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Sunday 12 October

LONDON CHAMBER MUSIC SERIES

Maggini Quartet

Curated by the
London Chamber Music Society

London Chamber Music Series

Since 1999 the London Chamber Music Society has managed the celebrated London concert series which can trace its origins to the Sunday concerts at South Place from the 1880s and then Conway Hall from 1929. Their legacy is extraordinary, the concerts having been associated with many important premieres and numerous famous performers over the years, including Henry Wood, Frank Bridge, Sammons, Ysaye and Percy Grainger. Now this much loved series finds a new home at Kings Place.

Hall One - 6.30pm

Maggini Quartet

Krysia Osostowicz *violin*
David Angel *violin*
Martin Outram *viola*
Michael Kaznowski *cello*

LudwigVan Beethoven (1770-1827)
String Quartet in G Op 18 No 2(1798)

Edmund Rubbra (1901-1986)
String Quartet No 2 in E flat Op 73 (1950-51)

INTERVAL (20 minutes)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
String Quartet in C minor Op 51 No 1 (1873)

Maggini Quartet

Formed in 1988, the Maggini Quartet is established as one of the finest British string quartets, both in performance and through its international award winning recordings, including those of Ireland, Bridge, Bax, Walton and Britten. The Quartet is renowned for championing British repertoire. The Maggini Quartet's commitment to new music has led to important commissions including James MacMillan's Second Quartet, Robert Simpson's Cello Quintet (his last work) and works by Eleanor Alberge and Roxanna Panufnik. This year the Quartet has already premiered Ronald Corp's String Quartet No 1 and a new work for string quintet and choir by Rozanna Panufnik. In 2009 the Magginis will be performing a new quartet by Michael Simpson.

The Quartet has much enjoyed their collaboration with Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, performing and recording his ten new "Naxos Quartets" over a five year period. Premieres have included the Wigmore Hall, Cheltenham Festival, Oslo Chamber Music Festival and the Purcell Room and all have been received with outstanding acclaim by audiences and critics. The Quartet appear regularly in prestigious concert series at home and abroad and is a frequent media broadcaster. Its initiative "The Glory of the English String Quartet" draws upon the wonderfully varied and distinctive repertoire, mostly from the first half of the 20th century, which the Quartet is committed to bringing to a worldwide audience through concert performances and an ongoing series of recordings for Naxos.

In addition to their concert activity, the members of the Quartet have an international reputation as chamber music coaches. They hold several UK residencies and their educational activities abroad have included coaching at Yale and Oberlin in the United States. The Quartet's name derives from the famous 16th century Breschian violin maker, Giovanni Paulo Maggini, an example of whose work is played by David Angel.

Ludwig van Beethoven - String Quartet in G Major, Op. 18, No. 2

- I. Allegro
- II. Adagio cantabile
- III. Scherzo (Allegro) & Trio
- IV. Allegro molto, quasi presto

The six Op. 18 quartets were Beethoven's first in the medium. Composed between 1798 and 1800, they explore the structural implications of the sonata principle, both in terms of the harmonies employed and how each instrument within the quartet is approached. In this first set of quartets alone, Beethoven's great achievements were to introduce new tonal areas and more complex work in counterpoint. These went hand-in-hand with a new approach to part-writing that put the instruments on a more equal footing. Beethoven's stature of course grew in competition with Haydn (whose Opp. 76/77 sets had been produced within the last three years) and Mozart (who had died only a few years earlier), not to forget the influence of Haydn's friend Dittersdorf, Johann Stamitz and other now obscure composers such as the Bohemian Rosetti and the Viennese Asplmayr. But each of Beethoven's innovations transformed the way in which the string quartet would be understood.

Op. 18, No. 2 was actually the third quartet Beethoven wrote, after Nos. 3 and 1. (The sequence of a published opus was decided on commercial, not musicological, grounds). With its clear, pleasing violin melody and restrained virtuosity, the first movement is distinctly Haydnesque, although the witty interplay between the instruments is a hint at how other movements might be characterised. The second movement appears conventional enough with a beautiful, yearning melody shared mainly between the first violin and viola. Then, on a hesitantly repeated motif, the "unison" ensemble writing is a marker that sees the quartet spin away, much faster, in an inconsequential country-dance vein. A decorated reprise of the opening melody completes a ternary pattern and so, for the first time in a quartet, Beethoven juggles with the relative functions of his movements. For good measure, the scherzo is based on a frolicsome theme that appears new but is related to the slow-movement melody. The final movement is more typical: the energetic conclusion exhibits Beethoven's mastery of tight motivic working and closely imitative textures.

Edmund Rubbra - String Quartet No. 2 in E flat Major, Op. 73

- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Scherzo polimetrico (Vivace assai)
- III. Cavatina
- IV. Finale

Despite the accelerated changes in music that occurred across the twentieth century, as a composer Edmund Rubbra (1901-1986) avoided most contemporary styles, domestic or foreign, and chose to follow his own path. He carved out a versatile early career as a composer, pianist and music critic, and Cyril Scott and Debussy were two of his first musical influences. But Rubbra did not fall into the common trap of "pastiche" either of these elder composers, nor his later teachers Hoist and, on occasion, Vaughan Williams. Rubbra's prolificness - his opus numbers stretch to 164, including eleven symphonies and much choral music - has sustained the posthumous reappraisal of his achievements. In the same way, the quartet heard this evening, composed in 1950 and his second of four in the genre, is the ideal example of how a work's fortunes might vary across time. When heard and recorded in the 1950s (by the Griller Quartet, who gave its national premiere), it was received poorly on the whole, being considered 'tired and academic' by one acerbic critic. Today, the same work is heralded as Rubbra's finest, and along with his cello sonata belongs at the pinnacle of his chamber music.

The quartet's expressive opening movement looks back to Beethoven in its compressed development of motifs; a rhapsodic freedom prevails and leads to a tranquil coda. By contrast, the second movement's virtuosic display of cross-rhythms corresponds with its unusual 'Scherzo polimetrico' title. There are shades of Tippett here too, although Rubbra took a more historic perspective when he described this stand-out movement as an 'essay in the unification of metrically diverse parts ... [written] to develop a procedure that is strongly in evidence in the Elizabethan madrigal and the instrumental Fancy.' Elsewhere, he also admitted to 'never know where a piece is going to go next... When I begin, my only concern is with fixing a starting point that I can be sure of... My imagination discovers the architecture for me.' This revelation is simpler to comprehend when hearing the following 'Cavatina', which gently unfolds its intuitive, flowing melody. Likewise, the colourful 'Finale' is Brahmsian in places, yet modal in others, but ends with another moment of serenity in its chorale-like coda.

Johannes Brahms - String Quartet in C Minor, Op. 51, No. 1

- I. Allegro
- II. Romanze. Poco adagio
- III. Allegretto molto moderato e comodo - Un poco piu animate
- IV. Allegro

In an age which had increasingly defined musical progress in terms of the symphony orchestra, Brahms did most to revive the refined, intimate sphere of chamber music and to define it for the later nineteenth century. The core of his chamber music centres not on string quartets - he would write only three - but rather quintets and sextets; Brahms claimed to have discarded twenty attempts to write a string quartet before publishing his first in 1873. The result, the Op. 51 pair of quartets, came after an eight-year hiatus in his chamber music, a period marked mainly by large choral works. In fact, both quartets were begun some years earlier. The second in A minor is the more overtly lyrical, but this C-minor quartet reflects a new phase in the composer's creativity, and comes closer to the more ambitious scale of the G-minor piano quartets (Opp. 25/26).

The thematic skill of this quartet's opening movement shows how Beethoven's examples had been understood, although its material is more restless and rarely relaxes into stable key regions. The 'Romanze', typically, has a quite different rhetoric, but the same Brahmsian opposition persists between its elongated, sustained themes and the usually submerged motivic work. (Helpfully for the listener, Schoenberg named as 'developing variation' the process by which Brahms's lyrical melodies were generated by motivic manipulation). Rather than focus its energy on a scherzo, the 'Allegretto' third movement has a lightness which he often used for contrast in a major work, and its "trio" section has the grace of a waltz. Brahms's dynamism and breathless density is restored by the final movement, and this also reveals most clearly the unifying thematic links between each movement.

