CORK UCC – Friday 9th February at 1.10pm – Aula Maxima, UCC

CLIFDEN – Saturday 10th February at 8pm – Station House Hotel - *presented by Clifden Arts Society*

SLIGO – Sunday 11th February at 3pm – The Model - *presented by Con Brio*

Ludwig van Beethoven [1770-1827]

String Quintet in E flat major Op.4 [1795]

- 1. Allegro con brio*
- 2. Andante*
- 3. Menuetto: Allegretto*
- 4. Finale: Presto*

Johannes Brahms [1833-1897]

String Sextet in G major Op.36 [1864]

- 1. Allegro non troppo*
- 2. Scherzo – Allegro non troppo – Presto giocoso*
- 3. Adagio*
- 4. Poco allegro*

THE VANBRUGH

The Vanbrugh has evolved from the work of the Vanbrugh Quartet which was based in Cork as RTE's Resident Quartet from 1986 to 2013 and as Artists-in-Residence at University College, Cork from 1990 until the retirement of violinist Gregory Ellis in 2017. Over three decades the quartet gave close to three thousand concerts, presenting the chamber music repertoire to audiences throughout Ireland, Europe, the Americas, and the Far East. Commercial recordings include more than thirty CDs of repertoire ranging from the complete Beethoven quartets to many contemporary Irish works. In 2016 the group was presented with the National Concert Hall's Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of their contribution to music in Ireland.

Keith Pascoe, Simon Aspell, and Christopher Marwood continue to perform together as the nucleus of the Vanbrugh and are joined by guest artists for performances of a wide range of chamber music repertoire.

Marja Gaynor, violin

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 has also performed with Irish Chamber Orchestra, Ensemble Marsyas, Dunedin Consort, London Handel Players, King's Consort and Helsinki Baroque Orchestra. Marja is known as a versatile musician at home in many different styles, a fluent improviser, as well as arranger and curator. Her string arranging credits include Oscar-winning song "Falling Slowly" from the movie *Once*, and Marja is also a long time member of the cult band Interference. Upcoming projects include chamber music tours with Solas Quartet and The Vanbrugh and performing and arranging as a trio with uilleann piper David Power and flamenco guitarist John Walsh. She teaches violin and chamber music in MTU Cork School of Music.

Ed Creedon, viola

Ed Creedon enjoys a varied career as a viola player, performing chamber music, in recitals and as an orchestral musician. Recent performances include the National Concert Hall Chamber Music Gathering, tours throughout Ireland with the Lir String Quartet, tours to Finland, France and India with Camerata Ireland as well as solo performances with Camerata Ireland and Barry Douglas.

Chamber music highlights include performances with the Vanbrugh Quartet, as well as appearances with the Ficino Ensemble in Dublin, the Piatti Quartet in the U.K., at the Ortús Festival in Cork, and repeat invitations to the Clondeboy Festival in Belfast and the Killaloe Festival of Chamber Music. For four consecutive summers he took part in the West Cork Chamber Music Festival's Young Musicians Programme.

Ed comes from Cork and studied with Constantin Zanidache and Simon Aspell at the Cork School of Music.

Maria O'Connor, cello

Cellist Maria O'Connor holds both a B.Mus and an MA from the MTU Cork School of Music. She was a prize winner in numerous competitions including Feis Ceoil, Feis Maitiu and the CSM Concerto and Chamber Music Competition. During her studies she was a guest soloist with the CSM Symphony Orchestra.

As cellist with the Chiral Quartet, Maria was awarded the 2014 CSM Directors Prize. The quartet were subsequently named Ensemble in Residence at CSM. They were winners of the CSM RTE Vanbrugh Quartet Chamber Music Competition, the KBC Great Music in Irish Houses Residency competition and the Music in Drumcliffe Strings Attached Competition and studied with both the Vogler Quartet and the Vanbrugh Quartet.

Maria has performed in numerous venues and festivals at home and abroad including the West Cork Chamber Music Festival, Killaloe Music Festival, the Music in Drumcliffe festival and in the RDS Rising Stars recital series, the Jeuneusses Musicales Festival and at Guildhall, London.

Since completing her studies, Maria has enjoyed a diverse career as a chamber musician, orchestral player and teacher. She is currently principal cellist with the Irish Memory Orchestra and has toured with them in both Ireland and abroad. As a freelance cellist she also plays with Cello Ireland, the RTÉ Concert Orchestra and the Kerry Scotia Ensemble.

PROGRAMME NOTES

Ludwig van Beethoven [1770-1827]

String Quintet in E flat major Op.4 [1795]

Beethoven's chamber music for strings is rightly dominated by his sixteen quartets but there are also an interesting number of duos, trios, and quintets including this quintet in E flat major. The piece is something of a 'Cinderella' among Beethoven's string ensemble output. Its performances are relatively rare and it lags way behind its sibling – the Op 29 String Quintet in C dating from 1801 – in the realm of popularity.

The Op 4 Quintet was most likely written in 1795 some three years after the composer's arrival in Vienna from his native Bonn, ostensibly to study with Franz Joseph Haydn. While Beethoven maintained he learned little or nothing from the master, the pupil's music often tells a different story. The quintet is partly a hybrid work with some, but not all of it, stemming from one of Beethoven's earlier pieces, a wind octet written in Bonn in 1792 for his patron Elector Maximilian Franz. He revised it in Vienna but, not particularly satisfied, put it aside. It resurfaced after his death when the publisher Artaria gave it the opus number 103.

While Beethoven may have discarded his octet, he didn't abandon it altogether and, in an extensive revision, transposed some of it, did some 'radical reworking' of more of it and added new material, to create this string quintet. The end result is a mature and intricately crafted piece with its inventive writing sounding perfectly natural in its string format.

The themes of the opening movement are light and flexible. Full of contrapuntal interaction, their construction follows the Viennese classical styles of Haydn and Mozart. The main theme has been described as 'a wriggling semi-quaver motif' and this tends to dictate most of the *Allegro's* musical discourse. Following the usual pattern of exposition and development, a cello passage in the remote key of B flat delays the arrival of the recapitulation in what has been termed 'an exquisite moment of harmonic deception'.

With a moderately slow tempo, the B flat *Andante* is a charming serenade not too far removed from a Siciliano. The movement is also sprinkled with harmonic surprises, something Beethoven learned from Haydn although this might not be readily admitted! A short central development moves through several unanticipated key changes and shows the composer already creating imaginative effects.

The following *Menuetto più allegretto* is an early example of a Beethoven scherzo. A rising staccato scale figure actually prefigures something similar in the scherzo of the 9th Symphony. Ideas from the original octet are greatly expanded with Beethoven adding a second trio section marked '*sempre dolce e piano*'. Interestingly, here he silences the second viola throughout. And maybe in homage to Mozart, who transformed his own Serenade in C minor K 388 for wind octet into the String Quintet K 406, Beethoven indulges in a series of canonic imitations.

In a complete rethinking of the octet's finale, the concluding sonata-rondo *Presto* is based on a gambolling main theme with the composer exploiting its amusing potential to the full. The influence of Haydn is not far beneath the surface and, maybe as a consequence, Beethoven is found in one of his more jovial moods. *Pat O'Kelly*

Johannes Brahms [1833-1897]

String Sextet in G major Op.36 [1864]

Brahms' love life is spelt out in his music for all to hear. In 1858 he had met and fallen for a young singer, Agathe von Siebold, who had a haunting voice *like an Amati violin*. She was also lively and intelligent and his own age, unlike Clara Schumann, who was 14 years older than him. Clara was of course his first love but they had already decided that marriage was impossible. Indeed she often urged him to find himself a nice young wife but seeing him with his arm around Agathe was too much for her. Brahms got as far as secretly exchanging rings with Agathe, but his nerve failed him and he brutally broke off the engagement in 1859 and they never saw each other again. The story reappears in his Magelone-Lieder and Rinaldo and, dramatically, in the G major Sextet. His

distress at this time was compounded by the total failure of his D minor Piano Concerto at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, where he was hissed off the stage.

The Sextet has a richness of sonority matched only by the B flat Sextet and these two works stand out like beacons amongst the comparatively small repertoire for this combination. Brahms may have seen the six strings as an ensemble with a less awe-inspiring history than the string quartet. He claimed to have destroyed at least 20 string quartets before he finally published his first two in 1873.

The opening of the G major Sextet is extraordinary and immediately shows the black areas of harmonic instability that Brahms is prepared to exploit before launching into his big themes. The semitone oscillation across two strings of the first viola that opens the work is present in many forms throughout the exposition either in the foreground as at the beginning or muttering away backstage. After the exposition repeat it becomes the obsessive subject of the development, which concentrates on this searching in the dark rather than either of the big themes. The first and second subjects both spawn glorious tunes, especially the second, which quotes the AGADHE code at the climactic moment. You cannot help wondering what Clara's comments were.

In the Scherzo Brahms reworks an idea from a neo-Baroque Gavotte that he penned in 1854, which retains both its minor key and its stylized dance character. It gets in addition a rhythmic irregularity, which adds to the mood of uncertainty already created by the first movement. The Trio however makes up for this with a rumbustious *Presto giocoso* with a strong Bohemian flavour. The transition back to the Scherzo is very cleverly manipulated so you hardly notice the moment of change. The coda is a sudden furious outburst.

The Adagio is a set of variations in E minor based on a theme given by the first violin accompanied by only violin and viola that recalls the feeling of loss of the opening of the first movement and bears the same Baroque tinge that we found in the Scherzo. Brahms was of course a music scholar of immense erudition, who studied early music from manuscript sources. The theme, which is very short, leads without a break into the romantic sighing and pizzicato cello of the first variation. The next variation led by the cellos also follows without interrupting the flow, the mood now pensive and questioning. Still in the minor key the fugal third variation takes a more strenuous approach evoking thoughts among cellists of the E minor Sonata that was being written at the same time. The fourth develops the subject at a livelier tempo before a smooth and deliciously anticipatory transition to, at long last, the major key. This is summer night's music, Brahms has exorcised his lost love and reached a moment of pure tranquillity. The E major key is held for the coda and the movement closes in peace.

The opening idea of the Finale recalls that persistent oscillating figure of the first movement but this time it is an element of stability giving the movement its energy. The second half of this group is a warm and vibrant tune that reflects the newly won contentment. Gradually the music takes on the character of a majestic and eternal dance seemingly unconcerned with the impossible vagaries of human emotions. But the dance cannot go on forever and the coda tries the usual trick of accelerating into the finish, this fails so he tries the opposite, slowing down until the music stops, which also fails, then he recalls the roundelay theme and now the *accelerando* drives to the finish. *Francis Humphrys*

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