

NATIONAL STRING QUARTET FOUNDATION - AUTUMN SEASON 2022

# ESPOSITO QUARTET

*Mia Cooper and Anna Cashell, violins - Joachim Roewer, viola - William Butt, cello*

**MULLINGAR** - Wednesday 5th October at 8pm - Mullingar Arts Centre

**CASTLEBAR** - Thursday 6th October at 8pm - Linenhall Arts Centre

**TRALEE** - Friday 7th October at 8pm - Siamsa Tire

**CORK** - Saturday 8th October at 1pm - Triskel Arts Centre (concert ends 2.30pm)

**DUBLIN** - Sunday 9th October at 3pm - National Concert Hall

**Dmitri Shostakovich** [1906-1975]

**Quartet No 4 in D major Op.83** [1949]

1. *Allegretto*
2. *Andantino*
3. *Allegretto - attacca*
4. *Allegretto*

**Donnacha Dennehy** [1970]

**Wig** [2019]

**Cesar Franck** [1822-1890]

**Quartet in D major** [1889]

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



**The Esposito Quartet** comprises four of our most distinguished musicians with a combined wealth of experience as recital artists, orchestral leaders and teachers, who have been playing as a quartet since 2010. The Quartet's name honours Michele Esposito, pianist and composer, who for forty years from 1888 was the initiator for much of the chamber music making in Dublin through the establishment of The Royal Dublin Society concert series.

#### **Mia Cooper, violin**

Mia Cooper has lived in Dublin since her appointment as leader of the RTE Concert Orchestra in 2006. She previously held principal positions with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and City of London Sinfonia, has appeared as guest leader of many of the UK's symphony orchestras. Equally at home as a chamber musician, Mia has participated in chamber music festivals, in Ireland, the UK, France, India, and Lithuania. Mia studied with renowned pedagogue Yossi Zivoni at the Royal Northern College of Music, and continued her training at the Paris Conservatoire. She teaches violin at the Royal Irish Academy of Music.

#### **Anna Cashell, violin**

Outside of her work with the Esposito quartet she performs regularly with her husband the pianist Simon Watterton and is a member of the Adderbury Ensemble and the Irish Chamber Orchestra. With the ICO she has performed in Heidelberg, the Wiener Konzerthaus, Würzburg, Rheingau the Lincoln Center and the Konzerthaus in Berlin.

She regularly freelances with a number of orchestras in the UK such as the City of London Sinfonia, Manchester Camerata and the Northern Sinfonia. She has also performed and recorded with the Crash ensemble in America and Dublin and has recently co-commissioned a new solo violin work by the New York based composer Stephanie Anne Boyd.

#### **Joachim Roewer, viola**

Born in East Germany, Joachim Roewer graduated from the Hochschule für Musik "Franz Liszt" Weimar and the Orchesterakademie of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. In 1994 he moved to Ireland to become principal viola with the Irish Chamber Orchestra, a position which he has held ever since. He has also worked as principal viola with the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland and Camerata Ireland. On numerous occasions he appeared as soloist with the Irish Chamber Orchestra, recently alongside Anthony Marwood in Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante.

Joachim Roewer is a passionate teacher and a busy chamber music player. Outside his work with the Esposito String Quartet he was invited to perform with the Vogler Quartet, the Vanbrugh Quartet and the ConTempo Quartet and since 2013 he works as Artistic Director of the annual international Killaloe Chamber Music Festival. Joachim teaches viola and chamber music at the Cork School of Music and the MA course for classical string performance at the World Academy at the University of Limerick.

#### **William Butt, cello**

William Butt enjoys a busy career as soloist, chamber musician and is professor of cello at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin. On the concert platform he has performed extensively throughout Ireland, the UK, Europe and the Far East. He is a much admired exponent of the solo repertoire, having performed and broadcast numerous works for this medium by contemporary composers, as well as the formidable solo sonatas by Kodaly and Ligeti and the suites of Bach and Britten. Of his recording of the Britten suites, the Observer wrote: *'Warner have found a worthy successor to Rostropovich, for whom Britten wrote these three suites... Meticulously played, with the passion and commitment the composer discerned in their dedicatee, these elegant, eloquent pieces could not have been entrusted to a safer pair of hands'*

He has performed and broadcast all the major concerti, in 1997 he gave the Irish premiere of the Walton concerto with the National Symphony Orchestra, in 2001 the Dvorak concerto with the NSO and 2003 a tour of the Schumann concerto with the NSO. As well as a performance of the Protecting Veil by John Tavener with the Hibernian Orchestra he undertook a series at the National Concert Hall in Dublin in 2004 with the orchestra of St Cecilia and Barry Douglas in which he played the Dvorak, Elgar, Shostakovich (No 1), Tchaikovsky Rococo variations, and both Haydn concerti in three concerts over a two week period. He has also performed and broadcast the cello concerto by Victor Herbert with the Ulster orchestra. He plays on a fine cello made by Giovanni Grancino in Milan (1690).

## PROGRAMME NOTES

**Dmitri Shostakovich** [1906-1975]

**Quartet No 4 in D major Op.83** [1949]

During the Great Patriotic War against Hitler, Stalin had loosened somewhat the shackles that restrained the Soviet artists. Musicians and even writers were evacuated to safe areas to make their contributions. Shostakovich's massive Leningrad Symphony became the stuff of legend and its worldwide performances generated huge radio audiences. Stalin was only too aware of the propaganda value of Shostakovich.

Nonetheless with the War over the internal persecution of artists and intelligentsia was revived under the enthusiastic leadership of Stalin's ideological watchdog, Andrey Zhdanov. It began in 1946 with the renewed hounding of Anna Akhmatova and culminated in the denunciation of Shostakovich, Myaskovsky, Khachaturian, Shebalin and Prokofiev in 1948. Shostakovich lost his teaching job at the Conservatoire, performances of his published works except the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies were banned and he was reduced to writing film music in order to survive. When Stalin personally insisted that Shostakovich lead the Soviet delegation to the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace in New York his material situation improved somewhat, though not sufficiently to allow performances of either his song cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry* or his Fourth Quartet. However his *Song of the Forests* won him a Stalin Prize.

The story goes that while Shostakovich was in New York he heard the Juillard Quartet play Bartók's First, Fourth and Sixth Quartets. Seemingly he was very taken with the tumultuous Sixth Quartet, written after Bartók's mother died, and this inspired him to start his next quartet.

The Fourth Quartet is music of great beauty and greater sorrow that would grip you by the heart even if you had no idea of the composer's circumstances. The opening theme suggests the open spaces and clear Nordic air of Sibelius. Rather like the Third Quartet, which begins with a passable imitation of Haydn that gradually disintegrates as the movement progresses, so here the freshness of the opening theme slowly takes on the complexities and compromises of Soviet life with much nostalgia for what was or might have been.

The grief in the *Andantino* is more personal and immediate, evoking a side of Shostakovich that will reappear constantly in his later quartets. The first thirty bars are given to the trio of upper strings, making a dramatic moment of the cello's entry. The music now builds gently to a climax before finding its way back to the elegiac opening and the muted restoration of the trio. There is an exquisite coda that looks back to the first movement.

The *Scherzo* gives a taste of Shostakovich's black humour and hints of Mendelssohn are now of course blatantly subversive. It is a delicate movement, unlike some of his more outspoken *scherzos*, with the mutes on throughout and, eventually, it peters out as the viola ushers in the *Finale*, which follows without a break. For a brief while the music hovers as if undecided, punctuated only by sinister pizzicatos, then the Jewish dance bursts out, something like the ferocious last movement of the E minor Piano Trio, but here the anguish and fury is naked for all to see and the power is terrifying. This is a huge and burning movement, throwing the whole weight of the quartet onto this climactic cry of horror. Then, quite suddenly at the end, in stark contrast to the intensely physical dance the grief-struck theme from the *Andantino* returns and the music dematerialises into a barely audible *pianissimo* and a plucked string.

The Fourth Quartet is dedicated to the memory of Pyotr Vilyams, a close friend of the composer, a painter and set designer, who died in 1947 at the young age of 45. One of his paintings hung in Shostakovich's study most of the composer's life. The Quartet did not get its public premiere until December 1953, nine months after Stalin's death. *Francis Humphrys*

**Donnacha Dennehy** [1970]

**Wig** [2019]

I originally wrote this piece as a reaction to Beethoven. That was the commission (for the National String Quartet Foundation in Ireland). I like that Beethoven's final complete composition, his op. 135 for string quartet, flies in the face of the narrative that many have tried to build around his late works, that of Beethoven the Romantic hero. But Beethoven was not just that, of course. Op. 135 hearkens back to the wit of his teacher, Haydn, probably the leading writer of string quartets before

Beethoven himself. I love the joy and the playful pushing of form in this quartet, where wrong turns work like viruses in the music. My short quartet, *Wig*, builds off of these viruses in the second movement of op. 135.

**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 shimmering 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. *David Winter*

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