

NATIONAL STRING QUARTET FOUNDATION - AUTUMN SEASON 2021

CONTEMPO QUARTET

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

THE GLENS CENTRE, MANORHAMILTON - SUNDAY 7TH NOVEMBER AT 4PM

Joseph Haydn [1732-1809]

String Quartet in G minor Op.74/3 'Rider' [1793]

1. *Allegro*
2. *Largo assai*
3. *Menuetto – Allegretto*
4. *Finale – Allegro con brio*

Dave Flynn [b.1977]

String Quartet No.2 - The Cranning [2004/2005]

1. 'Slip'
2. 'Slide'
3. 'The Bamako Highland'
4. 'Cran'

César Franck [1822-1890]

String Quartet in D major [1889]

1. *Poco lento – Allegro*
2. *Scherzo: Vivace*
3. *Larghetto*
4. *Allegro molto*



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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.

PROGRAMME NOTES

Joseph Haydn [1732-1809]

Quartet in G minor Op.74/3 'Rider' [1793]

Haydn wrote so many quartets that it is more than understandable that posterity sought a way through the maze by labelling as many of them as possible. The Rider is one of the most popular of his quartets due to its infectious high spirits and doubtless it used to get more than its fair share of performances as it's so easily identified.

It was written at an extraordinary period in Haydn's life, when he had suddenly become a major international figure as a result of his first series of concerts in London in 1791-2. He had spent most of his working life at the Esterháza estate as both Kapellmeister and court composer. His works were well-known all over Europe, but the composer himself had never travelled beyond Vienna. Suddenly his music-loving patron died, his successor no longer needed a resident orchestra and the sixty-year-old composer was free to travel. It is in some ways comparable to the visits to the West by Soviet bloc composers as their travel restrictions were lifted – for instance when Shostakovich attended the Edinburgh Festival in 1962. The difference being that Haydn composed freely while in England and loved being feted wherever he went, while the gloomy Russian hated the limelight, was incurably homesick and only wanted to get back to composing his latest symphony.

The Quartet opens with an acerbic eight-bar introduction that remarkably goes on to become the central subject of the development. The first subject proper begins in the cello and works its way imitatively up through the quartet. This delight the four instruments show in echoing each other quickly establishes itself as a defining feature of this movement.

The E major slow Largo assai is justly famous and gives the impression of being more emotionally revealing of the composer than most of his slow movements, as though his adventures in London had extended his expressive resources. There is a central section in the minor. The Minuet and Trio are surprisingly introspective, perhaps in contrast to the famous last movement with its irrepressible Rider and its exposed writing for the first violin.

Note by Francis Humphrys

Dave Flynn [b.1977]

String Quartet No.2 - The Cranning [2004/2005]

This piece is heavily influenced by the traditional music of my native Ireland. There are no traditional Irish melodies in the piece; however throughout the work's four movements there are techniques, modes, rhythms and feelings common to traditional Irish music.

Donegal traditional music has a particularly strong influence on the piece. Donegal fiddlers often use a very attacking bowing technique, which creates a heavy, aggressive sound. This aggressiveness characterises much of the piece and is my way of demonstrating that there's a lot more to Irish music than the saccharine 'Celtic' arrangements that have become synonymous with 'Irish' music in the classical music world.

The title 'The Cranning' refers to an ornamentation technique of the Uilleann Pipes, an instrument unique to Ireland. Cranning is used extensively in movement IV where the musicians repeatedly 'cran' on low D notes in poly-metric cycles.

There are influences other than Irish traditional music in the piece; references to African, Balkan, Classical, Jazz and Rock music occur at various points but overall an Irish sound is dominant, particularly towards the end where the only notes used are the notes of Uilleann Pipe harmony regulators, A, B, C, D, F# and G.

After I won the 2004 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival Composers Prize for the first movement 'Slip', I was commissioned by Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival to extend the work into a full string quartet. The finished quartet was premiered by The Smith Quartet at the 2005 Festival. The Irish premiere was given by the Contempo Quartet, the Russian and French premiere's by the Vanbrugh Quartet and the US Premiere by the New Juilliard Ensemble at MoMa.

Note by Dave Flynn

Cesar Franck [1822-1890]

Quartet in D major [1889]

Cesar Franck had been considering writing a string quartet since the 1870s. For a number of years there appeared to be little progress. In 1888, his piano was reportedly covered with the scores of quartets by Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms. A year later, he had completed this work and it was given its first performance in April 1890. It was his last completed composition and, rarely for Franck, a great success. As the composer himself remarked *at last the French public appear to be appreciating me*. Unfortunately, Franck did not live long enough to enjoy this success. He died in November 1890, probably because of injuries sustained in a road traffic accident.

Much of Franck's life had been a struggle. His early life had been dominated by his father who wanted him to be a great piano virtuoso in the manner of Franz Liszt. Although Franck's early piano recitals were a success, he preferred playing the organ and composing. Even though Liszt himself gave his support and encouragement, Franck's compositions were rarely successful. However, the churches of Paris always needed good organists and Franck held the position of chief organist in a number of them. His skills as an organist, particularly his ability to improvise, became widely recognised, eventually leading to a chair at the Paris Conservatoire.

When composing this quartet, Franck may have studied the quartets of his illustrious predecessors, the style is unmistakably his own. Franck shows enormous knowledge and understanding of the many possible quartet textures; from light and shimmery to the robust and passionate. His harmonies are essentially late romantic but they are laced with more astringent discords which anticipate modernism. No wonder Debussy admired this

quartet. Throughout this quartet, Franck displays his complete mastery of musical form and produces a magnificent and influential work.

The first movement opens in a declarative manner with the first violin playing the main cyclic theme over unison chords. This theme mainly consists of a declining sequence of notes preceded by a swooping leap upwards of over an octave. The tempo is slow (*poco lento*). After the opening fortissimo, the music becomes quieter for a few bars and the opening theme is played on the cello. Soon the theme returns played again fortissimo on the first violin. The first of these slow sections ends with a beautifully calm passage. In the allegro which follows, a number of new ideas are introduced. The first exploits dotted rhythms. Another has a rippling effect based on the repetition of two notes a semi-tone apart. When this theme is played at a slower tempo, the *poco lento* music returns. This time it is introduced by the viola and then passed to the second violin. Soon all four instruments are playing in counterpoint. The return of the allegro marks the passionate climax of the development and the movement concludes with the opening theme and a wonderfully peaceful coda.

While the first, third and final movements of this work are predominately serious, the second movement scherzo is both charming and hilarious. The first idea is delightfully comic. The second is a more lyrical dance. A feature of this movement is that after a phrase or two, Franck often inserts a bar of silence. As if to say, *well what do you think of that?* In fact it can be argued that the bar of silence becomes a musical theme in its own right.

The slow movement is solemn, serene and, at times, melancholy. The harmonies become both warmer and darker. There is a tempestuous middle section and after the movement returns to the original material, there is one last passionate outburst before a poignant conclusion. The Finale opens with another declarative passage played fortissimo. There follow quotations from each of the previous three movements. It is hard not to be reminded of the opening to the last movement of Beethoven's ninth symphony; but no soloists or chorus are required here. This movement becomes a brilliant virtuoso quartet finale. An idea based on four loud repeated chords is developed in astonishing ways. It is frequently used as a transition to quieter, sometimes almost ghostly passages. Themes from previous movements return once more and the quartet ends, just as Beethoven's ninth symphony does, in a blaze of glorious affirmation in D major.

Note by David Winter

The National String Quartet Foundation creates and sponsors projects which bring live chamber music to audiences throughout Ireland. It is committed to supporting musicians who wish to explore and perform the string quartet repertoire and to helping concert promoters present this rich and rewarding music. In addition to the support of its major funders, the Arts Council and RTÉ, the Foundation gratefully acknowledges the support of University College, Cork, Cork City Council and Cork County Council.

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