Lakeside Arts at Royal Concert Hall

SACCONI QUARTET

Thursday 17 June, 7pm

Programme Notes

Haydn String Quartet in C major, Op.54 No.2
Ravel String Quartet in F major
Schubert String Quartet No.13 in A minor, D.804, Op.29 'Rosamunde'

String Quartet in C, Op.54 No.2 **Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)**

1. Vivace
2. Adagio
3. Menuetto. Allegretto
4. Finale. Adagio – presto – adagio

The twelve quartets that comprise Haydn's Opp 54, 55, and 64 were written between 1788 and 1790, in the last years of his long first period of service to the Esterházy family. He originally conceived Opp 54 and 55 as a single set of six quartets but they were divided into two sets of three by the Paris publisher Jean-Georges Sieber, something that was becoming increasingly common towards the end of the 1780s.

The three sets are usually known, collectively, as the 'Tost' Quartets. Johann Tost was a violinist in the Esterházy orchestra from 1783 to 1788; he is thought to be the same person as the Johann Tost who established a prosperous business in Vienna in the 1790s and gained a considerable reputation as an amateur musician. Haydn entrusted him with selling the quartets, together with his Symphonies Nos 88 and 89, to publishers in Paris when he went to live there for a few years in 1788.

Op.54 No.2 is one of Haydn's most remarkable quartets. The bold opening sets the tone, with abrupt silences separating its opening phrases, and a sudden plunge into the distant key of A flat, from which the music returns to C almost casually, as though nothing had happened. When the opening returns at the recapitulation, those silences are artfully filled in by the first violin, and the second main theme swings off on a new development of its own.

The measured, solemn beginning to the short slow *adagio* scarcely prepares us for the rhapsodic, improvisatory solo for the first violin which suddenly breaks loose and continues for the rest of the movement. This is one of the more extreme examples of the wildness which often shows through the urbane, polished exterior of Haydn's music. The minuet follows without a break after a half-cadence. Except for the kind of irregular phrasing which is a frequent feature of Haydn's minuet movements, it is deceptively uncomplicated. The unexpected twist into a minor key which launches the central trio section is all the more of a shock as a result. Normally this would be the most relaxed section of a classical four-movement work, the last place you would expect to find music of such powerful harmonic and emotional intensity.

And so this extraordinary quartet becomes more and more extraordinary as it goes on. The finale begins with a slow introduction – except that it is too long and wide-ranging to be just an introduction. The presto, when it finally arrives, is over in a moment, and the slow music returns to close the quartet in a pensive mood that is worlds away from the exuberance we normally associate with Haydn's instrumental finales.

String Quartet in F **Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)**

1. Andante moderato. Très doux
2. Assez vif. Très rythmé
3. Très lent.
4. Vif et agité

Composed in 1902 and 1903, Ravel's String Quartet belongs to the period of his earliest maturity. Two years previously he had written his first fully characteristic work, the piano piece *Jeux d'Eau*, and the Quartet was followed by the orchestral song-cycle *Schéhérazade*. Both *Jeux d'Eau* and the Quartet had already been publicly performed when, for the fifth time, he entered for the prestigious Prix de Rome, open to final-year students at the Paris Conservatoire. When he was disqualified from the later rounds of the competition, expressions of outrage appeared in sections of the French musical press. By the end of the year the Conservatoire's Director, Théodore Dubois, had resigned, and his place was taken by Ravel's teacher, Gabriel Fauré (though, as Roger Nichols points out in his book on the composer, the *affaire Ravel* seems merely to have brought forward a retirement that Dubois had already planned).

There are obvious similarities between Ravel's Quartet and the one by Debussy, written in 1893. In both, the second movement is a scherzo played predominantly *pizzicato* (plucked), followed by an introspective slow movement, and both have a central theme which appears in all four movements, in various states of transformation. Debussy, possibly flattered by the similarity, liked the younger man's work very much; according to Ravel's friend, the violinist Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, "he urged Ravel not to change anything, even though others had expressed reservations."

While some resemblances to Debussy's Quartet are undeniable, the confidence of Ravel's own mature musical language makes an even bigger impression. The cool, limpid tone of the opening is characteristic, as is the clarity and precision of even the most heavily scored passages.

But the quartet, like Ravel's music as a whole, is about more than just elegance and clarity. The scherzo is driven by a nervy rhythmic impetus derived from the interplay of 3/4 and 6/8 metres. The slow middle section is more wistful, and is very hesitant in allowing the opening section to come round a second time. The main theme of the slow movement, marked 'very calm', is constantly threatened by disruptive elements such as the jabbing figure of the first two bars.

Like the scherzo, the finale plays two opposing metres off against each other, but this time presented in alternating extended passages, rather than being superimposed. The hard driving 5/8 metre of the opening gives way to a slightly more relaxed 3/4 time, bringing with it new versions of the first movement's principal themes.

Ravel dedicated the quartet "to my dear master, Gabriel Fauré". He used to enjoy telling the story of how Fauré at first reacted unfavourably to the work, but a few days later asked to see the score again. When Ravel asked why, Fauré replied "I may have been wrong."

String Quartet in A minor, D804 **Franz Schubert (1797-1828)**

1. Allegro ma non troppo
2. Andante
3. Menuetto. Allegretto
4. Allegro moderato

On 31 March 1824 Schubert wrote to his friend, the painter Leopold Kupelweiser, in a state of apparent depression, mainly over his health (he had experienced the first symptoms of syphilis by the end of 1822). But he was also full of plans for a change of musical direction. A return to instrumental composition had produced two string quartets and an octet, and he intended to write a third quartet, all with the aim of working towards a large-scale symphony.

The two quartets he mentioned are the A minor work, and the one in D minor, known as 'Death and the Maiden'. He dedicated them to the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, leader of the ensemble that was closely involved in Beethoven's later quartets. Beethoven was Schubert's musical hero, and the dedication reflected his intention to establish himself as a composer of large-scale instrumental music worthy of the comparison. Schuppanzigh was pleased with the A minor Quartet (although he was highly critical of the D minor), and his ensemble gave the first performance on 14 March 1824, the only occasion when one of Schubert's quartets was played complete in public during his lifetime.

There is an unmistakeable air of nostalgia and regret over the work. The Schubert scholar John Reed called A minor "Schubert's key of deprivation and alienation". The theme which opens the first movement is wistful, verging on the melancholic, presented in a song-like melody-and-accompaniment texture. A transition passage uses the melody's first three notes to whip up an air of turbulence, and the pull between the two moods is felt throughout the movement.

The *andante* is based on the theme of the B flat Entr'acte from Schubert's incidental music for *Rosamunde*. This was his last major score for the theatre, in which he expended some magnificent music on a, by all accounts, hopelessly convoluted play. Was he merely salvaging one of his best tunes, or looking back regretfully to something that might have been? Whatever the answer to that, there can be little doubt of his intentions in the third movement. He called it a minuet but it is more of a melancholy waltz, quoting as it does his 1819 Schiller setting *Die Götter Griechenlands* (The Greek Gods), the text of which begins "Beautiful world, where are you?"

The nostalgic tone of the quartet so far is only partially lifted by the finale, an idealised rustic dance. The mood is relaxed and amiable at first, but there is tension in the more tightly rhythmic second theme. The music eventually reaches its climax in a heart-stopping moment when the momentum is abruptly broken off, as though a mounting sense of hysteria is arrested only just in time. The moment soon passes, but it casts a long shadow.

Sacconi Quartet

The award-winning Sacconi Quartet are known for their refreshing and imaginative approach performing unanimously as a compelling ensemble. Their style and integrity to interpreting music has made them world-renowned musicians since forming in 2001. Their four founder members continue to demonstrate a shared passion for string quartet repertoire, infectiously reaching out to audiences with their energy and enthusiasm. With a busy international career, The Sacconi Quartet are seen regularly performing at major European venues, in recordings and radio broadcasts and are in Association at the Royal College of Music and Quartet in Residence in Folkestone.

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