

MARMEN QUARTET

Johannes Marmen and Laia Valentin Braun, violins - Bryony Gibson-Cornish, viola - Sinéad O'Halloran, cello

SLIGO - Thursday 24th November at 8pm - Methodist Church, Wine St - **presented by Con Brio Sligo**

THURLES - Friday 25th November at 7 pm - **The Source Arts Centre**

CORK - Saturday 26th November at 1pm - **Triskel Christchurch**

DUBLIN - Sunday 27th November at 3pm - **National Concert Hall**

CASTLECONNELL - Tuesday 29th November at 8pm - All Saints' Church – **presented by Limerick City and County Council**

Béla Bartók [1881-1945]

String Quartet No.4 [1928]

1. *Allegro*
2. *Prestissimo, con sordino*
3. *Non troppo lento*
4. *Allegro pizzicato*
5. *Allegro molto*

Ian Wilson [b.1964]

Rossiniana [2018]

Ludwig van Beethoven [1770-1827]

String Quartet in E minor Op 59 No 2 (Razumovsky) [1806]

1. *Allegro*
2. *Molto adagio. Si tratta questo pezzo con molto di sentimento*
3. *Allegretto – Maggiore (Thème Russe)*
4. *Finale: Presto*



THE MARMEN QUARTET

With a growing reputation for the courage, vitality and intensity of its performances the Marmen Quartet is fast establishing itself as one of the most impressive and engaging new talents in the chamber music arena. 2019 marked a year of significant achievement for the Quartet, with First Prizes at both the Bordeaux International String Quartet Competition and Banff International String Quartet Competition, where they were also awarded the Haydn and Canadian Commission prizes. Other accolades include first prize at the Royal Overseas League Competition (2018) and awards at the International Joseph Joachim Chamber Music Competition.

The Marmen Quartet has performed at venues including Wigmore Hall, Berlin Philharmonie, Boulez Saal, Frankfurt Alte Oper, Stockholm Konserthuset, Milton Court (Barbican), Palladium Malmö and Muziekgebouw Eindhoven. The Quartet performs regularly across Sweden and 2020 saw its first complete cycle of Beethoven String Quartets for Musik I Syd. Festival engagements have taken the Quartet to the Amsterdam String Quartet Biennale, BBC Proms, Hitzacker, Lockenhaus, Mecklenburg Vorpommern, and the Barcelona and Gulbenkian Foundation String Quartet Biennale Festivals. In the US, 2022 saw the Quartet take up its position as Peak Fellowship Ensemble-in-Residence at the Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist University in partnership with the Banff International String Quartet Competition; a relationship that sees the Quartet work closely with the University's students as well as giving performances and developing new projects across its residencies. The Quartet returns three times to the University in the 22/23 season, with other North American highlights including performances in Calgary and Vancouver.

Another highlight of the 22/23 season will see the Marmen Quartet taking part in the Australian National Academy of Music's Quartetthaus project, hosted in London by the Royal Albert Hall. A showcase of both musical and architectural talent, the Quartetthaus programme features works by both Australian and British artists including a new piece by Hannah Kendall commissioned for the Marmen Quartet by ANAM. Other UK highlights include a return to Wigmore Hall, as well as performances in Cambridge, Manchester, Belfast and Sheffield. In Europe, recital engagements take the Quartet to Bremen, Munich and Bern as well as seeing them take part in the Heidelberg String Quartet Festival and undertaking an extensive tour of Ireland for the National String Quartet Foundation. Elsewhere, the Quartet makes its debut in Israel with a tour including performances in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Formed in 2013 at the Royal College of Music, the Marmen Quartet were holders of the Guildhall School of Music String Quartet Fellowship (2018-2020) and studied at the Hochschule für Musik in Hannover with Oliver Wille as well as in London with Simon Rowland-Jones and John Myerscough (Doric Quartet). They were mentored by the late Peter Cropper and have received support from the Musicians Company/Concordia Foundation, the Hattori Foundation, Help Musicians and the Royal Philharmonic Society (Albert and Eugenie Frost Prize).

PROGRAMME NOTES

Béla Bartók [1881-1945] **String Quartet No.4 [1928]**

1928 was the year that Bartók completed his first concert tour of America, little suspecting that, twelve years later, war would force him to return and live out his last days there, away from his beloved Hungary. After his death in 1945, some of the music of that final period in exile - for example, the Concerto for Orchestra, the Third Piano Concerto - was criticised for a perceived softening of style and demeanour, allegedly reflecting artistic principles compromised in the interests of earning a living. Commentators in agreement with this view are unimpressed by the popular renown of these much-loved works. *Often the pieces most applauded are the least good*, said Pierre Boulez in 1961, adding that the Concerto for Orchestra is *far from being good*. He accused Bartók of *smoothing down* in his later works.

Among the un-softened, un-smoothed-down works to receive wholehearted critical approval are the Third and Fourth String Quartets of 1927 and 1928. Both reflect the experimentation, astringency and concentration, which characterised much of Bartók's work in the mid-1920s. They also represent a pinnacle within the thirty-one-year span of his output of string quartets, his six essays in the genre nowadays standing alongside those of Haydn and Beethoven as the greatest in the history of music. If Nos. 1 and 2 (1908, 1917) reveal him emerging from the influences of Impressionism and Late Romanticism, and 5 and 6 (1934, 1939) achieve a new directness, the two middle quartets find Bartók's synthesising of folk and art music influences at its most intense.

What Bartók describes as the *kernel* of the Fourth Quartet is the slow third movement. It is the centrepiece of a symmetrical, five-movement arch in which close correspondences make an outer layer of the first and fifth movements and an inner layer

of the second and fourth. The *kernel* is a sublime solo, initially for cello, taken up by violin, accompanied by near motionless chords which are directed to drift in and out of vibrato. The serenely cool atmosphere is that of Bartók's special night music sound world, while the solo's ornaments and scales have clear folk music origins. As music for cello, the solo line resonates with the 1908 Solo Sonata of his friend and countryman, Zoltán Kodály.

The quartet's inner layer comprises the two scherzo movements (2 and 4) on either side of the *kernel*. The second movement *Prestissimo* is a whirring, buzzing, two-and-a-half-minute helter-skelter played with mutes throughout and based on short, chromatic scales, which sometimes melt into *glissandi*. It generates an irresistible energy which, interrupted by the third movement, is then resumed with a new face on the far side by the all-*pizzicato* fourth movement. What in the second movement were semi-tone scales are here broadened into the diatonic scale figure introduced by the viola. Between them, these two scherzos contain a number of sounds and techniques then new to the string quartet genre. These include the mutes, *glissandi* and *sul ponticello* (playing on the bridge) inspired by Berg's Lyric Suite (for string quartet) which Bartók heard in 1927. The fourth movement also introduces the 'Bartók *pizzicato*' in which the plucked string snaps back against the fingerboard.

The two movements (1 and 5) of the outer layer, finally, are the toughest: densely packed, rather severe, and based on tiny, interrelated motivic cells rather than themes. The first movement explores this motivic material with extensive contrapuntal treatment including canons, inversions, retrograde motion and so on. Then, arising from Bartók's concern for symmetry, the chromatic motives of the first movement return in the fifth, transformed into diatonic themes, echoing the similar relationship between movements two and four. Meanwhile the finale's primary effect, in contrast with the erudite procedures which produced it, is driving, visceral excitement. *Note by Michael Dungan*

Ian Wilson [b.1964]

Rossiniana [2018]

Rossiniana, my 19th String quartet (2018), was written as a gift to Luisa MacConville to celebrate the 20th anniversary of her founding of Con Brio, the organization that has been bringing great concerts to Sligo since 1999. As the quartet's title suggests, the work references Gioachino Rossini, Luisa's favourite composer. Indeed, the work actually consists of over 40 fragments from a dozen or so works by Rossini; my job as a composer was to find the best way to knit all these fragments together. *Note by Ian Wilson*

Ludwig van Beethoven [1770-1827]

Quartet No 8 in E minor Op 59 No 2 (Razumovsky) [1806]

Beethoven's three Op 59 Quartets date from 1806. They were commissioned by Count, later Prince, Andrey Kyrilovich Razumovsky (1752-1836), who was Russia's diplomatic representative in Vienna from 1792 and one of the chief negotiators during the Congress of Vienna that resettled Europe in 1814. At his own expense, he built a magnificent embassy on Vienna's Landstrasse filling it with works of art. His long-standing interest in music brought him into contact with the leading artists of the day and for many years he employed a string quartet led by Ignaz Schuppanzigh (1776-1830) as his personal musicians. Placing them at the services of Beethoven meant the composer had these artists, more or less, at his beck and call.

Beethoven's relationship with Razumovsky was unique among those of his aristocratic patrons and his friendship with the Count remained cordial and undisturbed. Following a glittering party on New Year's Eve 1814 a disastrous fire almost gutted the Razumovsky palace and destroyed many of its artefacts. Beethoven was devastated as, with the Quartet disbanded, he lost stimulating contact with his extraordinary interpreters and with Razumovsky who, partially blinded in the fire, became a virtual recluse for the rest of his life.

Beethoven's Third *Eroica* Symphony of 1803 brought a radical change to the musical landscape of the period. Symphonic goalposts had been widened to an extraordinary degree and when he accepted Count Razumovsky's commission for three string quartets Beethoven's response also redefined the scale and ethos of that particular medium. The shock of the new surprised many of his contemporaries among them his indefatigable allies – the members of the Schuppanzigh Quartet.

However, the strongest reaction came from another musician, the violinist Felix Radicati. He chided Beethoven with the comment, 'Surely you don't consider these works to be music?' Beethoven's dismissive answer had a prophetic ring, 'Oh, they are not for you, but for a later age'. Schuppanzigh also railed against the difficulty of the music, conceived by Beethoven for skilled professionals, but the composer retorted gruffly, 'Does he really suppose I think of his puling little fiddle when the spirit speaks to me and I write something?'

Composed between the autumn of 1804 and November 1806 in, what has been said, 'the wake of his *Eroica* Symphony', Beethoven's Op 59 Quartets show the vastness of the Symphony's conception transferred to the string quartet arena.

Certainly, Beethoven's writing in his three *Razumovsky* Quartets, so called after the Russian prince who commissioned them, has an orchestral character.

The first movement of the E minor Second *Razumovsky* is full of nervous tension. It begins arrestingly with two forte chords followed by a brief silence. A short wispy motif is then followed by another bar's rest, while another brief idea leads to yet another stop. The opening chords reappear after which matters finally settle and the movement really gets under way. However, other moments of stillness are inserted throughout the movement.

The first violin signals the principal theme, which has many subsidiaries. All of them are wonderfully woven together and extensively developed with Beethoven, unusually, insisting that this development be repeated.

A second subject arises but is not given too much attention being ruffled overtly or in murmuring undercurrents. After these incursions, Beethoven leads into a lengthy coda that abounds in 'harmonic adventures' that has one believing it might even be another development. A climax is eventually reached and the movement is brought to a rather gentle conclusion.

The Molto adagio hymn-like slow movement is, in the main, serenely eloquent. One of Beethoven's pupils, Carl Czerny, maintains the composer thought of it while 'contemplating the starry sky and thinking of the music of the spheres'.

Beginning like a chorale, the movement brings a foretaste of the *Heiliger Dankgesang* (Holy song of thanksgiving) - Beethoven's hymn to the Divine in his Op 132 Quartet. It has been well described as possessing 'golden grace' as it moves 'in smooth long lines of gentle repose'. Beethoven indicates it is to be played with 'lots of feeling'. At the same time, its unhindered flow is given a persistent dotted figure mostly sustained by the lower strings and with the cello, particularly, having a muffled drum-like resonance as the movement advances.

Occasionally forte chords disturb the calm and an emotional climax is reached with a heartfelt cry. Overall the movement gives the impression of a mourning cortège solemnly treading in a dignified procession. In the recapitulation, cello and second violin are given an impressive sequence over the first violin with Beethoven moulding his ideas together with unflinching refinement.

As if unwilling to alter the preceding mood, Beethoven begins his syncopated Allegretto somewhat quietly. Before long, however, its eccentric pattern becomes apparent. The first violin has the theme that is relatively quickly harmonised by the ensemble as a whole. The theme also bears a relationship to the opening bars of the first movement and recalls its contrasted effects.

The Allegretto's Trio brings the Russian theme supplied, or maybe just suggested, by Prince Razumovsky. It comes from a traditional patriotic hymn, *Glory to the Sun*, published in a book of Russian folk songs in the 1770s. Interestingly, Mussorgsky used it in his opera *Boris Godonov*, Rimsky-Korsakov in his *The Tsar's Bride* and Rachmaninov in one of his Op 11 *Morceaux*.

Beethoven gives it a lively momentum in which he combines elements of fugue and variation. The theme appears first in the viola, is then transferred to the second violin, then to the cello and finally to the leader. Scoring it differently each time it reappears, Beethoven also adds an assortment of countermelodies to it. The Allegretto is repeated but, obviously pleased with his Russian encounter, Beethoven recalls it again before it is cheerfully dismissed by another reprise of the Allegretto.

The brilliant Finale is ostensibly a jovial, and at times a little boisterous, Presto. Its light and carefree principal theme is marvellously developed and repeated. A more lyrical second subject, heard on the first violin, is echoed by the other instruments.

Further development of the original idea gives the impression that there may be a third theme involved. Beethoven coalesces all his ideas in a continuously engaging progression of exuberant music making. While the subsidiary ideas endeavour to undermine the main theme, they are unsuccessful, as it refuses to be moved from its pre-eminent position. Towards the end of all these capers, Beethoven accelerates his tempo to a 'wild dash' Più presto and the Second *Razumovsky* Quartet ends in high spirits in the key of E minor where it all began in the opening Allegro. *Note by Pat O'Kelly*

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