

PROGRAMME NOTES

Friday 28 September 7.30pm

Maggini String Quartet

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) String Quartet in A, op.20 no.6

1. Allegro di molto e scherzando; 2. Adagio; 3 Minuet; 4. Fuga

In 1864, Prince Nikolaus Esterházy, a great lover of music and employer of Haydn, completed "the Hungarian Versailles", his monumental palace of Esterháza located south-east of Vienna. Its magnificence was counter-balanced by its being built on top of a swamp, its humidity, its "vexatious, penetrating north wind", its distance from Vienna and the obligation of the musicians (Haydn, as Kapellmeister, excepted) to leave their wives and families behind for many months.

Despite all this, Haydn produced operas, oratorios, and symphonic and chamber concerts, and wrote a steady stream of new music for the prince's amusement. In the palace, he blossomed as a composer as he stated he was "forced to become original" yet, from 1779, his reputation spread throughout Europe, he was lauded in the Austrian capital of Vienna and, from 1790, in London. His reputation had been huge in that city since about 1782, leading to the invitations to visit, compose and be lionised there.

In 1772 appeared the Opus 20 quartets, the third set of quartets Haydn wrote at Eszterháza. His reputation led to his being dubbed the "Father of the String Quartet" as he single-handedly brought it to pre-eminence amongst other instrumental chamber combinations prevalent at the time. Curiously, however, there is no record of a string quartet concert performed at the palace during this period, so his fecundity in the form is mysterious. The set became known as the "Sun" quartets, because of the picture of a rising sun that graced the cover of an early edition. The first known publication of the quartets was in 1774 by Chevardière in Paris and later by Artaria in Vienna.

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) String Quartet No.1 in G minor

1. Allegro moderato; 2. Minuet and Trio. Tempo di Minuetto;

3. Romance. Andante sostenuto; 4. Finale. Rondo capriccioso. Allegro molto

Vaughan Williams was born in 1872 in the Cotswold village of Down Ampney. He was educated at Charterhouse School, then Trinity College, Cambridge. Later he was a pupil of Stanford and Parry at the Royal College of Music after which he studied with Max Bruch in Berlin and Maurice Ravel in Paris. At the turn of the century he was among the very first to travel into the countryside to collect folk-songs and carols from singers, notating them for future generations to enjoy. As musical editor of *The English Hymnal* he composed several hymns that are now world-wide favourites (*For all the Saints, Come down O love Divine*). Later he also helped to edit *The Oxford Book of Carols*, with similar success.

Vaughan Williams volunteered to serve in the Field Ambulance Service in Flanders for the 1914–1918 war, during which he was deeply affected by the carnage and the loss of close friends such as the composer George Butterworth.

Before the war he had met and then sustained a long and deep friendship with the composer Gustav Holst. For many years Vaughan Williams conducted and led the Leith Hill Music Festival, conducting Bach's *St Matthew Passion* on a regular basis. He also became professor of composition at the Royal College of Music in London.

In his lifetime, Vaughan Williams eschewed all honours with the exception of the Order of Merit which was conferred upon him in 1938. He died in August 1958, his ashes are interred in Westminster Abbey, near Purcell.

In a long and productive life, music flowed from his creative pen in profusion. Hardly a musical genre was untouched or failed to be enriched by his work, which included nine symphonies, five operas, film music, ballet and stage music, several song cycles, church music and works for choir.

Vaughan Williams did not write much instrumental chamber music, his two string quartets lie about thirty years apart, the first completed in 1908 and revised in 1921. He completed tonight's 28-minute work, first after studying with Ravel (although a friend said it sounded more like he'd "been having tea with Debussy") and it does seem kin to Ravel's own quartet, though not at quite the same level of blazing masterpiece.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

String Quartet No.1 in E flat op.12

1. Adagio non troppo – Allegro non tardante; 2. Canzonetta: Allegretto; 3. Andante espressivo;
4. Molto allegro e vivace

Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg, on 3 February 1809, the son of Leah Salomon and Abraham Mendelssohn, a wealthy banker, and the grandson of the Jewish rabbi and philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn. Being born in a family of well-to-do intellectuals certainly had its advantages, providing the ideal cultural environment for the artistic and precocious young Felix. In addition to receiving a good education, Felix and his family travelled around Europe. In 1812, they moved from French-occupied Hamburg to Berlin, and converted to the Lutheran faith.

The move to Berlin proved to be beneficial for young Felix, (who had received prior musical instruction from his mother in 1815, then from his sister Fanny), as it was there he studied the piano under Ludwig Berger and composition with Karl. F. Zelter, from 1817. Visiting friends of the family were also a positive influence on the Mendelssohn children, as most of them were intellectuals who were involved in the arts and other cultural activities. From a young age, Felix Mendelssohn showed the true talent of a prodigy, playing both the piano and the violin, painting, and being gifted in languages, poetry, painting and sport. His first public appearance was on October 1818. Felix travelled to Paris to study under Marie Bigot the works of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Johann Sebastian Bach with his sister Fanny. He impressed audiences and artists alike with his precocious talent. By the age of 12 he had completed 12 string symphonies, five operas, and many other pieces for the piano.

In 1829, Mendelssohn made his *début* as a conductor, being the first to conduct Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* since the composer's death in 1750, and more importantly, 100 years after Bach's own premiere performance of the work. In the same year, he visited England for the first time and, during the years that followed, Mendelssohn travelled and performed all over Europe, discovering England, Scotland, Italy and France. In 1835, Mendelssohn moved to Leipzig and he became conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, performing works by Bach and Beethoven amongst others; at the time, there was little interest in Bach's music and it hadn't featured in the Gewandhaus concerts, but Mendelssohn changed all that, using his own popularity and the four hundred singers and soloists of the Singakademie to help renew interest in the great composer's work.

In November 1842, Mendelssohn founded and directed the Leipzig Conservatory, which opened in 1843, where he also sometimes taught when his busy schedule permitted it. The Conservatory remained one of the most prestigious music institutions in Germany for half a century.

The String Quartet No. 1 in E flat major, op.12, was composed in 1827, completed in London on 14 September and possibly dedicated to Betty Pistor, a neighbour and the daughter of a Berlin astronomer. It was his first published work and is part of that astonishing corpus of chamber works which he wrote as a teenager -- three piano quartets, the string octet, the first viola quintet and his first two string quartets (never mind the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream!*)

An interesting characteristic of this quartet, possibly a result of his Bach studies, possibly a reference to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, is the frequent bursts of recitative in the first violin part -- in the first, third and fourth movements -- making a personal, solitary utterance. The second movement comes from the same mould as the quicksilver fairy music of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the third is an operatic Song without Words and the fourth starts in C minor, tours a wide variety of keys before it settles properly into E flat major only in the coda. Before that, however, we have heard melodies from the first movement intrude and then dominate the movement, bringing a satisfying cyclical form to this work.