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Sunday 21 December

London Chamber Music Series

Dante Quartet

Presented in partnership with
The London Chamber Music Series

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Dante Quartet

Hall One, 6.30pm

Krycia Osostowicz	violin
Giles Francis	violin
Judith Busbridge	viola
Bernard Gregor-Smith	cello

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

String Quartet No 2 in A Minor 'For Jean on her Birthday'

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in D Major *Op 64 No 5* 'The Lark'

INTERVAL (20 minutes)

Ludwig Van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet in B Flat Major *Op 130*

Biography

The Dante Quartet, winner of the prestigious Royal Philharmonic Society Award for Chamber Music, is one of the finest string quartets in Britain. It is renowned for the imaginative programming and the emotional intensity of its performances. Founded in 1995, the group chose the name of Dante to reflect the idea of a great and challenging journey. The Dante Quartet plays at major concert halls, music societies and festivals throughout the UK, and in the past two years has appeared at the Aldeburgh, Bath, Cheltenham, Spitalfields, Hay, Brighton, Presteigne and City of London Festivals as well as at Wigmore Hall. In 2004 the quartet inaugurated its own chamber music festival at Launceston, North Cornwall, which proved highly successful and is now repeated annually. The quartet broadcasts regularly on BBC Radio 3 and has also performed in France, Holland, Spain, Switzerland, Poland and Finland. Last year saw the release of the Dante Quartet's latest CD of Janacek's string quartets, attracting enthusiastic reviews. Other recordings include Rubbra's quartets, romantic Russian works by Lyapunov and Gretchaninov and song cycles by Gurney and Vaughan Williams with tenor Andrew Kennedy. The Dante Quartet has recently released a highly acclaimed recording of the quartets of Faure and Franck. The quartet enjoys a special association with King's College, Cambridge, including master-classes, collaborations with the renowned King's College Choir and quartet concerts including poetry readings. It has taught at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, at Dartington and Cadenza Summer Schools and in Spain. Concert engagements are often combined with open rehearsals or workshops for young people and the Dante Quartet also offers special programmes to children in schools who might otherwise never hear live classical music. Several new commissions are under way in connection with the quartet's *Divine Comedy Project*, an invitation to composers to write music inspired by Dante's epic trilogy.

Ralph Vaughan Williams - String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor, 'For Jean on Her Birthday'

- I. Prelude: Allegro appassionato
- II. Romance: Largo
- III. Scherzo: Allegro
- IV. Epilogue: Andante sostenuto ('Greetings from Joan to Jean')

Ralph Vaughan Williams was acclaimed as the most important British composer of his generation for reinventing the styles of his late nineteenth-century predecessors, especially his compatriots. Today, we are likelier to recognise broader influences in his music, from the dynamism of the (post-)Beethovenian symphonic tradition, to the passion and magnificence of his music's goal-directed momentum. The Second String Quartet exhibits both qualities. Written from 1942-43, the quartet is a "satellite" work of the Fifth Symphony (1938-43/51): the two share not only their familiar post-Romantic musical language, but also more specific traits, such as ending in D major. The Menges Quartet gave the premiere of the quartet during a National Gallery concert in 1944 - the subtitle name-checks the work's dedicatee and the quartet's violist, Jean Stewart.

This explains why the viola is generally the quartet's most prominent instrument. This is true from the outset, when it emphatically opens the first movement with material that is developed virtually throughout. The viola also frames the 'Romance', although here the distribution between parts is more equal: all instrumental lines are marked *senza [without] vibrato* to maintain an absolutely "pure" texture, leading to a chorale-like passage in which Vaughan William's quintessential, modally-enriched language is the starting-point for another of dynamic climax. The viola opens the next movement, too, now with a theme borrowed from music for the film *The 49th Parallel*, against the muted *tremolo* figurations of the other instruments. Unusually for Vaughan Williams, the music here is almost cellular, albeit with a dense texture in keeping with the agitated passion of the 'Prelude'. The more serene 'Epilogue' has the subtitle 'Greetings from Joan to Jean' since its thematic material, introduced once more by the viola, was intended originally for a proposed film on Joan of Arc.

Franz Joseph Haydn - String Quartet in D Major, Op. 64, No. 5 [Hob. III: 63], 'The Lark'

- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Adagio - Cantabile
- III. Menuetto: Allegretto
- IV. Finale: Vivace

If Mozart's six quartets dedicated to Haydn (1782-85) exhibited all the elements of Classical quartet style as it has since been understood, then the reciprocal influence the set had on Haydn's own later quartets is no less important. The more serious tone of Haydn's earlier quartets, broadly speaking, was reconciled in his Opp. 50, 54/55 and 64 sets with a more popular touch. Technically, Haydn remained partial to an equal-voice texture and the cyclic integration of his quartets, but his counterpoint now became more extended, his writing more soloistic and harmonically broader. Haydn was less subtle in style but at the same time adhered to new standards, for example the minuet would almost always appear as the third movement, while the slow movements, in ternary, variation or double variation form, became more melodic.

Performed in London during Haydn's first visit there in 1791-92, Op. 64 is arguably

the most intimate set of Haydn's later quartets. The famous 'Lark' quartet (*Lerchenquartett*) is so called because of the first violin's entry high on the E string, although the technique is often used in the set since the quartets were written for the violinist Johann Tost. The concerto-like passagework of the *Allegro moderato* is another such consequence. Its dynamism and 'popular' feel are due as much to the close motivic work - especially in the harmonically remoter development - as the use of triplets which propel the music there and which overflow into the recapitulation. The exquisite *Adagio* frames its minor-key midpoint with major-key outer sections, each based on the same thematic material. The third movement opens playfully, its temperament broken for a short while only by the more 'learned' D-minor trio. This style is fleshed out during the dazzling interplay of the finale. The spectacle is made particularly effective thanks to Haydn's rapid figuration, which, incidentally, gave rise to the quartet's alternative, elapsed nickname, the 'Hornpipe'.

Ludwig van Beethoven - String Quartet in B flat Major, Op. 130

- I. Adagio ma non troppo - Allegro
- II. Presto
- III. Andante con moto, ma non troppo
- IV. Alia danza tedesca (Allegro assai)
- V. Cavatina (Adagio molto espressivo)
- VI. Finale (Allegro)

After a thirteen-year hiatus, Beethoven returned to the string quartet medium to pen a remarkable series of works that have been revered ever since their composition in 1823-26. The first three quartets, Opp. 127, 130 and 132 (Op. 131 came later), were commissioned by Prince Nikolai Balitzin. After completing the Ninth Symphony in 1824, Beethoven finished the three works the following year. The important exception to this chronology is that after completing the final Op. 135 quartet in 1826, Beethoven was persuaded by his publisher to compose a new finale to Op. 130. The new *Allegro* movement replaced the enigmatic, introspective *Grosse Fuge* [*Great Fugue*], which was published separately as Op. 133. Taken together, Beethoven's Late Quartets, as they are collectively known, push the structural implications of the sonata principle to new limits. The sheer proliferation of movements, beyond the conventional four, exhibits an unrelentingly ambitious impulse, yet with something of the effect of 'character pieces' in a Baroque suite. Coupled with the exploratory, often remote harmonies that distinguish each work, the quartets would soon transform the way in which the string quartet as a genre was understood.

The opening to Op. 130 is typically elusive - its thematicism has a deliberate sense of dissociation, with slow introductory material contrasted by the rapid semiquavers of the *Allegro*. Against these, a rising figure is heard intermittently in counterpoint, leading to a second subject in G flat. The brief, feverish Presto follows in the manner of a scherzo, but in the tonic (B flat) minor. The lower strings lead the way in the third movement, ostensibly cast in sonata form in D flat with several harmonic shifts. The following movement is effectively a second scherzo, now styled as a triple-metre dance with two contrasting trios. The old-fashioned reference to the tedesca should be simply taken to indicate 'the style of a *deutscher Tanz*'. Beethoven applied a similarly literal meaning to the cavatina (a songlike piece of instrumental music before its operatic appropriation), and he also took great pride in this intense movement and its anguished passage of recitative. The same might not be said of his "addendum" finale, a souped-up, Haydnesque effort that pales the radical *Grosse Fuge*.