

EVENT TWO

CONCERT BY FESTIVAL ARTISTS

Friday 19 September – 7:30pm
National Centre for Early Music,
St Margaret's Church, Walmgate



Charlotte Scott,
Jonathan Stone (violins)
Hélène Clément,
Gary Pomeroy (violas)
Jonathan Aasgaard, Tim Lowe (cellos)
Katya Apekisheva (piano)

Joseph Haydn

String Quartet in D Major, Op. 76 No.5 'Largo'

Allegretto – Allegro; Largo: Cantabile e mesto; Menuetto: Allegro; Finale: Presto

The Opus 76 set of six quartets were the last set Haydn wrote and arguably contain the greatest of his quartets moving the genre forward in scale and virtuosity, all six quartets unequivocal masterpieces. They have their origin with the death of his patron Prince Nicholas Esterházy. Haydn was free to accept the impresario Salomon's offer to spend a year in London. What Haydn discovered there was nothing like the rarefied, intimate salon of the Esterházy court but in the Hanover Square Rooms a hall which seated up to 600 in comfort, buzzing with all sorts of people, attentive and excited. For this new setting Haydn conjured two sets of string quartets (Opus 71 and Opus 74); with clear textures, virtuosic playing - especially the first violin – brilliant and wonderfully tuneful; attention grabbing!

On his return to Vienna from his second visit to London, he found himself in the middle of a political crisis with the city under threat of invasion from the post-revolutionary French Republican armies. A civilian militia had been mobilized to protect the city. The immediate threat faded and Haydn's creative energy carried forward to the quartets of Op. 76, written between 1796 and 1797. He brought into these quartets all his long, mature understanding of the inner life of the string quartet, played by virtuoso professional musicians and a heightened sense of musical emotion. These quartets defined the future of the string quartet for years to come and are the pinnacle of Haydn's lifetime's output of 68 string quartets. Even the super-confident Beethoven held back (not for long) from writing string quartets respectful of Haydn's gift.

Op.76 No. 5 opens with a surprise: rather than a dramatic introduction or a terse theme. Haydn begins with a moderately-paced lyrical "song" in a text-book two-part form initially sounding more like a slow movement placed first. Extremely unusual for Haydn's string quartets, the movement turns out to be a loose and fanciful theme and variations with the little song accelerating with a champagne-like energy. The quartet has been nicknamed *Largo* after the particularly beautiful slow movement. It amply lives up to the tempo and character directions in its title *Largo: Cantabile e mesto* (*singing and melancholy*) is perfectly reflected in music that sings heartfelt and hymn-like in a major key but then

darkens into a minor key by turns of phrase in a musical chiaroscuro. It is surely one of Haydn's greatest creations.

A short third-movement minuet and trio follows. The minuet marked as allegro with the qualifier "not too much" seems consistent with the first two movements in sustaining a kind of elegant gentility, then the minuet gives way to a slightly sinister trio featuring a rumbling wave in the cello and a surprisingly complex texture made from a diversity of independent figurations. Any sense of moderation or genteel restraint is immediately obliterated by the hijinks of the finale, an action packed romp with a unique, freewheeling design. The violin and cello take off, dashing up and down scales, around cadences and leaping with surprising modulations in a breathless chase with an ending that could hardly be further away from the gentilities of the Esterházy court where his output of 68 string quartets began over three decades earlier.

Dimitri Shostakovich **String Quartet No. 8 in C minor, opus 110**

In his 15 string quartets, written mostly towards the end of his life, Shostakovich composed music that conveyed his innermost thoughts and emotions, where he poured out his soul. The music is often autobiographical and is replete with deep cultural references.

Shostakovich's *String Quartet No. 8 in C minor* comprises a mere twenty minutes of non-stop music, written in three days in 1960 as a distraction from a project to write a film score about the Dresden fire bombings of World War Two (*Five Days – Five Nights*). In a letter, Shostakovich sarcastically dismissed the quartet as an "ideological piece of no use to anyone". Privately, he described it as a eulogy for himself, an epitaph close relations called a suicide note. The work has since become one of the most important string quartets of the 20th century, well known, frequently performed, extensively discussed. Vivid, dramatic, mesmerizing and devastating, this compact but dense quartet contains a lifetime of music: the life and music of Dmitri Shostakovich.

As other composers have done, Shostakovich wrote his name into his music. He used the initials DSCH from the German transliteration of his name (**D**mitri **SCH**ostakovich). In German music notation, the letters spell a four note musical motive, D, E-flat (S), C, B (H). This musical theme saturates the entire quartet, appearing in numerous, immediately recognizable transformations throughout the texture from violin to cello, from melody to accompaniment. It provides the first four notes of the quartet, and a primary element of the first movement. It flashes constantly as a frightening ostinato throughout the violent second movement, mockingly dances in the main melody of the macabre scherzo, languishes in the trio, and ultimately becomes the main subject of a heart-breaking fugue in the finale. Seemingly absent from the apocalyptic fourth movement (it surfaces once at the end as a transition), the motive is disguised within the main theme, a twisted inversion of itself that ends abruptly with three devastating notes variously described as the knock of the KGB, the bombs of warfare or the arrival of tragic fate.

Perhaps the most elusive aspect of his music is not only his self-quotation but also an echo deep within the music of other cultural references. Inside the Eighth Quartet there is something that suggests a ghost reference to Richard Strauss's string masterpiece *Metamorphosen*, Shostakovich's official role was writing music for the Soviet film about the evisceration of Dresden, remembering that Strauss was heartbroken at the destruction of the cultural capital of the Weimar republic. And so in a parallel universe, shared themes of loss, anguish and horror in *Metamorphosen* hover over the Eighth Quartet, barely perceptible, veiled through a glass darkly. Such is the music of the genius Russian composer as he trod his precarious steps through the USSR's cultural nightmare.

Arnold Schoenberg String Sextet *Verklärte Nacht* (Transfigured Night) Op. 4

The young Schoenberg's string sextet *Verklärte Nacht* (Transfigured Night) is a late-Romantic outpouring of intense, sensual emotion for he had recently fallen head over heels in love with his future wife Mathilde Zemlinsky. *Verklärte Nacht* was inspired by a poem of the same name by Richard Dehmel – a progressive German poet. Schoenberg's composition tracks the poem's story. This unusual combination of chamber music with programmatic content was intended by Schoenberg to reconcile the compositional practices of Brahms and Wagner. In the latter decades of the Nineteenth Century Chamber music in the German-speaking world was a genre dominated by Brahms and *Verklärte Nacht* has a strong resonance of this with its abstract development of motifs – as well as the harmonic language of Wagner, the great story teller. In 1899 Brahms was still in living memory - dead only two years – and if anything more influential after his death. But the piece also points strongly to the modernist aesthetic which Schoenberg championed against the stagnant, commercialized, popular culture that dominated fin de siècle Vienna, his native city. His discovery of a volume of Dehmel's poetry of *Weib und Welt* (Woman and World) opened his eyes to modernist themes of transformation implying that modernity and innovation were essential to cultural change.

Schoenberg's string sextet sets Dehmel's poem of the same name to music, tracing a walk of two lovers through the night as she explains that she is pregnant by another man. The hushed, still opening depicts the cold moonlight and the walking couple. This section eventually dissolves and, after a pause, a muted cello plays a new theme "with painful expression," against tremolos in the second violin and viola. This represents the woman's unhappiness. The following section, which becomes increasingly agitated and declamatory, conveys the woman's explanation of her situation, and her fears about the man's reaction. The only respite is a brief, calm passage in the major mode, expressing the consolations of motherhood. After reaching an intense highpoint, this section also subsides into silence.

A few very quiet chords prepare for the second half, which bursts into a clear and unexpected D major. A quartet of violas and cellos, with the first cello playing the melody, provides a warm, rich sonority for the man's response. This is followed by a magical passage in which muted harmonics and whispering scales depict the beauty of the moonlight. From this a love duet emerges in which the first violin and first cello trade four-note figures. The section continues with a series of lyrical new themes, the most ecstatic of which represents the man's acceptance of the child. The piece ends very softly with the "bare, cold wood" of the opening transfigured into a "high, bright night".

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