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OPUS13

Thursday 15 October, 7.30pm
Djanogly Recital Hall

PROGRAMME

String Quartet in D major, Op.18 No.3

Ludwig van Beethoven

Arcadiana, Op.12

Thomas Adès

Interval

String Quartet No.1 in C minor, Op.51 No.1

Johannes Brahms

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PROGRAMME NOTES

String Quartet in D major, Op.18 No.3

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

1. *Allegro*;
2. *Andante con moto*;
3. *Allegro*;
4. *Presto*.

Arriving in Vienna in 1792, Beethoven was immediately confronted not just by the need to establish himself and earn a living as a musician, but by the sheer artistic richness of the city at every level, from the enthusiasm and connoisseurship of audiences and patrons through to the finest compositional achievements of Haydn and Mozart, which were at the very centre of the living tradition of Viennese music. The young Beethoven was known primarily as a brilliant pianist and composer for the piano. Yet his published Op.1 was a set of piano trios, and he was acutely aware of the fact that symphonic and chamber music – and the string quartet in particular – represented a musical summit towards which he aspired, one moreover where he would have to measure himself against these two illustrious masters.

Despite his demonstrable fluency in invention and elaboration, the composition of Op.18 cost him more labour and self-criticism than any previous work had done, and he seems to have subjected his ideas to constant, intensive revision – much as Mozart had done in composing the ‘Haydn’ quartets in the musical shadow of the older composer. The Op.18 quartets (written between 1798 and 1800) show perhaps more than any other work by Beethoven of the 1790s the imprint of Haydn especially, and to an extent of Mozart as well. Yet if the tautness and clarity of the Haydn quartet idiom shine through in many passages, the formal and developmental scale often calls to mind something altogether longer-breathed and at times almost symphonic, beyond even Haydn’s imagining. There are passages, too, where the sheer ease and euphony of Mozart are audibly to the fore. Yet it is above all in the rhetorical scope and the degree of expressive intensification in certain movements that we hear the depth and power of Beethoven’s creative drive. Beethoven’s voice speaks forcefully and with insistence even at this relatively early stage (though it is scarcely ‘early’ by Mozart’s Schubert’s standards). It is clear, moreover, that he had truly ‘listened’ to what the Viennese quartet as a medium was capable of, and had to tell him. Texturally we find much of that subtle relationship between all the parts, with sustained melodic and rhythmic interaction and an invigorating spread of musical energy across the entire registral span of the instruments, that are one of the glories of quartet sound.

The D major quartet is at heart a euphonious, often lyrical, work. It begins in what is for the young Beethoven a notably expansive and flowing way, with wide-arching melodic lines that give rise to relaxed contrapuntal exchange rather than to intensive motivic or rhythmic development (though sforzandi and triplet quavers soon appear within the transition to the second subject to disrupt and intensify the music’s course). This polyphonic and dialogic approach is sustained throughout the movement and shows us just how thoroughly, during the composition of these works, Beethoven had reflected upon the nature of his task, and had given new thought to some of the most fundamental procedures for generating musical argument within a sonata movement. The expansive nature of the opening theme is given its final serene ‘apotheosis’ when it is brought back in the unself-dramatizing but beautifully imagined coda.

The second movement, in B flat major, grows out of a beautiful tune, richly scored and broadly phrased – though not slow, and enlivened with accompanimental touches which make the whole texture, not just the melody, intensely memorable. The interaction between the instruments is striking throughout the movement (the opening tune actually begins on the second violin before shifting to the first), as is the harmony, which ranges widely and takes us through regions of dark and light which broaden and intensify the effect of the main melody without subjecting it to dissection or development. The form is expansive and – in the best sense of the word – episodic, a species of

sonata rondo in which the harmonic and textural imagination Beethoven brings to his task overlays the reprises of the main theme with continuously eloquent music that carries us along almost despite ourselves, with scarcely a look cast behind. The final stages of the movement – alternately dramatic and mysterious, with sforzando semiquavers in rhythmic unison across the entire quartet juxtaposed with hushed meditations on fragments of the theme – bring this process to a quiet and reflective close.

The third movement has sometimes been seen as a scherzo, even though it is not so titled. But in its free and unobtrusive way it in fact shows both minuet and scherzo characteristics in its rhythm and phrasing, and includes a beautifully shaded minore trio. In both sections there is some easy, unselfconscious counterpoint; and the range of keys traversed is lightly – and wittily – held in balance. The finale crowns the quartet more than admirably. It is a tour de force of wit, energy and high spirits of truly Haydnesque stature. It sets out as a moto perpetuo with its tune strikingly phrased and articulated across the beat so as to transform relatively ordinary material into something much tauter and more intriguing. Herein lies one of the simplest – yet least imitable – secrets of Beethoven's art. Its 'point' and drive are achieved by clever phrasing and rhythmic technique at all levels from the tiniest detail to the broadest span. And this goes hand in hand with disruptions and strong contrasts that not only energise the existing material but serve to open up new vistas along the way that could scarcely have been envisaged from the outset. The movement's near-constant good humour is audibly Haydnesque in inspiration, but also has a bite and drive, at times almost a ferocity, that speak to us of the Beethovenian temperament. Its springing energy and momentum are maintained to the very last bar, where it ends, on a note of rare delight, as a witty pianissimo afterthought (recapturing the first three notes of the main theme) to the last fortissimo climax.

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Arcadiana, Op.12

Thomas Adès (born 1971)

1. *Venezia notturna*;
2. *Das klinget so herrlich, das klinget so schön*;
3. *Auf dem Wasser zu singen*;
4. *Et... (tango mortale)*;
5. *L'embarquement*;
6. *O Albion*;
7. *Lethe*.

Thomas Adès first came to public attention when he won second prize in the piano section of the BBC Young Musician of the Year Competition in 1990. His meteoric rise as a composer began three years later, when his *Chamber Symphony* was played by the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, and he was appointed Composer in Association with the Hallé Orchestra. His chamber opera *Powder Her Face* brought him international recognition, and his second opera, based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, was staged at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in 2004, to great acclaim. He is also active as a pianist and conductor, working regularly with the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and London Sinfonietta. Between 2023 and 2025, he was Artist in Residence with the Hallé Orchestra, and he was presented with the Royal Philharmonic Society's prestigious Gold Medal in September 2024. In May 2026, he was appointed the Hallé Orchestra's Principal Guest Conductor

Arcadiana dates from 1994. Each of the seven short movements has a title that, according to the composer, "evokes an image associated with ideas of the idyll, vanishing, vanished or imaginary." The work opens with a spectral Venetian nocturne, underpinned by a lilting barcarolle-like rhythm beginning in the viola part. The second movement, following without a break, begins with an upward rush on the violins and viola. Its title ("That sounds so wonderful, that sounds so beautiful") comes from the chorus of guards in the finale to Act 1 of Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, as they react to the sound of Papageno's magic bells, evoked here by the glittering sound of string harmonics. The

movement ends with a fleeting reference to the Queen of the Night's big Act 2 revenge aria. This is the only point at which a break occurs between consecutive movements; the rest play continuously.

'Auf dem Wasser zu singen' (To be sung on the water) opens with a falling pizzicato phrase on the viola. The title is that of one of Schubert's best-loved songs, and the rippling figures of its piano part soon begin to establish themselves as central to the texture. The steadily increasing emotional tension comes to a head, breaking off abruptly. After a moment's silence, an incisive plucked chord on all four instruments launches the dark, central fourth movement. The title refers to the Latin inscription 'Et in Arcadia ego' (I am here, even in Arcadia) on a tomb uncovered by shepherds in a well-known painting by Nicholas Poussin (1594-1665). Sublimated tango rhythms and Adès' string writing at its most strident establish the music's savage atmosphere.

Another famous French painting, *L'Embarquement Pour Cythère* (The embarkation for Cythera) by Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), provides the background for the fifth movement, which opens gently, with the four instruments muted. In spite of the painting's title, it has been suggested that in fact it shows figures leaving the island, the birthplace of the ancient Greek goddess of love, Venus. The third of *Arcadiana*'s four water pieces, this delicate, quicksilver scherzo briefly enters dark, shadowy regions in the central trio section, before the scherzo returns. The soft ending leads directly into 'O Albion', a slow, gentle meditative homage to Elgar, specifically 'Nimrod' from the *Enigma Variations* (*Arcadiana* was first performed during the Cambridge Elgar Festival in November 1994).

The final movement is named after the River of Oblivion in Greek mythology, and sets an extended lyrical cello solo against a mosaic of tiny figures, mostly in harmonics, on the other three instruments. The music gently fragments at the end.

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String Quartet in C minor, Op.51 No.1

Johannes Brahms (1833-97)

1. *Allegro*;
2. *Romanze. Poco adagio*;
3. *Allegretto molto moderato e comodo*;
4. *Allegro*.

Early on Brahms had learnt his compositional craft in part through re-composing movements by Beethoven with his own themes, and he chose to publish as his Op.1 a piano sonata beginning with emblematic resonances of Beethoven's 'Hammerklavier' and 'Waldstein' sonatas. His understanding of music and the concomitant evolution of his own creative voice were deeply conditioned by Beethoven's example, and, in the main, he found Beethovenian genres immediately well-suited to his expressive ideals. Yet in two genres to which his predecessor had made such notable contributions, the symphony and string quartet, he experienced perhaps a creative block, or, at the very least, a relatively protracted 'anxiety of influence'. His struggle with the symphony – during which he characterized Beethoven that 'giant marching along behind' – is well-known, less so, the struggle with the string quartet.

He had suppressed an early string quartet in B minor, which Schumann had encouraged him to publish, and worked on the C minor and A minor quartets Op.51 Nos.1 and 2 for some eight years, before composing them 'for the second time' in 1873; he also claimed by then to have destroyed some 20 previous quartets. Evidence for the formidable challenge posed by Beethoven's example in the genre is thus compelling: Brahms had to search out a way to be true to the tradition he loved, precisely by finding a renewal born of the fullest exercise of his own creativity.

In both symphony and quartet he decided to keep to the model of four separate movements, choosing to base the essence of his thinking therefore on early- and middle-period Beethoven. And in selecting C minor as key for his first published work in both these genres, he chose to confront the Beethoven of drama, energy and compression head-on. The breakthrough for the symphony was to come in the conception of the finale, with its 'speaking music' of horn-call, trombone chorale, and with its main theme, so reminiscent of Beethoven's 9th, yet treated so differently. The breakthrough for the string quartet surely lay in his retaining the Beethovenian dramatic momentum and intensity as essential, but enriching them with new harmonic resources on the one hand, and, on the other, seeking out the lyric hidden as latency within figure and gesture.

These aspects are announced in characteristic fashion in the opening bars of the C minor Quartet: the terse opening gesture is immediately fragmented, compressed, carried to a high climax on the first violin and brought to a stand. As the harmony sinks down, a new sustained motive is introduced, accompanied by residues of the opening, and elaborated with proto-lyrical decorations, before the music sinks yet lower to another stand, this time on the note F-sharp. Schoenberg used this modulation to B minor so near the beginning of the work as an example illustrating his view of 'Brahms the Progressive' in harmonic matters. When the opening then returns, the thematic gesture is in viola and cello, with figurative revision of the accompaniment as the new first violin part. This carries the music into a bridge passage founded on syncopation and imitation in the context of another remote key, E-flat minor, in which the lyrical and the major tonality seek intermittently to break through. When the second subject does eventually appear, in the traditional key of E-flat major, it proves to be a melody of just five notes, which are treated to all manner of elaborations in the first violin and contrapuntal workings in the lower instruments.

Taking a lead perhaps particularly from Beethoven's 5th Symphony, Brahms lets each of his subsequent movements explore further aspects and implications of the figurative and gestural resources of his first movement. Thus the slow movement builds its opening paragraph from dotted rhythms and repeated-note figures; the third movement, a typically veiled Brahmsian take on the scherzo archetype, elaborates with sighing repeated notes and teasing chromatic harmony the sustained motive and its accompaniment from early on in the first movement; and the finale compresses dotted rhythm, repeated-note figures and that sustained motive into a single opening theme. When the finale's second subject appears, it is based, just as in the first movement, on a strictly limited number of notes, which are accorded immediate and far-reaching elaborations. There are particular thematic resonances from Beethoven's own compositions in this work, at their most potent in the echo of the middle of the *Cavatina* from Beethoven's String Quartet in B-flat Op.130 in the middle of Brahms's slow movement, and of the 'musette' trio of Beethoven's String Quartet in A minor Op.132 in the trio of Brahms's third movement. But such emblematic resonances, so typical of Brahms's artistic response to his heritage, do not get to the real heart of the renewal of the Quartet – that is surely deeply embedded in the drama, energy, gestural terseness and compression, in the finding out of emergent lyricism and new harmonic enrichments within the context of an inexorable figurative logic.

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OPUS13

Sonoko Miriam Welde, violin
Edvard Erdal, violin
Albin Uusijärvi, viola
Daniel Thorell, cello

“This was a performance of a profundity and kaleidoscopic colour that would have been astounding from any ensemble, let alone a young one still making itself known.” (Charlotte Gardner, Gramophone)

First Prize winners at both the 2025 Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition and the Bordeaux International String Quartet Competition, Opus13 is rapidly building a reputation on the international chamber music scene.

Named after Mendelssohn's youthful and passionate A Minor Quartet, Op.13 - the first piece they ever played together - the quartet was formed in Oslo in 2014 by four teenagers eager to dive into the world of string quartets. Opus13 comprises Norwegian violinists Sonoko Miriam Welde and Edvard Erdal, violist Albin Uusijärvi and cellist Daniel Thorell, both from Sweden.

In addition to performing the core string quartet repertoire by composers such as Mozart, Bartók, and Schubert, Opus13 are passionate ambassadors of Nordic classical and contemporary music, frequently programming works by Grieg, Stenhammar, Tarrodi, Byström, and Fagerlund. They also enjoy genre-crossing collaborations, having performed with Norwegian folk and popular music artists including Gjermund Larsen Trio, Sissel Kyrkjebø, and Sver.

Upcoming debuts include performances at Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Wigmore Hall London, Laeishalle Hamburg, Essen Philharmonie, Rotterdam De Doelen and Stockholm Konserthus. They present a three-season concert residency at Leeds International Chamber Series as well as festival projects at the Baltic Sea, Bergen, Bologna, Cheltenham and Banff Festivals. Opus13 return to South Korea for a series of performances and make their debut tour of Japan including performances in Osaka, Yokohama and Tokyo.

Opus13 collaborates with leading musicians such as Janine Jansen, Leif-Ove Andsnes, Tabea Zimmermann and Anne Sofie von Otter. Their musical development has been shaped by ongoing mentorships with Bjørg Lewis and Berit Cardas of the Vertavo Quartet and Tim Frederiksen. From 2025 the quartet has also studied with Prof. Oliver Wille (Kuss Quartett).

Opus13 are the founders and artistic directors of Vinterspill på Lillehammer, an annual chamber music festival in Lillehammer, Norway. They received the Borletti-Buitoni Award in spring 2026 and have been selected as BBC New Generation Artists from September 2026.