

SPERO QUARTET

Jennifer Murphy and Brigid Leman, violins - Ali Comerford, viola - Yseult Cooper Stockdale, cello

CASTLEBAR - Wednesday 15th February at 8pm - Linenhall Arts Centre

PORTLAOISE - Thursday 16th February at 8pm - Dunamaisé Arts Centre

UNION HALL - Friday 17th February at 8pm – Myross Church of Ireland - *presented by Barrahané Music*

CORK - Saturday 18th February at 1pm - Triskel Christchurch

DUBLIN - Sunday 19th February at 12pm - Hugh Lane Gallery

Josef Haydn [1732-1809]

String Quartet in D minor Op.76 No.2 [1797]

1. *Allegro*
2. *Andante o più tosto allegretto*
3. *Menuetto. Allegro ma non troppo*
4. *Finale. Vivace assai*

Deirdre Gribbin [1967]

Hearing your Genes Evolve [2014]

Antonín Dvořák [1841-1904]

String Quartet No. 10 in E-flat major, Op. 51 "Slavonic" [1878]

1. *Allegro ma non troppo*
2. *Dumka (Elegia). Andante con moto - Vivace*
3. *Romanza. Andante con moto*
4. *Finale. Allegro assai*



THE SPERO QUARTET

Jennifer Murphy has performed in the Barbican Centre, London, the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, Toronto, and the National Concert Hall, Ireland, and has had performances aired on BBC Radio (UK) and CBC (Canada). Recent solo engagements include a performance of the Korngold Violin Concerto conducted by Bramwell Tovey in Koerner Hall, Toronto, and Chausson's Poeme with the RTÉ Concert Orchestra, Ireland. Jennifer regularly performs in solo and chamber music recitals in Europe and North America, and has collaborated with David Geringas, Barry Shiffman, Ernst Kovacic, Steven Dann and Marc Ryser. Summer festival performances include the Music by the Sea Festival, the West Cork Chamber Music Festival, Domaine Forget Chamber Music Festival, and the Banff Centre Masterclasses.

Brigid Leman was born in Ottawa, Canada. She studied in San Francisco, Zurich and Weimar and from 2012 to 2019 held a contract position with the Hamburg State Opera in Germany under Simone Young and Kent Nagano. She has played as a regular guest in the Hamburg Symphony, the NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra (Hamburg), the State Philharmonic Orchestra of Lübeck and the Århus Symphony in Denmark. In 2020 she moved to Ireland where she often plays in the RTÉ Concert Orchestra and the National Symphony Orchestra.

Ali Comerford was born and raised in Kilkenny. She completed her Masters in Viola Performance at the Manhattan School of Music in New York after gaining a full scholarship to study with Patinka Kopec. During her time there, she won the Fuchs Chamber Music Prize, and the Hindemith Viola Competition, and also played as principal violist under the baton of Leonard Slatkin. After graduating in 2017, Ali performed as a freelance musician in New York and played as principal violist with The New York Chamber Music Players, The Handel Festival Orchestra and TENYC, with whom she premiered works at Carnegie Hall, all while holding a Fellowship at the International House NY. It was as a music fellow at I-House that Ali became the music advisor to the Rockefeller Family as well as performing for the president of Liberia. Ali then won a position with Lincoln Center Stage and spent time traveling the world as a chamber musician and soloist, most notably to Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Alaska.

Yseult Cooper Stockdale studied in Cork, Dublin and Leipzig and enjoys a versatile career between the UK and Ireland. She has worked with both RTE orchestras, the Irish Chamber Orchestra, Welsh National Opera, Southbank Sinfonia and Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. As chamber musician she has played in groups including the Vanbrugh, the Alberi Piano Trio, Musici Ireland, Crash Ensemble, Ficino Ensemble and London-based Scordatura Collective. She has a keen interest in exploring new music, and has performed over 50 premieres with Kirkos Ensemble.

PROGRAMME NOTES

Josef Haydn [1732-1809]

String Quartet in D minor Op.76 No.2 [1797]

1. *Allegro*
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Haydn's entire quartet legacy comprises a rough total of sixty-eight quartets written over the span of nearly fifty years and includes at least twenty-five unequivocal masterpieces. The quartets were generally published in groups of six or three of which there are several landmark sets, each with its own personality, ingenuity and style. Each set tends to reflect a particular phase of Haydn's ever-creative quartet thinking and, rather miraculously, forms a complete universe in itself, so rich and varied are the musical treasures within. If one were forced to pick the so-called "desert island" opus, the likely candidate might be Op. 76, the last complete set of quartets Haydn wrote between 1796 and 1797 when he was 65 years old. At the time, Haydn was essentially retired from service to the Esterhazy family, "world" famous after his two fabulously successful tours to England, materially well-off and still in full command of his art. The quartets of Op. 76 were composed for high caliber ensembles in public performance before a sizeable, rapt audience. These were big, extroverted works of great virtuosity commissioned by a nobleman connoisseur for a handsome sum. They represent an unequivocal and dazzling peak in Haydn's career as well as a touchstone for all future quartet composers.

Within the world of Haydn's quartets, those in a minor key are few and far between averaging approximately one in six, generally, one per set. Haydn uses them sparingly since, by definition, they tend to be dark, by turns melancholy, tragic or severe. The String Quartet in d minor, Op. 76 No. 2 is a stellar example: with three of its four movements in a minor key, it casts a spell of intense gravity, perhaps one of the single best antidotes to the stereotypical image of the genial, "papa" Haydn. Like many Haydn quartets that have become as familiar as good friends over the centuries, it has a nickname, "Fifths", a reference to the cardinal musical feature of the first movement.

The opening Allegro is based on a singular four-note motif constructed from two pairs of descending fifths, a fundamental motif familiar to most through the likes of doorbells and clock towers. Just like Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (or his first string quartet written within a year or two of this one), Haydn's entire movement is saturated with the motif of which one brave scholar counted over 100 occurrences. It serves as the first theme, a counterpoint to the second theme, begins the development in a vividly obvious inversion and, naturally, forms an obsessive baseline in a little fugue. The curious thing about the motif is that its simple succession of perfect fifths is entirely independent of harmony; it implies none yet works without modification in a variety of harmonic contexts. This enables Haydn to craft a sonata articulated by contrasts between light and dark while maintaining the omnipresent theme. Its primal nature expressed in a short cell grows through repetition into a driving force of dark determinism suggesting and possibly even inspiring Beethoven's analogous fateful symphony.

The Andante brings immediate relief through several means: a switch to the major mode, a lightening of tempo as well as texture and a deliciously gallant theme treated to rich variation. Relaxed and gentle, it is a little marvel of formal craftsmanship, burnished with Haydn's playful sense of musical wit. Though marked by a ticking regularity like a musical clock, the movement's form is appropriately relaxed and spontaneous, one of the numerous elusive hybrids for which Haydn was famous. It suggests a simple ternary form, a sonata (with development) and a theme and variations all intertwined within a charmingly natural musical logic that needs no classification to be effective. Gracious and bright, it is, however, an eye within a larger storm.

Famous for its opening fifths, this quartet is nearly as famous for its scherzo. The third movement Menuetto even has its own nickname: the "Witches' Canon." Haydn indulges in a bit of learned craft by writing a strict canon between the upper and lower halves of the quartet, each pair playing in perfect, unrelenting unison with a certain bare austerity thematically akin to the fifths. With the restoration of the minor key and the mysteriously endless, trance-inducing quality of the canon, one can easily understand the association with witchcraft. A trio brings the necessary contrast but not without some feints, a bit more rustic humor, the curious reappearance of the ticking clock. All these intriguing proceedings occur rather miraculously within a "proper" sectional dance movement of the most classical sort.

The finale is a barnstormer: swift, urgent and brilliantly nervous in a mode of expression that is iconic of the grand Classical style perfected by Haydn and Mozart. The first violin enjoys a virtuosic prominence that is nearly concertante and its spicy flourishes remind us that Haydn was nearly as Hungarian as he was Austrian. Despite its driving vivace tension, the music travels through passages that are exuberant, even exalted. And despite its rare obsession with music in a minor key, the quartet concludes with a gracious turn to the major, a glorious and good-natured reassurance that all has been but a well-staged courtier's masque, a brilliant spectacle intended to entice, but not to offend or overly rile.

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Dr Deirdre Gribbin [1967]

Hearing your Genes Evolve [2014]

As Artist in Residence at The MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge composer Deirdre Gribbin worked with computational biologist Dr Sarah Teichmann creating a new work for string quartet called **'Hearing your Genes Evolve'**.

Dr Gribbin says: My response to contemporary debate about society, culture, science, and ethics forms the backbone of my work. I welcomed the chance to collaborate with Dr Teichmann at the MRC Laboratory, a stimulating environment that has historically been at the edge of scientific discovery especially in the field of genetics. I have interpreted results from the most up-to-date findings in a fresh, stimulating, and provocative way through my music.

Discussion about developments in DNA, and its implications on inherited genetic traits with reference to future health, is hugely topical. We are constantly wanting to know about what makes up our genetic profiles. The science is often difficult to understand. A central aim of my work is to make the science more meaningful to a wider audience. Debate about genetics has particular relevance for me. In 2006 my son was born with Trisomy 21: Down Syndrome. I'm sure that my research will give me a clearer understanding of the science behind his genetic profile.

Dr Teichmann and I have been discussing the potential of using music to help non-scientists understand the principles behind the DNA code. Finding ways of translating scientific data into lay terms encourages broader engagement with science. Through music, I devised a code that interprets the scientific principles employed in evaluating the computational data of four individual DNA profiles.

A musical system represents the inherent four nitrogenous bases associated with DNA. These four are shortened to ATC and G carry codes that control what cells are made up of and what they do. I have matched each base to one instrument in the

string quartet. There are many areas of overlap between principles for development in both the genetic programme and invention in musical language to do with how patterns develop and affect others.

From coloured genetic printouts, I have represented mutations as blocks in the music. These mutations happen as ideas of substitution, where one letter of ATGC substitutes for another. So a sudden switch from one instrument to playing the music of another emulates this mutation process. I continue to collaborate with science colleagues through my music currently at The Wellcome Trust and Crick Institute, London and anticipate new dialogues and understandings about the music derived from scientific data.

Antonín Dvořák [1841-1904]

String Quartet No. 10 in E-flat major, Op. 51 "Slavonic" [1878]

1. *Allegro ma non troppo*
2. *Dumka (Elegia). Andante con moto - Vivace*
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Dvořák first attracted significant attention as a composer with two sides of the same coin: folk music and dance. Aided by Brahms who recognized his talents and recommend Dvořák to his own Viennese publisher Simrock, Dvořák first published a set of Moravian Dances followed by collection of Slavonic (i.e. Bohemian) Dances thereby covering the two chief regions of what would eventually become Czechoslovakia. The Slavonic Dances, Op. 46, published in 1878 when Dvořák was in his late thirties, were wildly successful and immediately established his international reputation as an emerging Nationalistic composer. In the thrall of this excitement, the Florentine Quartet approached Dvořák asking for a new string quartet "in the Slavic style." Dvořák, a professional violist who had already written numerous chamber works responded by composing his tenth string quartet, Op. 51 published in 1879 and subsequently known by its nickname "Slavonic." Essentially marking the beginning of his mature, celebrated chamber works, it has been often described as the perfect fusion of classical style and Bohemian folk spirit and, a wonderfully revealing contrast to his more famous quartet, the "American", where ostensibly a different, new world folk spirit prevails.

The quartet opens with a warm, lyrical sonata typically played at a moderate tempo. The flowing quality of the music is punctuated by a rhythmic lilt suggesting the quick two-step beats of the Polka, originally a Bohemian dance. The dance qualities become more pronounced with the transitional material and the second theme. The development section features Dvořák's characteristic "flickering" between the major and minor modes, a trait recalling Schubert as well as the exotic flavor of Eastern European folk music (and a trait vividly continued in the second movement). The development also shifts briefly into something more reverent in the manner of a church hymn that Dvořák achieves by slowing the main theme to half its speed.

The quartet famously projects a pronounced Slavic folk character with the second movement Dumka subtitled Elegie. Dvořák would compose many more Dumky throughout his oeuvre, the term "Dumka" designating a heroic folk ballad beginning as a slow lament with contrasting sections of celebratory exuberance in a faster tempo. A mournful tale begins in G minor with a soulful duet between violin and viola to the guitar-like strumming of pizzicato in the cello (featuring a plangent shift between major and minor within a phrase). As soon as the sorrow is fully developed, the music abruptly shifts to G major, from a slow duple meter andante to a swift triple meter vivace and a lively Czech peasant dance known as the furiant. Dvořák will take the movement through these contrasts twice with thrilling tempo modulations for truly folk, improvisational feel as well as a constantly fresh treatment of the musical materials. Originally seeming like the slow movement, the second movement leaves one with the impression of a rhythmic scherzo.

The third movement is the proper slow movement, a beautiful Romanze that any lover of Dvořák's music will quickly recognize for its atmospheric, lyrical poignancy. While not representing a specific Slavic trait, the music exhibits a heartfelt directness, warmth and finely wrought "simplicity" for which Bohemian musicians and composers have long been famous. The languid interlude is a perfect foil for the rollicking finale, a swift rondo based on what musicologists have identified as the skačna, a Bohemian fiddle tune akin to an Irish reel with a jolly perpetual motion. An unmistakably vivacious dance energy animates the momentum. Dvořák exploits the rondo form for a great deal of contrast in rhythm, tempo, key and overall mood including a wonderful bluster of classical counterpoint and constantly shifting textures amidst otherwise directly accessible music with an infectiously rustic folk character, a superb blend of high art and music from and for "the people."

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