Gildas Quartet

Thursday 25 September 7:30pm

Tom Aldren violin
Gemma Sharples violin
Christine Anderson viola
Anna Menzies cello

Jessie Montgomery 'Strum'
Beethoven String Quartet No 9 in C, Op 59 No 3 'Rasumovsky'
Shostakovich String Quartet No 8 in C minor, Op 110 (from memory)

Jessie Montgomery (b.1981) 'Strum'

This work is the culminating result of several versions of a string quintet I wrote in 2006. It was originally written for the Providence String Quartet and guests of Community MusicWorks Players, then arranged for string quartet in 2008 with several small revisions. In 2012 the piece underwent its final revisions with a rewrite of both the introduction and the ending for the Catalyst Quartet in a performance celebrating the 15th annual Sphinx Competition.

Originally conceived for the formation of a cello quintet, the voicing is often spread wide over the ensemble, giving the music an expansive quality of sound. Within 'Strum' I utilised texture motives, layers of rhythmic or harmonic ostinati that string together to form a bed of sound for melodies to weave in and out. The strumming pizzicato serves as a 'texture motive' and the primary driving rhythmic underpinning of the piece. Drawing on American folk idioms and the spirit of dance and movement, the piece has a kind of narrative that begins with fleeting nostalgia and transforms into ecstatic celebration.

Jessie Montgomery

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
String Quartet in C, Op 59, No 3

1 Introduzione: Andante con moto – Allegro vivace
2 Andante con moto quasi allegretto
3 Menuetto: Grazioso
4 Allegro molto

By the time Beethoven moved to Vienna in 1792 he had the rare distinction of enjoying life as a freelance musician, unfettered by any court appointment as Kapellmeister. He soon cultivated numerous aristocratic patrons (some of whom were friends and pupils) whose commissions provided a measure of financial security. Indeed, most of his seventeen string quartets were commissioned works. Of these, Prince Lobkovitz was the dedicatee behind the Op 18 and Op 74 quartets, while the Russian cellist Prince Galitzin had commissioned three of the last five works in 1822. Many years earlier Count Rasumovsky, the Russian ambassador to the Imperial Court in Vienna, commissioned the three Op 59 quartets.

The Count was also a keen quartet player (playing second violin), and in tribute to him Beethoven included Russian folksongs in the first two of the Op 59 quartets, and some commentators have discerned a Russian flavour in the mournful slow movement of the third. Beethoven was particularly impressed by the Count's musical sophistication, and an audience at the Rasumovsky palace could be expected to listen to chamber music with an appreciative ear. But the world was not yet ready for the radical thinking behind the Op 59 quartets, and when a renowned violinist informed him that they were 'not music', Beethoven is said to have replied, 'Oh, they're not for you, but for a later age!'. In between the four years that separate his Op 18 quartets, Beethoven had expanded his horizons and transformed the medium with a new intensity of expression way beyond anything previously conceived.

Following the dissonant opening chord of Op 59/ 3, the ensuing 28 bars are startling for their seeming inertia and sense of mystery, both generated by the 'pianissimo' marking and the ambiguous harmonies that seem to grope towards a distant light. These tensions are swept away, if not entirely resolved, in a resolute 'Allegro vivace', with the first violin launching a skipping pattern that wouldn't be out of place in a concerto. There follows a tautly constructed sonata form movement brimming with lively, if fragmentary, ideas derived from the earlier cadential rhythm linking the two sections.

For the brooding 'Andante', Beethoven turns to A minor and underpins its flowing melody with a throbbing 'pizzicato' bass line. If its melancholy suggests a Russian influence, real or imitated, there is something unnerving about the movement's obsessively repeated rhythms and periodic stabbing accents. Relief from the prevailing sobriety (or is it anxiety resulting from his increasing deafness?) is achieved via brief tonal excursions into bright, major keys. The succeeding 'Menuetto: Grazioso' amply fulfils its title (a graceful minuet) with a lightness of touch, becoming more animated for the central Trio with its abrupt key changes and driving rhythms before relaxing for an enigmatic Coda. As if to cast aside any lurking uncertainties, the finale is an extraordinary 'tour de force' of string writing. The sheer exuberance of this fugal movement is remarkable even for Beethoven, and its dizzying virtuosity must have astonished those present at its first performance.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)
String Quartet No 8 in C minor, Op 110

1 Largo

2 Allegro molto
3 Allegretto
4 Largo
5 Largo

By the time Shostakovich attempted his First String Quartet in 1938 he had lived through thirty years of extraordinary political upheaval: the overthrow of the Tsar, a Bolshevik coup and the arrival of communism, first under Lenin, then Stalin, whose repressive cultural regime was to have far-reaching, and in some cases terminal, repercussions for all Soviet artists. Whilst still a student at the Moscow Conservatoire he had achieved international acclaim with his First Symphony and made his mark as a pianist as a competitor in the First International Chopin Competition. Not least, there was a growing portfolio of concerto, ballet, theatre and film music. But his growing success foundered in 1936 when 'Pravda', the official organ of the communist party, issued an attack on his highly successful opera 'Lady Macbeth of Mstensk District', notoriously condemned by Stalin as 'Muddle instead of music'.

His political standing recovered after the success of his Fifth Symphony, from which period he turned to the first of what were to be fifteen string quartets. These would create the necessary release from writing patriotic scores and be an outlet for the expression of his most private thoughts. Not since the late quartets of Beethoven had the medium been a vehicle for such personal introspection. In their emotional ambivalence Shostakovich's quartets mirror his precarious relationship within Russia's turbulent political regime. Taken as a collection, they stand as one of the great monuments of twentieth-century music, viewed by his compatriot Sofia Gubaidulina as the 'epitome of the tragedy and terror of our times'.

It would be hard to miss the sense of pessimism within many of these works, where often the most unclouded passages bring only a wintry sun. Likewise, the glow of major keys may be undermined by chromatic or oddly misshapen melodies, and sonorities dulled variously by mutes, pizzicato gestures and lean, pared-down textures. By contrast, one will hear savage, quasi-orchestral writing when the composer attempts to push the medium beyond its recognisable parameters. Aside from the hysteria and sullenness of the later works, an austere beauty inhabits a distinctive facet of the composer's musical personality.

The Eighth Quartet is by far the most frequently performed of the fifteen and was much influenced by the composer's traumatic visit to post-war Germany. In July 1960 he was sent with a film crew to Dresden to create a soundtrack for an East German documentary 'Five Days and Five Nights' commemorating the wartime devastation of the city. It was at the nearby spa town of Görlitz where, still in shock, he wrote the Quartet in just three days. He confided to a friend, 'however much I tried to draft my obligations for the film, I just couldn't do it. Instead, I wrote an ideologically flawed quartet that nobody needs'. Harrowing as that experience must have been, Shostakovich was also agonising over his induction into the Communist Party, a painful time for the composer and much reflected in the creative process of the Quartet.

Each of the five movements feature his personal monogram in which the notes D, E flat, C and B natural enshrine the composer's initials - transliterated in German as DSCH. They can be heard by the cello that launches the first movement's fugal opening paragraph built on the DSCH motto. After its imitative entries subside, the first violin introduces a sinuous idea over a drone bass, its chromatic line transformed by a magical change to C major. But it is the bleak four-note motif that haunts the movement. There can be few passages in his quartets as intensely visceral as the ensuing 'Allegro molto', its bitterness and

hysteria fixed onto a powerful sonata form design in which the signature motif (here a frantic cry for help) is developed and at one point augmented by the two violins in canon.

A sardonic 'Allegretto' follows beginning with a grotesque parody of the motto theme in waltz time. Its mood, apart from one sunlit bar (towards the end), is one of mocking despair. The fourth movement combines three new ideas; a series of percussive knocks, a slow folk song-like tune, similar in manner to a funeral oration and a beautiful bitter-sweet melody framed in a passage of rare calm. The motto theme leads to the second 'Largo'– a kind of prayer for peace – in which its fugal treatment of the four-note motif is now fully worked out, its consoling tone bringing a sense of closure to this deeply troubled work.

The Gildas Quartet, praised for their 'energy, verve and refreshing approach' have performed to critical acclaim at major venues including the Bridgewater Hall, Barbican, Wigmore Hall and live on BBC Radio 3. Their bold and explorative approach to performance has been recognised by the International Franz Schubert and Modern Music Competition, Graz, where they won first prize in the Audience Engagement Award 2018.

Determined to bring the visceral experience of string quartet performance to audiences at close quarters, the Gildas launched their immersive 'Surround Sound Sessions' project in Winter 2019. This series ranges from short one-work 'pop-up' concerts in unusual settings to full-length recitals, with the audience literally in the midst of the players, in surround sound. In May 2020, the Gildas Quartet received an award from the Help Musicians UK Do It Differently Fund, which supported the continuation of their Surround Sound Sessions project remotely, under the dramatically different circumstances that the pandemic brought about.

Passionate advocates of music from all periods, the Gildas have collaborated with many eminent British composers. The Quartet has been privileged to work with Sir Harrison Birtwistle, Colin Matthews and Michael Finnissy, and commissioned Philip Cashian's String Quartet No 2, which was premiered by the Quartet at the St Magnus Festival in Orkney. The quartet's recording of two works by Cheryl Frances-Hoad was released to critical acclaim on the Champs Hill label in 2020.

The Quartet has given recitals at international festivals such as Cheltenham, Lake District Summer Music and Oxford Lieder, as well as touring in Europe, China and South Africa. They are City Music Foundation Artists and former Junior Fellows at the Birmingham Conservatoire. They have frequently been featured by the Park Lane Group and are grateful for awards and support from the Arts Council, Britten Pears Foundation, Tunnell and Richard Carne Trusts.

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