EVENT TWO

Friday 13 September 2024 7.30pm
National Centre for Early Music,
St Margaret's Church, York

CONCERT BY FESTIVAL ARTISTS

Ben Hancox, Magnus Johnston (Violins)
Gary Pomeroy, Simone van der Giessen (Violas)
Marie Bitlloch, Tim Lowe (Cellos)
Andrew Brownell (Piano)

Joseph Haydn (1732 – 1809)
String Quartet in C major, Op. 33, No. 3 (The Bird)
Allegro Moderato – Scherzo: Allegretto – Adagio non Troppo –
Finale: Rondo Presto

We should just rehearse a few points about the place of the Op. 33 set of six quartets in Haydn's invention of the string quartet genre. There is an important back story to be told because they are a major advance in Haydn's creative genius. In the end he wrote 83 string quartets and as a result defined its future. Even the young Beethoven held back from entering the fray, but not for long!

A key milestone in Haydn's transformation of the string quartet dates to 1772 when he wrote the six Op. 20 quartets. At that stage Haydn, age 40, had been Kapellmeister at the amazing palace of Prince Nicholas Esterházy for six years. The prince lavished his considerable wealth on creating an architectural masterpiece and artistic hub; a haven with expansive gardens, an opera house, a museum and much more. His staff included a 25-piece orchestra. Haydn directed the musicians and composed prolifically for them. Among the musicians and friends with Haydn at Esterházy were two excellent cellists, Joseph Weigl and an internationally famous player Anton Kraft, who became principal cello when Weigl moved on. The orchestra's virtuoso leader, Luigi Tomasini, was also a great friend. Having such high-class musicians meant that there was little technical constraint on Haydn's compositional genius.

We should also remember that It was also a seminal time in European culture and Haydn was well aware of the new philosophies that were stirring the

Romantic movement; Rousseau, for example, espoused the idea of a return to nature and a ‘social contract’ that liberated the individual. The German poets Goethe and Schiller were following a similar track in a Sturm und Drang (“storm and stress”) movement – exalting nature and humanity’s essential individuality, and extremes of emotion – which was a reaction against Enlightenment rationality. For a time Haydn entered what we might call his Sturm und Drang period writing pieces that are dark in mood and full of intense drama.

In the course of the five years from 1768 to 1772 Haydn published three sets of quartets, Op 9 and 17 culminating in the six of Op. 20. Haydn’s genius was his discovery of what is obvious to us now but was entirely new then; that a string quartet has four independent voices, notably liberating the cello thanks to the virtuoso cellist Anton Craft. The technical facility of the players, Haydn’s extraordinary structural genius, his willingness to experiment, and a continuing maturing of his creative powers enabled him to explore the subtle development of his thematic material and above all its emotional implications. The Op 20 quartets transformed the string quartet for ever.

But then, he wrote no more quartets for a decade, until the Op 33 set was published in 1782. Probably all his energies were used directing the music for 50 operas (5 his own compositions) and various marionette theatre productions and hundreds of chamber music works for Prince Nikolaus to join in with at the Esterházy palace.
His return to writing symphonies and quartets may partly be due to an affair the unhappily married Haydn had with an attractive but not very good singer Luigia Polzelli. Prince Nikolaus retained her and her equally mediocre violinist husband for Haydn's sake. By 1780 energy flowed back and he started to compose symphonies and string quartets again. Haydn himself suggested in a personal letter to an intimate group of connoisseurs and potential subscribers that he had composed "brand new à quadro ... written in a new and special way, for I have not composed any for ten years". He was now fifty years old.

There is another important reason for the return to the quartet genre. For the first time in his long tenure at Esterházy Haydn was given the right to publish his music independently, on the open market. This historical moment corresponds with the growth of a nascent publishing industry in Vienna. The Op.33 quartets, written in the summer and autumn of 1781, were published by one of the Viennese publishers Artaria who would join the league of other international publishing houses in London, Paris, Amsterdam, etc. creating an international media network for new printed music. Within a short time, Haydn's quartets were on music stands all over Europe as exemplars of Viennese classical chamber music.
Perhaps with widening his marketing appeal in mind Haydn dedicated the set to the Grand Duke Paul of Russia (the son of Catherine the Great) – hence the common soubriquet for the set of six, the Russian quartets. Many (if not all) of the

quartets were premiered on Christmas Day, 1781, at the Viennese apartment of the Duke's wife, Grand Duchess Maria Feodorovna.

What clearly is 'new' about the Op.33 set is they are much more relaxed and confident than in the breakthrough Op 20s. In the new quartets Haydn challenged convention. They have, less Sturm und Drang, more major than minor and a variety of different finale forms replacing Op 20's intellectual fugues. Haydn created music that toyed with convention, surprised expectation, engaged players and listeners with fresh delight and made music that was more self-aware. These are the first quartets in which Haydn uses the title "Scherzo" for his minuet-derived dance movements, an Italian word meaning "joke". There is indeed a lot of humour in these quartets making the music naturally somewhat lighter, less serious and studious than the Op.20s. The tempi, particularly for most of the opening movements, are more moderate, even relaxed. There is time to converse, argue, sing, dance and play. Each movement of each quartet is a unique creation spanning the gamut of emotion, character and technical ingenuity while also maintaining a sense of balance within each quartet as a whole. And here, Haydn celebrates his realisation from the Op. 20 set of the ultimate conversational balance among four equal but equally distinct voices.

The Op 33 set appeared in Vienna just as the 26 year-old Mozart arrived there in pursuit of a freelance career. Almost certainly learning from his younger colleague Haydn digests Mozart's sparkling, spirited sound and brilliant themes. He finds a lighter touch in his musical imagination and with a finer pen creating a luminous quality in the scoring. Haydn's new quartets catalysed Mozart into writing more quartets of his own, resulting in the famous set of six that he dedicated to Haydn.

The Piece

The glorious first movement of No 3 in C major ('The Bird') has one of the most magical openings in all Haydn. Against the softly pulsing second violin and viola, the first violin steals in with a soft sustained high G, grows increasingly animated (with a hint of birdsong?) and then plunges down two octaves against an ardent rising cello line. It is also characteristic of the 'new' Haydn that these first small motifs become expanded through the whole quartet; here small grace notes become more elaborated and charming; more bird-like, perhaps a finch.

The second movement is marked Scherzo but begins in darkness despite the 'bright' key of C major. This is not a 'joke' because the tenderly veiled music turns into a hymn or prayer, with the four instruments playing sotto voce on their lowest strings. Suddenly it is sunrise welcomed by an early bird's chirping from the first violin in the Trio with light accompaniment on the second violin. Not what we might expect from a scherzo but this is the new Haydn full of surprises and enigmas. 50 bars of genius.

The serene, warmly textured Adagio, in condensed sonata form (with a brief transition instead of a central development), surely left its mark on the slow movement of Mozart's 'Dissonance' Quartet, K465, in the same key. Instead of literally repeating the first section, Haydn varies it with floridly expressive figuration for the first violin.

The rondo finale is Haydn at his most playful. Its manic refrain, oscillating obsessively between G and E, derives from a Slavonic folk dance. After the tune has tumbled down from first violin to cello, Haydn swerves into an impassioned episode in Hungarian gypsy style. But the mood is quickly punctured by the irrepressible, hyperactive folk tune. The coda is pure slapstick, with a fragment of the theme bandied about between upper and lower instruments before the music seems to disappear into thin air.

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
String Quartet No 1 in D Major Op. 11 (1871)
Moderato e semplice (D major)
Andante cantabile (B-flat major)
Scherzo and Trio: Allegro non tanto e con fuoco (D minor)
Finale. Allegro giusto (D major)

Unlike many great musicians, Tchaikovsky was not a child prodigy. Up to his early twenties he expected to take up a civil-service career. Fortunately, he found his calling when he began taking classes at the new music school in St. Petersburg founded by Anton Rubinstein. After leaving the St. Petersburg Conservatory, he embarked on a career that involved teaching at the even newer music conservatoire at Moscow, writing music criticism, and composing. His string quartets all date from what might be called his first creative period; the late 1860s to the early 1870s. Prominent pieces from those years include the orchestral fantasia Romeo and Juliet, the first three symphonies, the B-Flat Minor Piano Concerto, and his first ballet, Swan Lake.

Although the works from this period were mostly successful they did not provide immediate financial security. Tchaikovsky's life as a fulltime composer of independent means would not begin until 1876 when Nadezhda von Meck, a wealthy, music-loving widow, took particular interest in Tchaikovsky's symphonic fantasia The Tempest. The stipend she granted Tchaikovsky freed him from money worries although, famously, they never met.

But this was still in the future; in 1871 Tchaikovsky decided to supplement his modest income from teaching and journalism by staging a concert of his own works in Moscow. The programme featured piano works, a group of songs, and the new String Quartet. No.1 in D major. The pianist at the oncert was Nikolai

Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky's mentor at the Moscow Conservatory. The string players were members of the Russian Musical Society, led by another Moscow faculty member.

Newspaper critic Herman Laroche raved, "Tchaikovsky's compositions revealed a rich and sympathetic talent. The String Quartet was distinguished by the same delightfully succulent melodies, beautifully and interestingly harmonized, the same mobility of tone — so foreign to the commonplace — the same . . . softness, to which we have become accustomed in this gifted composer."

The first movement, marked Moderato e semplice, is a bit slower than most Classical-Romantic opening movements. Two themes, the second announced by the viola, intertwine and contrast throughout, accentuated by syncopated rhythms. The development gives full flight to the contrapuntal lines, bringing them to the foreground against the background of the original syncopated theme sped up as a pulsating accompaniment. A wonderfully dense but crystal clear texture reaches a climax before the return of opening material. A brilliant coda maximizes the long line of acceleration culminating with an extended sequence of rapid D major chords, the original syncopated rhythm pushed as fast as the music allows. The second movement Andante cantabile reflects Tchaikovsky's love of Russian folk music about which he wrote to Mme. von Meck. The main theme comes from a tune called "Vanya sat on the divan and smoked a pipe of tobacco" (or, in another translation, "Vanya one night sat sadly on the divan, a glass of rum in his hand, to drown his sorrow and forget tomorrow"). He heard a gardener singing it while visiting his sister at his favourite country retreat in the Ukraine, a family estate called Kamenka. The music alternates between the folk theme and a contrasting section of Tchaikovsky's own inspiration that is instantly recognizable as characteristic of the composer. This lovely little dream has been transcribed for numerous instrumental combinations as a separate, stand-alone piece (including a version dear to the hearts of cellists that Tchaikovsky arranged for cello and orchestra).

All other themes in the quartet are the composer's own, though some may also have been influenced by his affection for folksong. Like his Bohemian contemporary, Antonin Dvořák Tchaikovsky was usually not inclined toward direct quotations of folksongs; he preferred instead to compose new melodies that recall folk music without precisely emulating it.

The Scherzo matches the heartfelt folk song of the slow movement with a vigorous peasant dance. It is heavy with unison playing, sharp rhythmic accents, strong dynamics and the stout severity of a minor key. The trio is a curious combination of frivolity and ponderous chromaticism (music is chromatic when it uses more than just the seven notes of an octave) and then returns to the animated Scherzo.

The Finale again reveals Tchaikovsky's love for folk music. Each of its two main themes is reminiscent of folksong melodies. As with the first movement, Tchaikovsky spotlights the viola by having it introduce the second theme.

The Finale is a combination of sonata and rondo form full of bristling vigour, wonderful quartet textures, unmistakable touches of Tchaikovsky's lyrical drama and tinged with a distinctly Russian character. It is one of Tchaikovsky's finest chamber music movements. With its poise, balance and concision, it is utterly classical in the true sense of the word. In fact, it is oddly reminiscent of the string quartet music of Tchaikovsky's greatest musical idol; Mozart.

The concert that introduced the Quartet No. 1 was an unqualified success and gave the emerging composer some much-needed recognition. A touch of prestige was added by the attendance of Ivan Turgenev, the prominent 19th century Russian novelist. Another acclaimed novelist of the day also plays a part in the First Quartet's history: Leo Tolstoy is said to have burst into tears when he first heard the Andante Cantabile. A thoroughly Romantic-era reaction, perhaps, but also a testament to the power of Tchaikovsky's melodic gifts.

INTERVAL

Antonin Dvořák
String Quintet in E flat major, Op. 97

From 1892 to 1895, Dvořák served as director of a new educational institution in New York City, the National Conservatory of Music, a predecessor to Juilliard. Desperately homesick for Bohemia, he sought relief by spending the summers of 1893 and 1894 in Spillville, Iowa. The town boasted a large Czech community, mainly farmers. He had intended to go back to Bohemia for the summer of 1893 but instead he and his family went on an extended excursion to Omaha, Nebraska, the Niagara Falls and the Columbian World Exhibition in Chicago. Dvořák was a keen train-spotter and took the Chicago Express which he had watched departing from 155th Street station. After a journey lasting thirty-six hours Dvořák arrived in Spillville on 5 June 1893, together with his wife and their six children.

His stay in Spillville refreshed his roots and inspired his productivity. In the three months of 1893, he composed two of his greatest chamber works – the 'American' String Quartet and the String Quintet in E Flat Major, which we hear this evening. He completed the quartet, on 29 June, and launched into the companion-piece scored for string quintet; string quartet and an additional viola. These two compositions are among his finest. They both embody his intense, lifetime love of chamber music, his mature mastery of classical form intricacies, and his revolutionary commitment to folk melody, achieving passionate emotional

tension. They celebrate the joy of life while also exhibiting the profound grief that the death of his children had produced.
As a musical romantic and a committed Czech nationalist, Dvořák felt keenly that great music can grow from the healthy soil of native folk music. Early in his visit to the US he took an interest in both African-American and Native American music. Deeply moved by the tradition of singing spirituals. But with the exception of an adaptation in the first movement of the New World Symphony of Swing Low Sweet Chariot, the themes in Dvořák's 'American' works – including Goin Home were original to the composer.

The truth is that there is not a lot that is truly 'American' in these compositions. Dvořák's knowledge of African-American and Native American music was superficial. He said so himself in letters to friends at home. Actually, the common thread among these otherwise diverse idioms is their use of pentatonic themes – that is, melodies built on a scale of five intervals (as opposed to the seven of the major and minor scales) with no half-steps. While pentatonic melody is characteristic of African-American spirituals, it is also found in the folk music of such diverse countries as Scotland, Russia, China and central Europe. In fact, Dvořák had first heard pentatonic music as a boy in Bohemia, and had used it in his own music long before coming to the US.

He continued to use pentatonic themes and other recurrent folk devices in the music he composed in America and Czech listeners understandably heard in his "American" works similarities with their own music. This ambiguity applies to the 'Native American' dance rhythms often heard in his String Quintet. While in Spillville, Dvořák was fascinated by a travelling troupe of Iroquois Indians who used their songs and dances to attract buyers for their herbal medicines. And, sure enough, three of the quintet's movements feature repeated drum-like dotted (long-short) rhythms. But he had used persistent dotted rhythms in music written well before landing in New York.

On balance, then, we can conclude that while Dvořák was sensitive to elements common to American and Czech music, he did not know enough about the various American folk idioms to make deliberate use of them. The most one can safely say is that his existing inclination toward persistent dotted rhythms and pentatonic melodies was stimulated by what he heard in the US., and that he combined these elements with his characteristic Bohemian folk idiom. The music that he wrote in the US, in other words, is not particularly 'American' in origin but was shaped by his experiences there blend Czech and American influences and refined by his own remarkable originality.

What is not in doubt is that the string quartet and the quintet Dvořák wrote at Spillville are masterpieces, among his finest works embodying his intense love of chamber music, his mastery of the intricacies of the classical form and above all his revolutionary commitment to folk melody which gave his music such a

passionate emotional impact – celebrating the joy of life while exhibiting his profound grief at the early death of three of his nine children.

The Piece

The quintet begins with a long slow introduction in which the second viola anticipates the principal theme. Eventually the first violin introduces the theme, a pentatonic melody but with more Bohemian flavour than African-American. Dvořák then introduces the possibly Indian drumming rhythm over which the second violin presents the second theme. The rhythm then pervades the development.
The second viola opens the second movement, a scherzo but in duple rhythm, with another Indian-like drumbeat pattern. A number of strains, again more of Czech than Native American character, are blended in. The middle section, in a contrasting minor mode, is slower and more melancholy.

The third movement is a theme with five variations. The theme actually has two strains – one in the minor mode and one in the major. According to one source, the second strain was based on Dvořák's sketch for a new American national anthem using the familiar words "My country, 'tis of thee." Try it – the words fit.

The finale is a rondo with the main theme in the dotted rhythm of the first movement. There are two contrasting episodes, the second of which one writer called "Bohemian" and another described as "typically American." Following the subtleties of the slow movement, the rumbustious finale brings us down to earth with a bump.