

Belcea Quartet

Corina Belcea *violin*
Krzysztof Chorzelski *viola*

Laura Samuel *violin*
Alasdair Tait *cello*

The Belcea Quartet are rapidly gaining an enviable reputation as one of the leading quartets of the younger generation. They continue to take the British and international chamber music circuit by storm, consistently receiving impressive critical acclaim for their performances. Since the autumn of 2001, they have been the **Resident Quartet of Wigmore Hall** and, in July 2002, embarked on an exclusive recording contract with EMI Classics.

The Belcea Quartet's initial recording for EMI was for the debut series and comprised the quartets of Debussy, Ravel and Dutilleux. This disc won the 2001 Gramophone Award for the best debut recording and, in the autumn of 2002, their first recording on the EMI main label of Schubert quartets was released to great critical acclaim. Their latest disc is due for release in January 2004 and couples Brahms's String Quartet op. 51 No. 1 with Brahms's second string quintet where the Belcea Quartet are joined by Thomas Kakuska. Further recordings are planned with Thomas Adès (Schubert *Trout Quintet*) and Ian Bostridge (Fauré *La Bonne Chanson*).

The Belcea Quartet's repertoire at the Wigmore Hall this season incorporates a new commission by Huw Watkins, as well as works by Adès, Bartók, Beethoven, Brahms, Dvorak, Haydn and Mozart. They join forces for performances of Schubert's Trout Quintet with Thomas Adès and Schumann's Piano Quintet with Aleksander Madzar and continue their involvement in the Hall's extensive education programme. Past collaborations have been with Isabelle van Keulen, Piotr Anderszewski, and Imogen Cooper.

In the 2003/2004 season, the Belcea Quartet continue to tour extensively in Europe, including their debut performances at the Helsinki and Schleswig-Holstein Festivals, concerts in Zürich, Vienna, Milan, Amsterdam, Brussels, and Frankfurt. They make their Spanish debut this season, appearing in Seville, Valencia and Bilbao, as well as being resident in Madrid's Auditorio Nacional de Musica, giving six concerts there throughout the year. They present a Haydn/Bartok-series together with the Vertavo Quartet at the Aldeburgh Festival in June 2004 and, the following month will appear as Artist in Residence at the Cheltenham Festival. Further a-field, they continue to give a number of concerts in the US and future tours to this territory are currently being planned. In the past two seasons, the Belcea Quartet have performed in Japan, Australia and New Zealand and will return to these countries in the future.

The Belcea Quartet was established at the Royal College of Music, where they were coached by the Chilingirian Quartet, Simon Rowland-Jones, and the Amadeus Quartet. From 1997-2000, they were represented by Young Concert Artists Trust in London, during which time they were coached by the Alban Berg Quartet, won the first prizes at both the Osaka and Bordeaux International String Quartet Competitions in 1999 and represented Great Britain in the European Concert Halls Organisation "Rising Stars" series for the 1999/2000 season. The Quartet was one of the selected artists for the BBC Radio 3 "New Generations" scheme from 1999-2001. The Belcea Quartet are supported by the Royal College of Music's New Generation Scheme, the Zurich Financial Services Ltd. and Rosalind and Brian Gilmore. In May 2001, the Belcea Quartet received the Chamber Music Award of the Royal Philharmonic Society.

STOUR VALLEY ARTS & MUSIC

53rd Season: 2003-2004

Belcea Quartet

Sunday 7 March 2004 4pm

St. Mary's Church East Bergholt

PROGRAMME

String Quartet in D major, Op 18 No 3 **Ludwig van Beethoven**
(1770 -1827)

Allegro; Andante con moto; Allegro; Presto

String Quartet No 2, Op 17 **Béla Bartók**
(1881-1945)

Moderato; Allegro molto capriccioso; Lento

INTERVAL

String Quartet in A flat major, Op 105 **Antonin Dvořák**
(1841 – 1904)

Adagio ma non troppo - Allegro appassionato; Molto vivace
Lento e molto cantabile; Allegro ma non tanto

***This concert has been generously supported by an
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PROGRAMME NOTES

Beethoven's first quartet was written during a time of considerable personal distress. At thirty years of age, his career as a pianist was under threat from progressive loss of hearing. A letter to his friend Wegeler reveals how he was seeking solace in composition: 'For two years I have avoided almost all social gatherings because it is impossible for me to say to people: "I am deaf"...I beg of you to say nothing of my condition to anybody...I live only in my notes.' He had already created a considerable amount of music. Piano pieces of the period exhibit striking originality and passion, though in other genres his style had not yet developed its full individuality. Striving to come to terms with the works of his illustrious forbears, he had, a few years earlier copied out all six quartets of Haydn's Opus 20, as well as Mozart's K.387 and 464. His own first quartets were composed between 1798 and 1800: when they were published in 1801 as Opus 18, the first in order of composition - the D major - appeared as No. 3. Its thoughtful beauty gives little indication of its composer's inner turmoil - a warning against expecting to find easy connections between an artist's personal life and his art. The first movement has a number of features showing that Beethoven had absorbed many lessons from his study of Haydn. These include the quietly understated opening, the sharing of melodic material to give all parts equal importance, the gradual build-up to more energetic music, the unexpected key in which the second subject is introduced, and its striking reappearance near the very end of the movement. The second movement is a rondo, based on a very simple theme which, in the hands of a lesser composer, might have become pedestrian. But Beethoven's texture is mostly very rich, and the harmony often more chromatic than that of Haydn or Mozart: the rhythmic detail of each individual part shows exquisite judgement. The finale demonstrates Beethoven's familiarity with examples such as that of Haydn's *Military Symphony*, where springing energy is contrasted with passages of almost uncanny stillness. Beethoven cannot yet quite match these, though one or two passages hint at them - the movement's ending achieves a notable touch of humour in its descent from the preceding climax.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the language of music was undergoing radical transformation. Composers were turning away from the hierarchy of keys and chords based on major and minor scales which had held sway for over four hundred years. It had been stretched so far, many felt, by the gigantic constructions of Wagner and Strauss that it could be developed no further. Accordingly, they sought alternative means by which to achieve structural logic within their compositions. In **Bartók's** case, the transition was made in several stages. His first quartet (1908) is still clearly under the influence of German Romanticism. The second (1917), is much less so, though its language does not attempt the fierce intellectual abstraction of some later pieces. During the nine years between these two quartets, Bartók had become increasingly engrossed in the collection and study of folk music. He had made various settings of Magyar and Rumanian songs and dances, and his interest in such materials extended right around the Mediterranean. He described the second quartet's expansive and lyrical first movement as being in sonata form. The second he termed 'a kind of rondo' - this was the section of the work with which he experienced the most difficulty

in composition. He drew on inspiration from North Africa in the limited pitch range of the harsh tune, with its repeated juxtapositions of major and minor thirds, the exaggerated embellishments, and the drumming accompaniment. The whole is characterised by an almost savage rhythmic drive of the kind which Bartók had recently pioneered in the piano piece *Allegro barbaro*. By contrast, the final movement's opening is introspective and static. Magyar elements and Impressionist influences can both be felt, though the movement's chain-like sequence of apparently unrelated sections is a most unusual conception.

In 1895, **Dvořák** returned to Czechoslovakia from the United States. He was able to spend Christmas with his entire family - he had six children aged from 6 to 16 - for the first time in over three years. On 30th December he completed his fourteenth and last string quartet, a work from which we may conclude that he was overjoyed to be home. It begins with a slow introduction to the following *Allegro*, which has two first themes, one based on a motif that threads its way through the entire work, the other making prominent use of large downward leaps. The eventual second subject resembles a hunting call. The second movement is a *furiant* - a dance in fast triple time containing contradictory accents suggestive of duple time, which in this case are taken to extremes (the Czech word *furiant* means 'a proud, swaggering, conceited man'). The ensuing *Lento* gives ample demonstration of Dvořák's ability to spin long melodic lines, and leads us to a finale rich in ideas and unusual in having two distinct second subjects. A sure sense of proportion is demonstrated by the decision to recapitulate only the first of these when the music finally returns to its home key.

Contemporaries thought of Dvořák as a composer who wrote prolifically and fast, and who, as his publisher Simrock once observed, could 'pull melodies out of his sleeve'. Yet surviving documents show that his compositional process usually went through four painstaking stages. He first jotted down fragments of melody in notebooks, often with no particular project in mind. Secondly, he made sketches of rough outlines of the whole or part of a planned work. Third came a continuity sketch, with firm melodic outlines, indications of harmony or instrumentation, often showing the rejection of a way previously taken, the search for new solutions, and the disentangling of problems (or 'knots', as Dvořák called them). Finally there was a fair copy of the score, with the definitive refinement of details outlined in the continuity sketch. Dvořák aimed to have 'no instrument demoted to a part that is merely filling in', but to ensure that every instrument 'speaks an eloquent language of its own'. Yet when we hear the music, we have no sense of the sustained effort that went into its making. Dvořák, like Schubert, had the ability to give the complexity and richness of his music the appearance of being entirely uncomplicated and spontaneous, and expressing the simple pleasure of music-making.

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