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A “virtual” Coffee Concert recorded at the Holywell Music Room, Oxford

Sunday April 4, 2021 at 11:15

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Virtual Coffee Concerts are pre-recorded at the Holywell Music Room in Oxford and are streamed from our YouTube channel at 11:15 on Sunday mornings. (These recordings are available for a limited time after release but, of course, there will be more to come.)

The Adderbury Ensemble with Fiona Cross (clarinet)

- **Brahms: Clarinet Quintet in B minor, op 115**
- **Beethoven: String Quartet no 2 in G major, op 18 no 2**

Fiona Cross

Fiona Cross is one of the leading clarinet players of her generation. She combines chamber music with a solo career and playing guest principal clarinet with all the leading British orchestras. She is principal clarinet of the Manchester Camerata and joint principal clarinet of the Brighton Philharmonic Orchestra. She has performed concertos with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Bournemouth Sinfonietta, Manchester Camerata and the English Sinfonia. She has performed chamber music with various ensembles including the Vanbrugh and Alberni string quartets, Kegelstatt Trio, New Music Players, LPO Ensemble and Adderbury Ensemble. She was also invited to perform chamber music with Andreas Schiff at his festival in Weimar.

Fiona has recorded the Lefanu Concertino for Naxos, the Horowitz concerto for Dutton, the Simpson clarinet quintet for Hyperion and a virtuoso CD of clarinet and harp music for the Dinmore label. She takes a keen interest in promoting new music and has commissioned many new works for clarinet and piano and clarinet and harp. She has given many recitals in all the major venues in Britain, including London's South Bank Centre, as well as performing in many of the established music clubs and festivals. She is a professor of clarinet at Trinity College of Music, London.

Adderbury Ensemble

Formed in 1986 by a group of the UK's finest young freelance musicians, the Adderbury Ensemble have always had a flexible line-up, mixing and matching different players to

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deliver performances primarily as quartets, quintets or small chamber groups and occasionally adding further instruments to play symphonies and concertos by the likes of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn or Brahms – with or without a conductor.

Everyone who performs as part of the Adderbury Ensemble is an eminent instrumentalist, usually a principal player with one or more of the leading orchestras of Europe. From their early years playing Sunday evening concerts in the beautiful village of Adderbury in north Oxfordshire, the group have gone on to develop a global reputation. They perform regularly throughout Britain and other European nations, and played their first concerts in the United States

in Spring 2016. They also helped found the world-famous Oxford Coffee Concerts at the Holywell Music Room, the oldest purpose-built music venue in Europe.

The Adderbury Ensemble have released ten recordings in their own right since their first CD was released in 1997, and individual members have recorded many more, either as soloists or as members of other groups.

The players for today's concert:

David Le Page (violin)

Chris Windass (violin)

Vanessa McNaught (viola)

Jane Fenton (cello)

More information:

<https://www.adderburyensemble.com/>

Clarinet Quintet in B minor, op 115 by Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

1. Allegro; 2. Adagio; 3. Andantino – presto non assai, ma con sentimento; 4. Con moto.

When Brahms completed his G major String Quintet, op 111 in 1890, he intended it to be his last work. "It really is time to stop," he wrote to his publisher, Fritz Simrock. The following year he met the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld, whose playing of Mozart and Weber so haunted him that, during the summer, he produced the Clarinet Quintet and the Trio for clarinet, cello and piano, op 114. Three years later, he added the two clarinet sonatas, op 120.

The grace and sensitivity of Mühlfeld's playing earned him the nickname "Fräulein Klarinette". Brahms called him "my primadonna". All four works reflect this characteristic in clarinet writing which calls much more for refinement and delicacy than for virtuoso display. Together they form a body of work whose essence is neatly

summed up by Brahms's biographer, Jan Swafford: "Perhaps the clarinet pieces are the only true love songs to an instrument Brahms ever wrote."

The quintet is the supreme masterpiece of Brahms's last years. It combines the concentrated introspection and melancholy of many of the late piano pieces with his characteristic flowing lyricism. But the music also has a vigorous sense of purpose, and Brahms's musical intelligence is evident, as always, in the structural ingenuity which subtly unifies much of its material. In the first movement, for example, the broad first and second themes, and the sturdier theme linking them, all grow from the two distinct ideas contained in the opening four bars.

An atmosphere of achingly tender, almost breathless, quiet begins and ends the adagio. In startling contrast, the middle section, which the clarinet flags up with echoes of the first movement's opening, contains some of Brahms's most impassioned music, a last rhapsodic dallying with the gypsy music he had loved for so long, with wild flourishes for the clarinet and tremolando writing for the strings suggesting the dulcimer-like instrument of Eastern Europe, the cimbalom.

The third movement's tender, song-like opening theme is soon transformed, with

characteristically Brahmsian sleight-of-hand, into a spirited, but still rather subdued, presto. A brief snatch of the theme in its original form provides a gentle close.

A set of five variations on a rather wistful theme rounds off the work – in the literal sense of bringing it full circle. The last variation, in a quick triple time, continually hints at the Quintet's very opening. This eventually returns to close the work in a final benediction shot through with deep sadness and pain.

String Quartet no 2 in G major, op 18 no 2 by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

**1. Allegro; 2. Adagio cantabile – allegro – tempo 1;
3. Scherzo. Allegro; 4. Allegro molto quasi presto.**

When Beethoven settled in Vienna in 1792 it was as a pianist that he first made his name. To build a reputation as a composer he seems to have had a deliberate plan, writing works for himself to play (several piano sonatas and two concertos), while carefully avoiding the string quartet and the symphony, genres particularly associated with his teacher, Haydn. His first large-scale works for string ensemble were for trio – not a limbering-up exercise for writing quartets as has sometimes been supposed, since the medium is actually a trickier one to handle successfully. It was not until 1798 that he began work on a group of six quartets, by which time Haydn had composed his last completed set of quartets.

In spite of the confidence shown in his earlier works, Beethoven seems to have had problems tackling the quartet medium. He radically revised nos 1 and 2 of the op 18 set, and possibly no 3 also, before they reached their final form. Sending the new version of no 1 to

his violinist friend Karl Amenda in 1801, he commented: "...only now do I know how to write quartets properly". In the case of No 2, he discarded the original second movement and wrote a completely new one (the original was reconstructed from sketches by Beethoven scholar Barry Cooper, and first performed by the Quatuor Danel at Manchester University on 29 September 2011).

No 2 is thought to be the third of the set to be written. On first acquaintance it would seem to be the least forward-looking of the group. The first violin's opening flourish and the dapper little theme it leads to suggest a world of classical grace and elegance, rather than the work of a late eighteenth-century tearaway. All the time, though, Beethoven is playing with his audience's perceptions; he is particularly fond of subverting our expectations as to which key the music is going to next. And there's a moment of genuine comedy when the cello gets in early with the opening theme at the

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recapitulation (when the music returns to its starting point), creating a moment of confusion and frayed tempers, before everything settles down again.

The adagio continues to pull the rug from under our feet. The opening section is grave and serene with some florid writing for the first violin. But no sooner has this come to rest than Beethoven picks up its closing figure and uses it to launch an energetic allegro which bustles along like a scene from an Italian comic opera. The return of the

opening music is just as abrupt; now it is even more highly decorated than before. The scherzo is a deft, sprightly affair, with nimble, quick-witted exchanges between the instruments, and a trio section whose mock-four-square solidity is quickly dispelled by racing triplet figures.

The cello leads off the brisk, purposeful finale. Here again, Beethoven plays with some unexpected key changes, not just to keep us alert but also to tie up some loose ends from earlier movements.

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