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

Sunday May 2, 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 Consone Quartet

- **Haydn: String Quartet no 41 in D major, op 50 no 6, Hob III:49 (“The Frog”)**
- **Mendelssohn: String Quartet no 6 in F minor, op 80**

The first period instrument quartet to be selected as BBC New Generation Artists, the Consone Quartet are fast making a name for themselves with their honest and expressive interpretations of classical and early romantic repertoire. Their debut CD (released in 2018 on the French Ambronay Label) explores music by Haydn and Mendelssohn, and was met with great critical acclaim as a recording “that instantly leaps out of the stereo at you as something special” (The Strad, 2019.)

Formed in 2012 at the Royal College of Music in London, the Consone Quartet are winners of the 2016 Royal Over-Seas League Ensemble Prize in London, having previously been awarded two prizes at the 2015 York Early Music International Young Artists Competition, including the EUBO Development Trust Prize and a place on the EEEmerging Scheme in France.

The quartet has been enthusiastically received at London’s Wigmore Hall, King’s Place, St Martin-in-the-Fields and at the Edinburgh, Cheltenham, and King’s Lynn Festivals amongst others. The Brighton and York Early Music Festivals have been key Consone supporters over the past few years and regularly host the group.

Keen to enhance their international reputation, the quartet has performed at the Paris Philharmonie String Quartet Biennial and the Lyon Auditorium in France, at the Concertgebouw, Brugge and AMUZ in Belgium, twice at the REMA Showcase, the Concerts d’été à St Germain in Switzerland and at other venues in Italy, Austria, Bulgaria, Slovenia, as well as on tour in Bolivia and Peru.

Consone always enjoy collaborating with fellow musicians, including the Fitzwilliam

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String Quartet, members of the Hanover Band, Anneke Scott, Simone Jandl, Mahan Esfahani, Justin Taylor, Gillian Keith, Jane Booth and Ashley Solomon. The quartet has previously worked with students of the Royal College of Music and is currently appointed at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama as Chamber Music Fellows for 2020/2021.

In 2020 the group was scheduled to perform at the Tanglewood Festival in the US, at the BBC Proms and at the Ryedale and Buxton Festivals amongst others, but due to the pandemic these dates have either been cancelled or postponed. In 2021 Consone is looking forward to a return to the Wigmore Hall and a tour of Japan later in the year.

More information: www.consonequartet.com

String Quartet no 41 in D major, op 50 no 6, Hob III:49 by Josef Haydn (1732-1809)

1. Allegro; 2. Poco adagio; 3. Menuetto. Allegretto; 4. Finale. Allegro con spirito.

Haydn's six op 50 quartets were his first since op 33 of 1781, with the exception of the single D minor Quartet, op 42, dating from 1785. In the meantime, Mozart had composed a set of six quartets which he dedicated to Haydn, and which were prompted by his example. These, in turn, may well have encouraged Haydn to return to the medium. In a remarkable burst of creative energy, he composed the eighteen quartets that make up opp 50, 54, 55 and 64 between 1787 and 1790.

By now he was established as the most eminent composer in Europe, with publishers queuing up to acquire the rights to his latest works and a steady stream of commissions, in addition to his commitments with his employer, Prince Nicolaus Esterházy. Op 50 was commissioned by his regular publisher, Artaria and Co, in 1784, although it was to be another three years before the set of six was complete. It is dedicated to King Frederick Wilhelm II of Prussia, an enthusiastic cellist who was to be the recipient of Mozart's last three quartets, written in 1790. Although the cello does have its moments in the spotlight, Haydn, unlike Mozart, seems not to have gone out of his way to give it an especially prominent role. He is known to have written at

least two of the quartets *before* he decided on the dedication.

The opening allegro of no 6 is one of those movements in which Haydn plays games with our sense of musical perspective. The opening gesture is a final cadence acting as an introduction. But it is more than that. Its initial falling scale figure becomes an important motif in its own right, and at the start of the second half of the movement Haydn reveals the entire phrase's potential for steering the music in new and unexpected directions.

The second movement begins in a brooding D minor, which gives the normally lilting siciliano rhythm a distinctly sorrowful air. The emotional intensity is heightened as the music explores a sequence of remote keys – D flat major and E major – ending in a D major which is not quite the tranquil resolution of the preceding tension it might at first appear.

Haydn adopted the term 'scherzo' for quick inner movements for the first time in op 33, but reverted to 'minuet' for op 50. In no 6 the minuet is characterised by its crisp, rhythmic figures. The rhythms of the central trio section are more smoothly homogenised, though

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disrupted by sudden silences at a couple of points towards the end.

The finale opens with an effect that recurs a number of times. The first violin uses a technique called *bariolage*, which involves playing a single repeated note alternately on adjacent strings to exploit the resulting subtle changes of tone. The quartet owes its

nickname to this effect, which apparently put someone in the 19th Century in mind of a frog croaking. A wistful minor key theme provides some expressive contrast. At the end, the other instruments decide they want to try a bit of *barriolage* themselves – first the second violin and viola, tucked away in the middle of the texture so as not to sound too pushy, then the cello, more openly, and finally the upper three instruments together, bringing the quartet to a nicely tongue-in-cheek ending.

String Quartet no 6 in F minor, op 80 by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

1. Allegro assai – presto; 2. Allegro assai; 3. Adagio; 4. Finale. Allegro molto.

In May 1847, Mendelssohn returned to Germany from his last visit to England. Passing through Frankfurt on his way home, he received the shattering news of his beloved sister Fanny's sudden death. The shock, added to his own precarious state of health, left him for a while completely unable to compose. A holiday in Switzerland partly restored his well-being, and he set to work on the F minor string quartet, which was to be his last major composition. The piece is a great welling-up of all the turbulent, stormy emotions that occasionally show through the urbane exterior of his music. This is perhaps the least familiar side of his musical character. Although there are other examples in his work (the aria "Is not His Word like a fire?" from *Elijah*, for one), none of them quite prepares us for the sustained, bitter intensity of this quartet.

We know where we are, emotionally, from the very first bar. The agitated tremolandos which propel the opening theme so forcefully are actually quite sparingly used, but they set the tone for the whole movement. In such a context the lyrical relaxation afforded by the second main theme seems so fleeting as to be illusory. In the end, the emotional pressure builds up to

such an extent that an increase of speed to presto in the coda is needed to contain it.

Even so, the turbulence spills over into the second movement. Quite unlike Mendelssohn's usual light, airy way with scherzo movements, this is positively savage in its relentless, syncopated energy. With the adagio comes a degree of relief, but only to begin with. The main theme is in Mendelssohn's typically suave melodic vein, but off-the-beat accompanying chords keep nudging it forward towards a tense, dissonant climax.

The agitation of the first two movements breaks out with renewed force in the finale. The main theme, like the second movement's, is propelled by its syncopated rhythm. At the recapitulation – the climactic moment when the music returns to its starting point – triplet figures begin to take over the texture, like the tarantella rhythm that Mendelssohn had used so often before, but to very different effect; here it suggests grim energy rather than high spirits. The final impression is of tragedy, not so much overcome, as met head-on with stoic determination.

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