

Wethersfield Chamber Concerts

26 April 2015– 4pm

The Villiers Quartet String Quartet

PROGRAMME NOTES by John Woollard

Joseph Haydn (1810 – 1849) Quartet No. 53 in D major ("The Lark"), Op. 64, No. 5, Hob. III:63

1. Allegro moderato
2. Adagio. Cantabile
3. Menuetto. Allegretto
4. Finale. Vivace

Joseph Haydn's string quartets, Op. 64 is a set of six string quartets composed in 1790. Along with six earlier quartets published under the opus numbers 54 and 55, they are known as the Tost quartets, after the Hungarian violinist and later merchant Johann Tost.

It is believed that Tost was actually a violinist in Haydn's court orchestra at the palace of Count Esterházy until he left in 1788. By 1790 Tost was already wealthy and helped Haydn find a publisher for the works. Unlike the earlier quartets, Haydn actually dedicated the Op. 64 set to Tost in gratitude for his efforts.

In view of the fact that of the dedicatee, it is not surprising that, right from the opening where it plays the part of the supposed lark, the first violin is given greater prominence

than is usual with Haydn. Only the third movement maintains the equal distribution of material so characteristic of his mature quartet style.

In the first movement, the 'Lark' theme which starts the whole thing off soars skyward on the first violin above an earthbound accompaniment on the other instruments to furnish the first subject. After this, the rich expansion of the second subject is a wholly unexpected development, and its climax is succeeded by the most surprising stroke of all, as the first subject (the 'Lark' theme) sails calmly in once more and starts a brand new, and this time, closely condensed recapitulation. As other commentators have noted, 'Haydn never wrote another movement like it'.

The second movement is made up of an extended violin melody with a middle section in the minor key whose music is derived from the first section. The same key relationship is present in the minuet and trio, where similarly the trio is based on the melodic material of the minuet. The Finale is a sparkling moto perpetuo incorporating a fugal section in the minor key.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 - 1827) String Quartet in B flat major Op.18, No.6

1. Allegro con brio
2. Adagio ma non troppo
3. Scherzo: Allegro
4. La Malinconia: Adagio – Allegretto quasi allegro

Beethoven successfully staved off the pressure of high expectations that came with writing a string quartet through much of his first decade in Vienna. It wasn't until 1798 that Prince Lobkowitz (for whom Haydn also wrote string quartets) commissioned from Beethoven a set of six quartets that became Op. 18. The set was finished in 1801. While each Op. 18 quartet is highly inventive, Beethoven's equalization of part writing and his exploration of variations on a theme are particularly evident in No. 6.

No. 6 is Beethoven's answer to "Papa" Haydn, and we can hear this in the texture of the first movement, Allegro con brio. The movement begins rather modestly, the theme's importance growing as it moves through turn figures and elegantly dotted rhythms.

The second movement, Adagio ma non troppo, is truly exquisite – one of the most expressive of the composer's early slow movements. Its simplicity of form and major/minor contrasts among sections hold the listener's attention, as do the sudden swells in dynamics, and the

coda, which recalls the minor mode of the middle section. The Adagio comes to an end with two gentle pizzicato chords.

The Scherzo starts out like the tumbling act of a circus troupe – with syncopations and quick, bouncy surges. After two movements of basically straightforward rhythmic patterns, the Scherzo is a blast of vivacity and rhythmic eccentricity. Nevertheless, the heart of the quartet is the fourth movement, labelled La malinconia: Adagio; Allegretto quasi allegro.

Perhaps the only thing that could trump the rhythmic genius of the Scherzo is the stunning harmonic spectrum of this finale. The "Melancholy" introduction makes way for a merry 3/8 Allegretto. Then, suddenly, between measures 195-212, the Malinconia of the beginning and the Allegretto (Tempo I) begin an agitated trade off with one another, pulling the listener in two very different directions. Finally, the main Allegretto theme returns, though at a much-slowed Poco adagio leading into a Prestissimo (the fastest tempo marking found anywhere in Beethoven's works) that sweeps to the end in a rhythmic unison of fortissimo 16th notes.

----- Interval -----

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Mystery Work

To be introduced by the Quartet.

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) String Quartet No. 12 in F major, Op. 96, B. 179, American

1. Allegro ma non troppo
2. Lento
3. Molto vivace
4. Vivace ma non troppo

Antonín Dvořák was the most prolific chamber music composer of the late nineteenth century. He wrote numerous excellent works in every standard form as well as for novel ensembles. His natural and seemingly effortless proclivity for chamber music resulted in a body of work that was unusual for a composer of the Romantic period, a time in which the exploration of large forces, extra-musical programs and expansive, subjective forms had little to do with this intimate and formalized genre most associated with the Classical era. It was characteristic of his time for Dvořák to express his musical nationalism; strong elements of his native Bohemian (i.e. Czech or Slavonic) folk music appear in his music in the dance and narrative forms of the furiant and the dumka respectively. But despite such general influences of form, rhythm and mood, Dvořák's music was always entirely original, characteristic, and, by the standards of the best chamber music, masterful. Though he was not a pioneer, his music has a freshness, a clarity of texture and a bounty of dramatic lyricism that makes it original.

Dvořák's most well-known works date from the 1890's during his three-year sojourn to America where he served as director of the National Conservatory in New York. They include the New World Symphony, the Viola Quintet and the "American" String Quartet. Dvořák encountered American folk music in the form of Native-American drumming and African-American spirituals, the latter of which he regarded as profoundly original music that might serve as a basis for a national style. Many find strong influences of both genres in Dvořák's own "American" compositions while others claim that his music is entirely consistent with his own European folk

and classical traditions. Dvořák himself denied that he intentionally incorporated any American elements. Nonetheless, the "American" String Quartet in particular bears the stamp of the time and place of its composition.

Ironically, Dvořák composed the American quartet while on holiday in the predominantly Bohemian farming community of Spillville, Iowa. A spirit of relaxation and perhaps joyful homecoming inspired him to swiftly compose the quartet within a few weeks. Flowing, spacious, and bright, the music seems to reflect his disposition, if not, as some claim, the expanse of the American plains. The most pervasive aspect of the quartet supporting these qualities, as well as reflecting Dvořák's general preoccupation with folk idioms, is the use of the pentatonic or five-note scale: nearly every primary and secondary theme throughout the quartet uses a form of it. Common in folk music around the world, the pentatonic scale omits the semitones found at the 4th and the 7th degrees of the more common classical scale yielding a specific quality of broadness, stability and a lack of tension (even in a minor key). Whatever influences or expressive intentions lay behind this choice, it imbues the quartet with a personality and a continuity that is distinctive and strongly evocative. The most particular trace of the quartet's rural, American origin, however, is birdsong. The third movement Scherzo features the song of the Scarlet Tanager, a bird that Dvořák heard and transcribed while hiking the countryside. After an initial statement of a sprightly, rustic theme, the first violin sings the birdsong high in the treble range. The instantaneous evocation of dance, the outdoors, and the piercing simplicity of nature's own music define a pure moment of folk music as high art.

The work is simply joyous from beginning to end. It makes a perfect ending to our season, and I defy you not to leave the church smiling!

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

The Villiers Quartet is one of the most charismatic and "adventurous" quartets of the British chamber music scene (The Strad). Nothing is outside of the VQ's repertoire as they define the string quartet for the 21st century. Dedicated to the established works of Beethoven, Haydn, and Mendelssohn, they are also renowned for their interpretations of English composers including Elgar, Britten and Delius. Having toured across the UK and internationally, they have been declared "one of the best young quartets around today" (Jerry Horner, Fine Arts Quartet), and their performances of Shostakovich and Tischenko have been hailed as "masterful playing" (Classical Source).

They have been a featured quartet in numerous festivals including the North York Moors Chamber Music Festival, the Brit Jazz Fest, the English Music Festival, and the British Music Society. Known for championing the works of British composers, the VQ has been invited to present masterclasses on British music at Dartmouth College, Syracuse University, Goshen College, and the University of Nottingham. Their internationally acclaimed digital VQ New Works Competition encourages audiences to interact with contemporary music performance online, and supports the creation of new works for string quartet.

Named after Villiers Street in London's colourful musical epicentre, the Villiers Quartet encompasses the grand and iconic spirit of the extraordinary music tradition in London. Their debut CD for Naxos, The Complete Quartets of Robert Still, was praised for their "sublimely articulate and concentrated readings" (Gramophone), and received 5-stars in Classical Music Magazine. In 2015, Somm Recordings releases their recording of Shostakovich and David Matthews piano quintets with pianist Martin Cousin, and they are the featured quartet on the soundtrack to the BBC television drama, Lady Chatterley's Lover. The Villiers Quartet are winners of the 2015 Radcliffe Chamber Music Competition and have been appointed Quartet-in-Residence at the University of Oxford for the period 2015-18.

We hope that you will join us for our next season, on 3 April, 24 April & 8 May 2016