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SACCONI QUARTET

Thursday 16 October, 7.30pm
Djanogly Recital Hall

PROGRAMME

On the streets and in the sky

Jonathan Dove

String Quartet in F major

Maurice Ravel

Interval

String Quartet in A minor, Op.132

Ludwig van Beethoven

Please ensure all mobile phones are switched off. Photographs and videos of the performance are not permitted.

There is a Sennheiser Infrared enhanced hearing system in the Djanogly Recital Hall; please request a headset from our front-of-house staff to enhance your enjoyment of this evening's concert.

Please ensure hearing aids are switched to the appropriate concert setting.

PROGRAMME NOTES

On the streets and in the sky

Jonathan Dove (born 1959)

Lockdown in London in 2020 was a strange time. Days were filled with anxiety: ordinary daily chores such as a trip to the shops might be deadly. Yet at the same time, without traffic pollution or aeroplanes, the sky over London seemed exceptionally clear and blue. The birds seemed to sing more loudly – or perhaps it was that without the sounds of traffic, we could hear them better. The blue sky and the birdsong contrasted strangely with the uneasiness of life on the ground. They seemed to offer glimpses of a better world.

Some birds had a particularly tuneful song. I don't have a garden, but in the tree outside my window, I heard the same bird on a number of occasions, singing the same notes, and was struck by the strong pentatonic outline of its song. I could never see it, hidden in the tree: I guessed that it was a blackbird, but I have no expertise to support that. I recorded the unknown bird on a few occasions, and transcribed its song. Around the same time, in a nearby park, a robin impressed me with its unceasing concert, a flow of utterance without any exact repetition. The robin and the unknown bird sing throughout the second movement of the quartet. (My transcriptions of their songs are, of course, an approximation, lower and slower than the real thing.) They form an interlude between the driving, edgy first movement and a serene third movement, suggested by the clear blue sky.

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String Quartet in F

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

1. *Allegro moderato*
2. *Assez vif – Très rythmé*
3. *Très lent*
4. *Vif et agité*

Debussy's solitary String Quartet (1893), while still not quite representative of the composer's mature style, nevertheless transcended its obvious borrowings from César Franck to create a highly personal idiom, the textures of which exerted a significant influence on later quartet composers. Ravel, who was 13 years Debussy's junior, at first found it difficult to emerge from the shadow of the compositional innovations for which Debussy was renowned. Ravel's single contribution to the quartet genre, first performed at the Société Nationale de Musique on 4 March 1904, came at a crucial point in the younger composer's development, and to some extent marked a self-conscious attempt to exert his own musical personality.

The influence of Debussy on Ravel's quartet remains clear enough, however, in the cyclic treatment of its four-movement plan, in the prominent use of pizzicato in its second movement, and in various aspects of the score's harmonic language. The critics' invidious insistence on making direct comparisons between the two quartets led inevitably enough to what Roland-Manuel later termed 'the sacrificing of Debussy's Quartet on the altar of Ravel's'. For his part, Debussy is reputed to have had a high regard for Ravel's effort, in spite of the incipient rivalry that soon caused the relationship between the two men to deteriorate. Ravel developed something of a complex about his quartet, however, especially after Fauré (his teacher at the Paris Conservatoire) slated the last movement as 'stunted'. Some days after this incident, Fauré apparently requested to see the score again and confided to his pupil that he might have made an error of judgement; Ravel generously did not flinch from dedicating the score to his 'dear teacher'. (Debussy is rumoured to have told Ravel not to change a note of the score when asked his opinion on the need for revisions in the finale.) In his own defence, Ravel laconically commented that the quartet represented 'a conception of musical construction, imperfectly realised no doubt, but set out much more precisely than in my earlier compositions' – hardly a stimulating description of a work primarily noted for its atmosphere of heady sensuality.

The most striking stylistic advances made by Ravel in the quartet are to be heard in aspects of rhythmic technique and novel sonorities. Exhilarating cross-rhythms are explored in both the second and fourth movements (the former familiar to television viewers as the theme tune to the dramatisation of Mary Wesley's *The Camomile Lawn*). Throughout the score, Ravel creates textures of almost orchestral complexity, a characteristic for which he was criticised at the time of the première but which was to remain a notable feature of his chamber music; the textures of the later Sonata for unaccompanied violin and cello (1922), for instance, are sufficiently sophisticated as to suggest the sonorities of a full string quartet (for which the work has sometimes been mistaken by unwitting radio listeners).

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String Quartet in A minor, Op.132

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

1. *Assai sostenuto – Allegro*
2. *Allegro ma non tanto*
3. *Molto adagio – Andante – Molto Adagio*
(*‘Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart’*)
4. *Alla marcia, assai vivace*
5. *Allegro appassionato – Presto*

Beethoven's Op.132 is famous above all for its extended, and very beautiful, slow movement. But its musical scope is far wider than this, and its five-movement shape is in every respect very much more than the sum of its parts. It is the second of the works produced in response to a commission, received in November 1822 from Prince Galitsin, for three new string quartets. Even more than its predecessor (Op.127) had done, it set in motion that phase of intensive and radical experimentation with musical form and substance which Beethoven conducted in the quartet medium during the years 1825 and 1826. The newness of sound and structure in the late quartets is matched – not just paralleled by, but in a certain way identical with – Beethoven's late expressive needs. Op.132 was his first quartet in A minor – perhaps surprisingly, there is no quartet in that key by Mozart or Haydn either, though Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms wrote one each.

Moreover, Op.132 is the first instance of a quartet which is also, in a certain sense, a biographical document – or at least contains one. The ‘Sacred Song of Thanksgiving’ is the centrepiece of the work, formally speaking. It also represents its centre of gravity – expressively and psychologically, as well as spiritually. But this extraordinary hymnic movement depends in part for its effect on its placement, on the skilfully managed contrasts which surround it, and on the overall pattern of movements within the quartet as a whole. These contrasts are integrated by Beethoven with masterly judgement and expressive tact – his new creative thinking about the possibilities for the layout of a quartet and the character of its movement types is one of the great and lasting innovations of the late period (though one which later composers found it hard to follow, let alone emulate).

The quartet was already being composed during the early months of 1825 and was finished quite quickly, by the end of July. It was entrusted to the Parisian publisher Maurice Schlesinger (son of the influential Berliner Adolf Schlesinger), but did not finally appear in print until as late as September 1827. It was given two ‘workshop’ performances by the Schuppanzigh Quartet in September 1825 (witnessed by a ‘numerous assembly’ with over a dozen eminent invitees, including the English visitor Sir George Smart) and was then premièred on 6 November, with a repeat performance on the 20th.

The *Heiliger Dankgesang* documents Beethoven's recovery from a serious illness during the early part of 1825 and his state of mind at his (possibly unexpected) return to health. That this was something which may have seemed almost miraculous to him at the time may be judged from his profound and gravely impassioned musical response. More even than through its biographical interest, however, the movement commands our attention as a wholly original example of the musical sublime. It is unprecedented in its direct, seemingly unadorned simplicity both of conception and of stylistic realisation. Yet it has at the same time an implied, almost understated complexity of a slowly evolving and subtly pervasive kind that seems to open vistas onto eternity – doing so without losing contact

with the world of human emotion and aspiration. The movement juxtaposes the pure modal polyphony of the hymn proper, composed in a serene 'Lydian F major' (*Molto adagio*), with a deftly – and at times vigorously – elaborated harmonic ground in D major (*Andante*), expressing in archetypal form the suffering composer's return to vitality ('Neue Kraft fühlend' – feeling new strength). Here, as at the very opening of the work, we experience the proximity of two distinct and complementary affects – a quiet, slow-moving, at times almost motionless ecstasy contrasted with the vital movement of human sentience and feeling. Altogether this is an astonishing example of how something of extreme inwardness and subjectivity can be transmuted into a humane public utterance – the expression of a universal experience, – without losing its sense of delicacy and intimacy. That such a thing is musically possible is another of the miracles of late Beethoven.

The beginning of the first movement dovetails two tempi – the veiled introduction (*Assai sostenuto*) and the fast music which quickly follows (*Allegro*). From the slow, mysterious opening and the rapid semiquaver and dotted themes which soon arrive to contrast with it, we hear very graphically how Beethoven has intervened in the conventions of musical discourse and caused its primary relationships – in melody, motif, rhythm, interval, tonality, sentence structure and rhetoric – to (re)emerge in new, and seemingly elemental, configurations. In doing so he also finds a way of making these renewed conventions speak to us of primary human experiences – of movement and stasis, of awakening feeling and spiritual transcendence, of joy and repose, serenity and complication, all shot through with an insistence and an intensity of feeling that are quintessentially Beethovenian.

The *Allegro ma non tanto* has an ease and fluency that mark it out from many more obviously driven and obsessive Beethoven scherzos. It shows a characteristic motivic-rhythmic clarity of high definition which produces the kind of rapidly evolving musical continuity we seem to know so well – limitlessly inventive and seemingly profligate, yet in fact closely constructed from the permutation and varied repetition of small intervallic or cellular ideas. The trio has an astonishing (for Beethoven) Ländler-like, bucolic character complete with drone effects, string crossing, long-bowed arpeggios, and insistent staccato chords: the whole section is marked at the outset – surely not without a gentle hint of affectionate irony – to be played *p dolce*.

The taut, highly rhythmicized *Alla marcia*, which shows a certain kinship to the march in the piano sonata Op.101, is a punchy and concise binary movement. It leads directly, through an ingeniously composed transition, into the finale – this link proves to be one of the most striking gestures in the whole piece. It is a dramatic instrumental recitative, such as we find in the Ninth Symphony or the 'Tempest' sonata, yet unprecedented in a quartet (later emulated, however, by Mendelssohn in his Op.13). Here it is played by the first violin accompanied by pointed chords and 'orchestral' *tremolando* in the lower strings.

The finale is a restless, impassioned rondo, in which the rhythmic motifs and thematic ideas are woven together with such dynamism and skill – including the insistent (E-)F-E semitone first heard in the second violin – that the form seems to unfold effortlessly, as if under its own emotional and rhythmic impetus (the quartet players, however, know how far this fiction is from the more practical truth). The play of the instrumental lines is deftly controlled, as ever, and the writing is occasionally deliberately angular and tough in the manner characteristic of the late quartets. But the captivating main rondo theme is one of those rare musical conceptions that brought Beethoven as close as he would ever come to Schubert. More generally, the range of stylistic and expressive contrast within the movement shows us just how carefully and intensively Beethoven was considering the whole spectrum of possible solutions to the compositional challenge of the finale in this sequence of late works. The second recurrence (third appearance) of the rondo theme is considerably developed and extended, and drives through into a hushed polyphonic *sempre pp* passage – which then accelerates and crescendos into a joyous concluding *Presto*. Here we are taken irresistibly into A major, again stretching quartet sonority to its limits. This buoyant peroration carries everything – not without a cathartic sense of wit and good humour, – exuberantly before it.

SACCONI QUARTET

Ben Hancox, violin
Hannah Dawson, violin
Robin Ashwell, viola
Cara Berridge, cello

For over two decades, the Sacconi Quartet has been captivating audiences with their unanimous and compelling ensemble, consistently communicating with a fresh and imaginative approach. Formed in 2001, the four founder members share an unwavering passion for the string quartet repertoire, infectiously reaching out to audiences with their energy and enthusiasm. The Sacconis enjoy a busy international career, performing regularly across the world, at Europe's major venues, in recordings and on radio broadcasts. The Sacconi is Quartet in Association at the Royal College of Music and Quartet in Residence for the town of Folkestone. Unchanged since its inception, Sacconi is Britain's longest-established string quartet.

The Sacconi's prolific recording career covers a broad swathe of repertoire from Haydn to present day. Their most recent double-album release *Loosening* features premiere recordings of five major works of Graham Fitkin. *In Damascus*, their album of music by Jonathan Dove including *In Damascus*, commissioned by the quartet, and featuring Mark Padmore and Charles Owen, hit the Classical Top Ten, and was chosen as one of Gramophone Magazine's Recordings of the Year: "This important release cannot be recommended too highly". Their complete recording of Graham Fitkin's string quartets and their collection of Roxanna Panufnik's chamber works entitled *Heartfelt* were released to critical acclaim and will be followed next year by a further album of Dove. They celebrated their twenty-first anniversary with another Top Ten release of Beethoven's Opus 131 alongside Schubert's *Death and the Maiden*, and their recording of Taneyev and Schumann's piano quintets with Peter Donohoe is released on Signum.

Champions of new music, the Sacconis have given over thirty world premieres. This January, they gave the first UK premiere in twenty years of Terry Riley's *Sun Rings* – his seminal work for string quartet, chorus, samples and pre-recorded track – becoming the first quartet to perform it since Kronos Quartet. For their twentieth anniversary, the Quartet commissioned Jonathan Dove's second quartet *On the streets and in the sky*, now released on Signum Records. Their film of Dove's first quartet *Out of Time* was released on Amazon in 2021. They continue to give fully staged performances of Beethoven's late quartets, entirely from memory, in collaboration with theatre director Tom Morris.

As the result of a generous grant, the Sacconi Quartet are Quartet in Residence for the town of Folkestone and its surrounding areas. This is enabling creative collaborations with local artists and projects, and includes an embedded outreach programme. Performances of Beethoven on the Beach and Glass on the Warren seafront have attracted large audiences, many of them experiencing the energy of chamber music for the very first time. Their Sacconi Chamber Music Festival in Folkestone is firmly established among the UK's major chamber music festivals and attracts audiences from far and near for its vibrant atmosphere and dynamic programming.

The name Sacconi Quartet comes from the outstanding twentieth-century Italian luthier and restorer Simone Sacconi, whose book *The Secrets of Stradivari* is considered an indispensable reference for violin makers. Ben Hancox plays a 1932 Sacconi violin and Robin Ashwell a 1934 Sacconi viola, both made in New York. Hannah Dawson plays a 1927 Sacconi violin made in Rome, and Cara Berridge plays a Nicolaus Gagliano cello from 1781. Their gratitude extends to the Royal Society of Musicians and Ellen Solomon for generously providing them with these exceptional instruments.