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

Sunday May 30, 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 Carsaig Quartet

- **Webern: Five Movements for String Quartet, op 5**
- **Janáček: String Quartet no 1, JW VII/8 (“Kreutzer Sonata”)**
- **Haydn: String Quartet in D major, op 76 no 5, Hob III:79**

Juliette Roos (violin)
Charlotte Spruit (violin)
Miguel Sobrinho (viola)
Findlay Spence (cello)

The Carsaig Quartet was established in 2019, bringing together four award-winning young musicians from the UK, the Netherlands, and Portugal. (The quartet is named after an exceptionally beautiful cove in the Western Isles of Scotland, close to where its members first met and played together.)

Following performances alongside the Doric String Quartet at the Mendelssohn on Mull Festival, the Carsaig Quartet began to establish itself with engagements across the UK. The quartet is closely mentored by the Doric Quartet, David Waterman and Alina Ibragimova, and has taken part in several

projects arranged by Richard Ireland’s ChamberStudio in London.

The Carsaig Quartet has been selected as Kirckman Artists in 2021-22 and is set to make its major London debut later in the year. (The Kirckman Concert Society promotes young artists of exceptional talent.) As an official selection of the McGill International String Quartet Academy in Montreal, the quartet also has the opportunity to study with members of the Alban Berg, Artemis and Ebene quartets.

This season sees the Carsaig Quartet performing at the Chipping Campden Chamber Music Festival, Conway Hall and Romsey Chamber Music Festival as well as the Holywell Music Room, and it has been re-invited for a major residency in association

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with the Mendelssohn on Mull Festival. This includes performances throughout the year across Scotland. Its selection Musethica artists will see the quartet perform throughout Europe in a wide range of venues, from concert halls to schools and prisons.

The Carsaig Quartet has appeared at several London venues including St Martin-in-the-Fields and has had a performance broadcast

and been interviewed on National German Radio. Upcoming tours include dates in the Netherlands and Portugal.

The quartet has worked with luthiers at WE Hill & Sons to 'premiere' a new quartet of instruments. It is privileged to perform on exceptional instruments by Rocca, Grancino, and Robert Brewer Young.

More information:
<https://www.carsaigquartet.com>

Five Movements for String Quartet, op 5 by Anton Webern (1883-1945)

- 1. Heftig bewegt/Etwas ruhiger (violently moving/rather calmer);**
- 2. Sehr langsam (very slow);**
- 3. Sehr bewegt (very agitated);**
- 4. Sehr langsam;**
- 5. In zarter Bewegung (gently moving).**

Schoenberg and his pupils Berg and Webern weren't the only composers exploring the idea of atonal music – music without a sense of key - at the start of the twentieth century, but they are the ones we usually think of first. Together with Schoenberg's later formulation of twelve-note serial technique, this development is still viewed by some as a wilful act of vandalism against the very nature of music itself. Schoenberg and his colleagues saw it differently. For them, working at a late stage of the Austro-German tradition, with the old certainties fast disappearing, there was simply nowhere else to go.

Part of the difficulty in coming to terms with what, for many, is still an unprecedented world of musical expression, is not that the music which results is inexpressive, but that it is almost too expressive for comfort, exploring emotional and psychological states of exceptional intensity, often subject to bewilderingly rapid changes. The term 'expressionism' is usually applied to the results, which can be compared to similar qualities in much of the painting and literature of the period. With this intensity came extreme brevity and concision, since without the ready-made framework of a text, purely instrumental pieces

could not be sustained for any length of time. The problem appears in a particularly acute form in Webern's work from this period. His already succinct and laconic style reached a new level of concentration in these Five Movements, which he composed for string quartet in the summer of 1909, and transcribed for string orchestra in 1928. The music is in a constant state of flux, with minimum repetition, and with landmarks which tend to become recognisable only after several hearings.

Webern takes his listeners through unsettling contrasts of mood, heightened still further by his exploration of a wide range of string playing techniques – pizzicato (plucked), tremolando (moving the bow rapidly backwards and forwards), harmonics (notes with a clear, whistling sound made by just touching the strings lightly at certain points with the left hand instead of pressing them down), col legno (tapping the strings with the wood of the bow), sul ponticello (bowing close to the bridge to produce a husky, rasping sound), and using mutes. Tiny motifs, of sometimes no more than two or three notes, even isolated single notes, carry an expressive weight out of all proportion to their brevity.

The hyperactive first movement alternates two tempos – one fast and energetic, the other slower and more lyrical, though expressively the distinction between the two is not always clear-cut. The instruments are muted for the delicate, intangible second movement, with its gentle opening viola theme, while the ominous march-rhythm of the third culminates in a

ferocious unison statement for all four instruments. The remaining two movements return to the subtle, refined world of the second, with the instruments muted once more. No 4 seems to be trying to express some inexpressible grief, while the last offers a hesitant attempt at consolation.

String Quartet no 1, JW VII/8 (“Kreutzer Sonata”) by Leos Janáček (1854-1928)

**1. Adagio/Con moto; 2. Con moto – meno mosso;
3. Con moto – vivo – andante; 4. Con moto – adagio – più mosso.**

“It seemed that entirely new impulses, new possibilities, were revealed to me in myself, such as I had not dreamed of before. Such works should be played only in grave, significant conditions, and only then when certain deeds corresponding to such music are to be accomplished.”

The narrator of Tolstoy’s short novel *The Kreutzer Sonata* has just heard the Beethoven violin sonata in question played by his wife and a visitor to their home. The performance inflames the husband’s possessive jealousy and precipitates his murder of his wife.

Tolstoy’s denunciation of unbridled passions and the situations which encourage them (including, in his view, music) has been dismissed by Janáček’s biographer, Mirka Zemanková, as “a rather pathetic, misogynistic product of his old age”, but in the composer’s hands it became a protest against tyrannical male attitudes towards women. “I had in mind a poor woman, tormented, beaten, battered to death”, he wrote to Kamila Stösslová, the young woman who inspired in him the strange, virtually one-sided relationship which was the dominant emotional force of his last ten years or so.

The quartet was written in 1923, in response to a request from the Czech Quartet (whose second violinist was the composer Josef Suk,

Dvořák’s star pupil and son-in-law). In 1907 Janáček had composed a piano trio based on Tolstoy’s story. This is now lost, but it is believed to have quoted from Beethoven’s sonata. It seems likely that the quartet re-worked some of the trio’s material (without the Beethoven quotation, if any), but such earlier music as it may contain has been thoroughly assimilated into Janáček’s uniquely personal late style, with its abrupt, vivid contrasts, short pithy motifs and folk-like melodies.

The impassioned two-bar motif which opens the quartet alternates with a springing polka tune. Two new ideas follow this opening section: a flowing lyrical theme for the three upper instruments in turn, and a lively arpeggio figure based on the opening motif and divided, at first, between the two violins. A quiet echo of the opening motif brings this turbulent movement to a close.

Polka rhythms also play a major part in the second movement. Contrast is provided by two ideas: first, a slowly descending figure played *sul ponticello* by the viola, second violin and first violin in turn; second, against a persistent triplet figure, a short melodic idea which will become increasingly passionate as the movement proceeds.

The third movement begins with a searing passage of dialogue between the gentle opening theme, marked ‘*leggiero, paventoso*’ (lightly, fearfully), and a savage repeated

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figure which is a speeded-up version of its last four notes. These same four notes are stretched into a new figure, the main idea of the anguished central section. The movement ends with a brief recollection of the opening.

The quiet, muted opening of the finale brings back the opening motif from the first

movement, alternating with a melancholy theme for the first violin. Elements from both these ideas combine in a new theme played first by the viola. Through a series of abruptly contrasted episodes the music reaches its tempestuous climax in yet another new variant of the first movement's opening motif, before its unexpectedly brief, understated conclusion.

String Quartet in D major, op 76 no 5, Hob III:79 by Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

**1. Allegretto – allegro; 2. Largo ma non troppo. Cantabile e mesto;
3. Menuetto. Allegro; 4. Finale. Presto.**

The six works that make up Haydn's op 76, and the two of op 77, are the rich final harvest of his long experience with the string quartet. Over the preceding forty years or so he had developed it from the lightweight divertimento style of its origins in the late 1750s into one of the most important of all instrumental genres. There is no sense, though, of him consciously looking back or summing up his achievements. On the contrary, he is still expanding and developing his approaches to structure, melody, harmony and texture.

Op 76 was composed between 1796 and 1797, commissioned by Count Joseph Erdödy, a member of an aristocratic Viennese family with keen musical interests, but whose precise relationship to Haydn is unclear. Although they were written, like most of Haydn's quartets, for small gatherings of connoisseurs, he had recently returned from his second visit to London, with the novel experience of hearing his quartets played to large paying concert audiences, and this leaves its mark on much of his writing in these last works.

The first movement of no 5 is unusual. For only the second time, Haydn begins a string quartet with a set of variations in a moderate tempo. The theme is an easy-going, genial melody in two halves, each repeated in a more decorated form. Just as unusually, the first variation is in D minor (minor-key variations normally come

towards the end). The second variation returns to D major, but is unexpectedly short, breaking off before the final, third, variation, which suddenly races off at a faster tempo.

This comparatively lightweight opening focuses attention on the largo as the pivotal point around which the rest of the quartet revolves. Lasting over half as long as the other three movements put together, it is one of Haydn's most profound slow movements, full of a kind of tender melancholy (cantabile e mesto = 'song-like and sad'), in the remote key of F sharp major, which gives the music a kind of veiled radiance.

After that it is only to be expected that the mood of the minuet is relatively restrained at first. The trio section even dips into the minor key, beginning low in the cello. But by the start of the finale Haydn's tongue is firmly in his cheek. For one thing he starts with the ending – the gesture repeated five times to launch the movement is usually employed as a final cadence. But this isn't just an introduction; it becomes an essential part of the music's fabric, along with the frisky theme that follows on the first violin, then the cello. The result is one of Haydn's most ebullient quartet finales, which he rounds off by showing that the opening gesture is an ending after all.

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