

FUAIM - MUSIC *at* UCC

Friday lunchtime concerts – Spring 2024

THE VANBRUGH & FRIENDS

Keith Pascoe and Marja Gaynor, violins

Simon Aspell and Ed Creedon, violas

Christopher Marwood and Maria O'Connor, cellos

Aula Maxima, UCC - Friday 22nd March at 1.10pm

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*



UCC

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

**NATIONAL
STRING
QUARTET
FOUNDATION**
www.nsqf.ie

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 NOTE

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*

UPCOMING NSQF CONCERTS IN AND AROUND CORK

Saturday 20th April at 8pm – Vanbrugh & Friends at Bandon Methodist Church

Saturday 8th June at 8pm, Aula Maxima, UCC - NSQF SUMMER GALA CONCERT

Tickets for the Gala Concert go on sale Monday 1st April at 10am – see www.nsqf.ie

The National String Quartet Foundation is Chamber Music Partner to UCC