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# MARMEN QUARTET

Thursday 22 February, 7.30pm  
Djanogly Recital Hall

String Quartet in E flat, K428

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**

A Way A Lone

**Tōru Takemitsu**

## **Interval**

String Quartet in G minor, Op.10

**Claude Debussy**

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 ask for a headset from our front-of-house staff.

# PROGRAMME NOTES

String Quartet in E flat, K428

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)**

*Allegro non troppo*

*Andante con moto*

*Menuetto (Allegretto)*

*Allegro vivace*

1781, the year in which Mozart settled permanently in Vienna, also saw the publication of Haydn's string quartets Op.33, and it is from this time that the friendship between the two composers developed. On 31 December 1782, Mozart completed his string quartet K387 – his first work in the genre for almost a decade – but it is unlikely that he envisaged it as the first of a set of six dedicated to Haydn. Over the next two years, however, Mozart wrote five more quartets: K421 in D minor, K428 in E flat, K458 in B flat, K464 in A and K465 in C (the celebrated 'Dissonance' quartet). These works are a homage to Haydn not only in respect of their dedication, which speaks of them as the fruits of 'long and laborious effort', but also in their stylistic indebtedness to Haydn's Op.33 quartets. This is particularly apparent in the way each instrument plays a significant role in the musical discourse, the use – as an obvious consequence of this more equal status – of more contrapuntal writing, and even some perhaps unconscious thematic similarities.

The String Quartet K428 was composed in June and July 1783. It is one of three quartets in the set to place the slow movement second and the Minuet third (the others are K421 and K465). In the first edition, it appears as the fourth of the 'Haydn' quartets, though it was the third to be composed. Haydn's reaction to hearing these quartets at private performances in January and February 1785 was one of unbounded enthusiasm, famously remarking to Mozart's father, Leopold: 'I tell you before God, and as an honest man, that your son is the greatest composer I know, either personally or by reputation; he has taste and moreover, the greatest possible knowledge of the science of composition'.

The set of six quartets was published as Mozart's Op.X by the Viennese firm of Artaria in the Autumn of 1785 (the dedication is dated September), and remains as perhaps the most remarkable group of works ever dedicated by one great composer to another.

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Unlike so much of Western art music over the centuries, Takemitsu's work is not concerned with taking us from A to B in a single trajectory. Instead, it invites us to contemplate sound-spaces filled with carefully-placed objects – sensuous harmonies, melodic shapes, shifts of instrumental colour – moving from one to another as we might move among features in a garden (gardens are frequent images in much of his output).

The pace of this music is predominantly slow, but it is not the cosmic-scale slowness of a Bruckner, nor the fidgety slowness of minimalism. It is, rather, a timelessness, a paradoxical sense of both enclosed space and infinitely receding perspectives, as rich harmonic progressions, dense sonorities and exquisitely shaped solo melodic lines move in and out of each other. It would be easy to dismiss it all as floaty mood or background music, but it has a depth and vitality that repays close attention. And while Debussy and Messiaen are clear influences on his refined ear for instrumental and harmonic colour, Takemitsu has his own very individual voice.

*A Way A Lone* was written in 1980, commissioned by the Tokyo String Quartet to mark the group's tenth anniversary. It gave the world premiere in Carnegie Hall, New York, on 23 February 1981. Takemitsu also made a version for string orchestra, *A Way A Lone II*.

The title comes from the open-ended last words of James Joyce's famously cryptic novel *Finnegan's Wake*: “A way a lone a last a loved a long the”, which loop back to the book's opening: “riverrun, past Eve and Adam's...” so beginning the cycle again. *Riverrun* was the title Takemitsu chose for a work for piano and orchestra he composed in 1984; his 1980 work for violin and orchestra, *Far Calls. Coming, far!* also takes its title from Joyce's novel. Takashi Funayama, who has written extensively on Takemitsu's music, has called the three works his 'James Joyce Triptych'.

A principal character of *Finnegan's Wake* is Anna Livia Plurabelle, widely regarded as Joyce's personification of Dublin's River Liffey. That *A Way A Lone* is one of Takemitsu's many water pieces is confirmed by the presence of a three-note motif – S-E-A (S being the German Es, for E flat) – which recurs in a number of his works. It appears here often in its inverted form, so that it falls in pitch instead of rising. We first hear it about twenty seconds in, on the first violin, twice in quick succession, each time starting on a different note, and it is subtly present throughout the work.

Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite* is also a potent influence, not least in the way Takemitsu explores different playing techniques and sonorities. These include *glissandi* (slides from one note to the next), harmonics – the high-pitched, glassy, whistling tone that results from touching the string lightly at certain points, instead of pressing it down onto the finger-board – and playing with the bow immediately next to the bridge to produce a slightly rasping sound.

The music is built from short, contrasting phrases that flow into one another with a kind of dream-like logic. A number of contrapuntal passages – independent melodic lines weaving around each other – suggest Takemitsu consciously referring to the European string quartet tradition, as a number of writers have commented. The work culminates in three loud chords, accented and played *tremolando* (with the bows moving rapidly backwards and forwards), then fading away. The players, for the only time in the piece, then mute their instruments for the ethereal last bars.

*Animé et très décidé;*  
*Assez vif et bien rythmé;*  
*Andantino doucement expressif;*  
*Très modéré – très mouvementé et avec passion.*

Why did Debussy interrupt work on his first orchestral masterpiece, *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune*, to produce this string quartet in 1893, and why did he give it an opus number and designate a key, when he did so for none of his other works?

The answers to both questions may lie in his friendship with the composer Ernest Chausson. Chausson had sat in on César Franck's classes at the Paris Conservatoire (though he was never formally one of his pupils) and was strongly influenced by him. Debussy's own encounter with Franck had been brief and unsatisfactory. But Franck wrote the most notable French string quartet before Debussy's, in 1889, and the composition of Debussy's quartet suggests an attempt to come to terms with Franck's example, albeit at second hand, mediated through his friendship with Chausson. As for the key and opus number, and the designation 'First String Quartet' in the first published edition, they may well be an ironic acknowledgement, typical of Debussy's sense of humour, that, for the moment at least, he has one foot in the academic world of Franck and the Conservatoire. He does seem to have contemplated writing another quartet soon afterwards (if a letter to Chausson is to be taken at face value), but the idea came to nothing.

Debussy's attitude to Franck was to remain ambivalent. But though nothing else in his quartet suggests the direct influence of Franck's, he was attracted to the older composer's concept of cyclic form, in which the separate movements of a large-scale work are unified by continual transformations of a single theme. The String Quartet grapples in a concentrated way with the technique, which Debussy will also have encountered in Grieg's G minor String Quartet of 1878 (a strong influence on his own), and which also left its mark on later works such as *La Mer*.

The sonorous theme that launches the quartet, with its characteristic quick triplet figure in the very first bar, begins to undergo subtle changes of contour almost from the start. After the vigorous opening section, it appears on the cello, underpinning the first violin's gentle and expressive second theme, and it becomes the expansive theme for the first violin towards the end of the movement, shortly after the return of the opening music.

In the scherzo second movement the theme appears first as a sinuous *ostinato* (repeated) figure on the viola. This threads its way through a pizzicato texture which may be a recollection of the intricate sonorities of the Javanese gamelan music which Debussy heard at the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1889 (the pizzicato writing in the scherzo of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony may also have been an influence). The *ostinato* figure is later transformed into the broad song-like theme at the centre of the movement.

The slow movement explores a world of half-light and melancholy sweetness. The slightly quicker central section is dominated by another transformation of the quartet's main theme, first heard on the viola. We return to the mood of the movement's opening at the end, and out of this the finale slowly emerges, starting with the cello, unaccompanied. The music then gathers momentum ready for the passionately vigorous main part of the movement. At its heart is a quiet episode marked by the main theme's most expansive transformation yet. A pared-down version of the work's very opening launches the brisk final section, which reaches its tumultuous conclusion with Debussy still finding new perspectives on the quartet's main theme.

# MARMEN QUARTET

Johannes Marmen – Violin  
Laia Valentin Braun – Violin  
Bryony Gibson-Cornish – Viola  
Sinéad O’Halloran – Cello

With the courage, vitality and intensity of its performances, the Marmen Quartet is fast establishing itself as one of the most impressive and engaging talents in chamber music, demonstrated by recent first prizes at the prestigious Bordeaux and Banff International String Quartet Competitions.

The Marmen Quartet has performed at leading European venues including Wigmore Hall, Berlin Philharmonie, Boulez Saal, Frankfurt Alte Oper, Stockholm Konserthuset, Milton Court (Barbican), Palladium Malmö and Muziekgebouw Eindhoven, with festival appearances at BBC Proms, Lockenhaus, Mecklenburg Vorpommern, Rheingau, Heidelberg and Zeister Musiekdagen festivals and the Amsterdam, Barcelona and Gulbenkian Foundation String Quartet Biennale Festivals.

The quartet made its Australian debut in 2023 as part of the Australian National Academy of Music’s Quartetthaus project, which brings Australian and British contemporary music and quartets together in a listening space designed specially for quartet performances, for which the Marmen Quartet played a work written for them by Hannah Kendall. Previous commissions have included Salina Fisher’s work *Heal*, composed for them in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and commissioned by Chamber Music New Zealand.

In the 23/24 season, the quartet gives the premiere of a work by Garth Knox, written for them as a companion piece to Janáček’s ‘Intimate Letters’, commissioned for them by National String Quartet Foundation Ireland. Other European highlights include performances at Wigmore Hall, Hamburg Laeiszhalle, Amsterdam String Quartet Biennale, Mozartfest Würzburg and an extensive Swedish tour. Its debut recording for BIS Records will be released in 2024, featuring works by Ligeti and Bartók, with future plans for the label including Debussy, Ravel and Takemitsu.

In 2023, the group also spent time in the US, completing its time as Peak Fellowship Ensemble-in-Residence at the Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist University, in partnership with the Banff International String Quartet Competition. Other recent North American highlights have included performances in Calgary, Kelowna, Victoria and at the Capital Region Classical series, and the quartet returns for a tour of US and Canada in the 23/24 season.

Formed at the Royal College of Music in 2013, the Marmen Quartet held a Guildhall School of Music String Quartet Fellowship (2018–20) and studied at the Hochschule für Musik in Hannover with Oliver Wille, as well as in London with Simon Rowland-Jones and John Myerscough (Doric Quartet). They were mentored by the late Peter Cropper and have received support from the Musicians Company/Concordia Foundation, Hattori Foundation, Help Musicians and Royal Philharmonic Society (Albert and Eugenie Frost Prize). The Marmen Quartet is an official Pirastro Artist.