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presents

THE BROMPTON STRING QUARTET



7.30 PM THURSDAY 29TH OCTOBER 2020

NORDEN FARM CENTRE FOR THE ARTS

PROGRAMME

Franz Liszt
(1811 – 1886)

Angelus (Prière aux Anges gardiens)

Fanny Mendelssohn (1805 - 1847)

Quartet in E flat (1834)

Adagio ma non troppo

Allegretto

Romanze

Allegro molto vivace

Karen Tanaka
(b. 1961)

"At the grave of Beethoven"

Interval

Joseph Haydn
(1732 - 1809)

Quartet op.76 no.4 "Sunrise"

Allegro con spirito

Adagio

Minuet and Trio: Allegro

Finale: Allegro ma non troppo

Ludwig van Beethoven *Quartet op.95 - "Serioso"*

Allegro con brio

Allegretto ma non troppo

Allegro assai vivace ma serio

Larghetto espressivo – Allegretto agitato

Franz Liszt is primarily known as a composer of piano music and the Angelus (Prière aux Anges Gardiens – Prayer to the Guardian Angels) is from the third volume of his *Années de Pèlerinage – Years of Pilgrimage*), originally written for piano. The music of the third volume displays less pianistic virtuosity, is more contemplative and gentle and is perfectly suited to arrangement for string quartet.

Having struggled her entire life with the gender constraints imposed by social convention, **Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel**, an extremely gifted musician, finally decided to publish some of her music only one year before her early death at the age of 41. The true extent of her musical contribution has only fully been appreciated in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Fanny and her younger and more famous brother Felix were very close, and he died only a year later, aged only 37. It is now thought there was a familial tendency to high blood pressure and that they both died of strokes.

This imaginative and elegantly lyrical work was Fanny Mendelssohn's only string quartet and acknowledges her debt to the quartets of Beethoven. The dark tone of the opening phrases

establishes a mood of quiet anguish. As the music progresses, emphatic chords further darken the music. The following *Allegretto* in 6/8 time serves as a scherzo and is not unlike the famed ‘elfin’ scherzos of her brother and has a dynamic central section before a return to the opening section. A plaintive *Romanze* in G minor ventures into distant keys, modelled on late Beethoven. The concluding *Allegro molto vivace* is in sonata form; the assertive opening theme alternates with a dreamy rocking figure, reinforced by tremolo-like gestures from the lower strings before the piece ends briskly and emphatically.

Karen Tanaka’s “At the grave of Beethoven’ was commissioned by the Brodsky Quartet to celebrate the bicentenary of the opus 18 quartets, and is based on the opus 18 number 3. Karen Tanaka writes “ *Opus 18 no 3 is probably the most gentle and lyrical work in the set. I feel the pure spirit and ardent hope of the young Beethoven in it. The first movement of ‘At the grave of Beethoven’ was inspired by the first four bars ...developed and interpreted in a contemporary manner reflecting the tension and anxiety of our life today. The second movement is made of chains of modulations. When I was writing this movement in the spring of 1999, the news from Kosovo was reported on the TV every day. I was shocked and horrified by this civil war, and it influenced my writing unconsciously. Along with each modulation, I had images that lotus flowers grow and bloom, in the hope of serenity and peace*”

Haydn richly deserves the title ‘father of the string quartet’ and in his lifetime developed the form from the early style that was basically a solo violin with simple accompaniment playing light divertimento-like pieces to the masterpieces that were his final quartets, complex music generally having the four movement structure of fast, slow, minuet and trio, fast, and with each instrument playing an important role. The opus 76 was his final set of six quartets, followed only by two opus 77 and a two movement fragment op 103. The opus 76 set was commissioned by the Hungarian Count Erdödy, and probably written in 1797 and published in 1799; it really is as though Haydn is passing the baton to Beethoven, especially when you hear the opening of the ‘Sunrise’ quartet. As with the Beethoven op 18 no 3, one isn’t immediately aware that this movement is *Allegro* as it starts with a sustained chord in the lower three instruments and the sun gently rising from the chord in the first violin melody. One has to wonder whether Beethoven heard this quartet shortly after it was composed, at around the time he was writing his opus 18 set.

The movement does quickly become very lively however, though recalling the ‘sunrise’ idea at various moments and on different instruments. The beautiful second movement *Adagio* starts in the same vein as the first with gentle rising chords (another sunrise?) and then becomes a contemplative hymn.

The *Menuetto* brings us back down to earth; it is a rustic German dance with an even more folksy *Trio* section featuring violins in octaves and introduced by a drone on the viola and cello reminiscent of a hurdy-gurdy. The *Trio* has an interesting element – intermittent short quiet phrases that have been likened to the monks at vespers in the distance. The final movement begins in the vein of a simple, gentle English folk tune, but this is misleading as Haydn is at his most inventive here. The simple theme undergoes several variations and is tossed between the instruments in many different ways. As the movement progresses the tempo is ratcheted up, finally coming to a hurtling unison conclusion.

Beethoven’s opus 95 string quartet, which he himself entitled ‘*Serioso*’ is the last of the five quartets that are grouped as his ‘middle’ quartets. Apart from its title, the only other directions we have about it from Beethoven are what he wrote to an English musician, George Smart, shortly after its publication in 1816 –

“the quartet is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public”.

Beethoven had completed the quartet in 1810 and there was then a 14-year gap before he embarked on his five ‘late’ quartets, but in many ways this opus 95 is more closely linked with the late quartets than with the four earlier ‘middle’ quartets. Of those, the three opus 59 were commissioned by and dedicated to Count Razumovsky and the opus 74 dedicated to

Prince Lobkovitz, who had been the dedicatee of the opus 18 set ten years earlier. There is a huge contrast between the beautiful serenity of the opus 74 and the harshness of the opus 95 composed in the following year. There has been speculation that the romanticism of opus 74 was the result of Beethoven's being madly in love with Therese Malfatti, but that she turned down his proposal of marriage in 1810 and the opus 95 was written after this devastating blow. There is also the factor that Beethoven had been given a salary in 1810 which enabled him to be more free and experimental in his composition. The opus 95 quartet was dedicated to a cellist friend of Beethoven, rather than to a benefactor. It has the traditional four movements, but in each of them we see the abrupt changes in mood that characterise the late quartets. The first starts with a dramatic angry unison phrase that leaves you in doubt of the mood of the movement; there are moments of calm, but they are generally interrupted by another dramatic explosion. The second movement is calmer, even serene at times. It is introduced by a soft, mysterious scalar descent from the cello, something that repeats through the movement. A fugal section in the middle hints at some anguish and tension, but the general mood remains tranquil. Ending on a long soft suspended chord, there is a change of key and it leads straight into the third movement where Beethoven adds the direction *serioso* in the title of the movement, indicating that this is not a 'fun' scherzo. However, once more, we see a huge contrast in the lovely trio section, played twice, where the lower instruments have a beautiful chorale-like melody while the first violin has a gentle quaver decoration. The last movement starts with perhaps the most tragic, yearning music in the quartet, a slow introduction that gives no clue of what is to follow. What does follow is an uneasy, minor key dance-like movement, but the very end is the most surprising moment of all in the quartet. A change from a minor to a major chord leads to a sprightly, completely classical coda that could have easily appeared in one of the opus 18 quartets. It's as though Beethoven is saying 'Enough of this *serioso*'!

The Brompton String Quartet

Maja Horvat – violin

Hannah Renton – violin

Kinga Wojdalska – viola

Wallis Power – cello

The Brompton Quartet is comprised of musicians from the UK, Austria and Slovenia, studying at the Royal College of Music. They were winners at the 2019 St Martin in the Fields Chamber Music Competition, and since forming in October 2018, have worked with artists including Alfred Brendel, Daniel Rowland (Brodsky Quartet), Mats Zitterqvist (COE), Heinz Holliger, Rafael Todes, Jon Thorne and the Marmen and Harlem Quartets.

All four members of the group are also active soloists and orchestral musicians, and have participated in festivals including St Endellion Festival, Prussia Cove and Stift International Music Festival. Prizes won by individual members of the group include 1st prize at the 13th Concorso Internazionale per Giovani Strumentisti, 3rd prize and the Szymanowski award at the 1st International Karol Szymanowski Competition and the Cambridge University Instrumental Award.

The Brompton Quartet explore a diverse range of repertoire and have recently given recitals around the UK and Europe, at venues including Conway Hall, Elgar Room Royal Albert Hall, Kings Place and the Red House, Aldeburgh. They are delighted to have recently been selected as Park Lane Group Artists for 2020.