

Piatti Quartet

Tuesday 19 September 8pm

Schubert Quartet in C minor, D703 *Quartettsatz*
Dvořák Quartet No 12 in F, Op 96 *American*
Charlotte Harding *Iorsa* (Piatti commission)
Smetana Quartet No 1 in E minor *From my life*



Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Quartet movement in C minor, D703 *Quartettsatz*

During Schubert's lifetime, he was primarily known as a composer of lieder and his posthumous recognition in the realm of chamber music and the symphony was due initially to the advocacy of Robert Schumann from the 1830s. Schubert's three final piano sonatas remained unpublished for over ten years after his death while, inconceivably, the popular String Quintet in C waited until 1850 for its first performance. When, twenty years later, his *Quartettsatz* was finally issued, the composer had been dead for over forty years.

Completed in 1820 (a year that generated some 20 songs, the melodrama *Die Zauberharfe* and an abandoned cantata *Lazarus*), the *Quartettsatz* was originally conceived in a conventional four movement design but abandoned just forty-one bars into an 'Andante', Schubert seemingly losing interest. Why he

began this quartet never to complete it remains as much a mystery, as does the unexplained incomplete Symphony in B minor and some half a dozen discarded piano sonatas. Like the 'Unfinished', the music is not diminished by its brevity and has sufficient musical stature in its sonata form framework to work successfully as a stand-alone piece.

The movement opens with a bustling semi-quaver figure (more an agitated introduction than a theme) leading effortlessly into a secondary idea of sunny lyricism given to the first violin and supported by a gentle throbbing accompaniment. After a stormy interlude, with fiery ascending scales, there follows a tortuous third idea above a *pizzicato* (plucked) cello. A succinct development follows, after which all three ideas return to complete a single movement distinguished by supreme assurance and passionate expression.

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet No 12 in F, Op 96 *American*

1 Allegro ma non troppo

2 Lento

3 Scherzo: Molto vivace

4 Vivace ma non troppo

The chamber music of Antonin Dvořák forms one of the most treasured collections of the Romantic repertoire – its music soars and dances with a wonderful vitality that has rarely been matched. Much of this derives from his preoccupation with folk music from his native Bohemia, where hardly a phrase passes without some reference to its melodic contours and rhythmic idiosyncrasies. These traits were brilliantly mirrored in the composer's Slavonic Dances of 1878 which brought him widespread recognition and, in America, the attention of Mrs Jeannette Thurber, the widow of a millionaire grocer and recent founder of New York's National Conservatory of Music. It was to this institution that she invited Dvořák to become its director in 1891, wishing to appoint a figure of international standing and hoping that an illustrious musician would stimulate a new generation of composers and create an American national style. As an inducement she offered him the staggering annual salary of \$15,000, some 25 times his current income in Prague. For this stipend he was to receive four months' summer leave in exchange for three hours of daily teaching and six annual concerts. In addition, there would be guest-conducting appearances and commissions for new works which would include his symphony 'From the New World', the Cello Concerto, the Te Deum and this much-loved Quartet.

The work was composed in 1893 during a summer vacation taken with his family at the immigrant Czech community of Spillville in north-east Iowa. It developed at an extraordinary speed, progressing from a sketch made between the 8th and 10th of June to its completion on the 23rd. 'Thanks be to the Lord God', wrote Dvořák at the end of the score, adding that although written in America it was 'genuine Bohemian music'. Cast in four movements, the energetic first abounds in a freshly minted spontaneity built on its principal theme of buoyant rhythms and pentatonic contours. Two further melodies enrich the movement's lyricism and return after a restless central panel. Dvořák's thoughts of home are conveyed in the nostalgia of the serenade-like

'Lento' set in motion by a deeply felt song passed from first violin to cello. Two passionate outbursts interrupt its gentle rumination. The 'Scherzo' comprises a set of miniature variations based on birdsong heard at Spillville, its chirruping figure given in augmented form during two minor key episodes. A dance-like main theme, offset by a central chorale-like passage, occupies the unbuttoned rondo finale and mirrors the relaxed mood in which the Quartet was composed.

Charlotte Harding (b.1989)

lorsa

Following studies with Mark-Anthony Turnage at the Royal College of Music, Charlotte Harding has established herself as an award-winning composer, orchestrator and saxophonist. Her compositional path has drawn on classical and cross-genre influences and fuses bold rhythmic statements with evocative melodic lines. Amongst her diverse works her concerto for soprano saxophone has enjoyed performances in Australia, France and Germany. *lorsa*, one of her more recent works, was a co-commission by the Piatti String Quartet and the Three Choirs Festival and received its first performance at Holy Trinity Church, Hereford in July 2022. It is a short effective work that transports the listener to the windswept and rugged Glen lorsa on the isle of Arran.

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)

String Quartet No 1 in E minor *From my Life*

1 Allegro vivo appassionato

2 Allegro moderato a la Polka

3 Largo sostenuto

4 Vivace

It seems to be the lot of certain composers, most obviously Beethoven and Schubert, that their best musical work should arise from personal misfortune. In Smetana's case there were the deaths of three of his infant children and first wife, an embittered second marriage and later the onset of deafness, the gradual loss of speech and memory and, if that wasn't enough, incarceration in an asylum where he died aged sixty. Financial instability and a mixed reception for many of his compositions were additional burdens. Yet despite his struggles Smetana emerged as a successful

opera composer and following a performance of *The Bartered Bride* in 1870 he was hailed as the father-figure of the Czech nationalist school of composition.

In the decade following his operatic achievements Smetana wrote his two string quartets, adding a pair of wonderful works to the corpus of quartet literature. But in 1874, at the age of fifty, he experienced a variety of hearing problems, including high-pitched notes resulting from the onset of tinnitus. His hearing quickly deteriorated and by the end of the year he had become permanently deaf. Two years later his first quartet emerged and while its four-movement scheme was entirely conventional its autobiographical subtitle, 'From My Life', was entirely novel. Smetana said of his own first quartet that 'it is more a remembrance of my life and the catastrophe of deafness'. However, its content influenced its design and was made known to a friend two years after its completion; 'My intention was to paint a tone picture of my life. The first movement depicts my youthful leanings toward art, the Romantic atmosphere, the inexpressible yearning for something I could neither express nor define, and also a kind of warning of my future misfortune . . . The long insistent note in the finale owes its origin to this.

It is the fateful ringing in my ears of the high-pitched tones which in 1874 announced the beginning of my deafness. I permitted myself this little joke, because it was so disastrous to me'.

'The second movement, a quasi-polka, recalls the joyful days of youth when I composed dance tunes and was known everywhere as a passionate lover of dancing. The third movement . . . reminds me of the happiness of my first love, the girl who later became my wife. The fourth movement describes the discovery that I could treat national elements in music and my joy in following this path until it was checked by the catastrophe of the onset of my deafness, the outlook into the sad future, the tiny rays of hope of recovery, but remembering all the promise of my early career, a feeling of painful regret'.

As a vehicle that conveys the universal struggle between the individual artist and man's destiny this quartet amply demonstrates Smetana's ability to rise above adversity and produce music of great drama and sparkling imagination.

David Truslove, 2023



Gavin Bryars Ensemble Tuesday 3 October 8pm

The influential British composer Gavin Bryars brings his Ensemble to Turner Sims in his 80th birthday year. He presents a programme built around two of his greatest works.

Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet began with a discarded recording of an unknown homeless man singing unaccompanied. Gavin set about building an exquisite, swelling arrangement of brass and strings around it, a process that he has likened to setting a jewel. Inspired by the story that the ship's band continued to perform as it slid beneath the waves, *The Sinking of the Titanic* imagines how the sound would reverberate through the medium of water.



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Piatti Quartet

Michael Trainor violin

Emily Holland violin

Miguel Sobrinho viola

Jessie Ann Richardson cello

The distinguished Piatti Quartet are widely renowned for their 'profound music making' (The Strad) and their 'lyrical warmth' (BBC Music Magazine). Since their prizewinning performances at the 2015 Wigmore Hall String Quartet Competition, they have performed all over the world and made international broadcasts from many countries. The Piatti Quartet is Resident Quartet at Kings Place in London.

The Piattis are famed for their diverse programming and for passionate interpretations across the spectrum of quartet writing and have commissioned and recorded some of the most major and impressive works added to the quartet canon in recent years.

Since their inception they have always had projects in the recording studio with critically acclaimed releases. Accolades in 2023 include Gramophone's 'Editor's Choice for the Month' with NMC, a five-star review from BBC Music Magazine with Delphian and in 2022 they were nominated for 'Recording of the Year' with both Limelight and Gramophone for their collaborative disc on the Hyperion label. Their wide-ranging discography and repertoire is thanks to their enthusiasm and curiosity in collaborating with a broad range of artists including some of the most recognisable names in classical music such as Nicky Spence, Julius Drake, Michael Collins, Barry Douglas, Ian Bostridge, Katherine Broderick, and the Belcea Quartet to name a few.

Contemporary music has been ever present in their repertoire and leaving a legacy to the quartet genre through commissions is one of the quartet's central tenets. Major commissions and dedications have stemmed from Mark-Anthony Turnage, Emily Howard, Charlotte Harding, and Joseph Phibbs whilst they have premiered a mesmerising number of new works over the years beginning with Anna Meredith back in 2009. The Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Flagey Radio Hall Brussels, Wigmore Hall London, and the Aldeburgh Festival are some of the high-profile occasions where new music has been presented and recordings of Turnage's quartets 1 - 4 and Gavin Higgins' chamber music has also been extensively lauded by critics.

Historical research into quartet music that has been undiscovered or deserves to be better known has led to the premiere recording of Ina Boyle's (Ireland) SQ in E minor, and performances of lesser-known quartet gems by Ralph Vaughan Williams, E.J. Moeran, Rachmaninov, Ireland, Haas, Ulmann, and Durosoir.

The quartet's name is dedicated to Alfredo Piatti, a 19th Century virtuoso cellist who was a professor at the Royal Academy of Music (the alma mater of the founders of the quartet) and also a major exponent of chamber music and contemporary music of his time.

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