

Friday 22 September 2017, Rickmansworth Baptist Church

THE MAGGINI STRING QUARTET

JULIAN LEAPER, violin
CIARAN McCABE, violin
MARTIN OUTRAM, viola
MICHAL KAZNOWSKI, cello

Wolfgang Mozart (1756-1791)
String Quartet No.15 in D minor K421

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)
String Quartet in E minor op.83

Interval

Antonín Dvorák (1841-1904)
String Quartet No.11 in F, op.96 'American'

Programme introduced at 7.00 pm by
JULIAN LEAPER

Biographies and notes

Formed in 1988, the Maggini Quartet is one of the finest British string quartets. Its acclaimed recordings have won international awards including Gramophone Chamber Music Award of the Year, Diapason d'Or of the Year and a Cannes Classical Award, and have twice been nominated for Grammy Awards. The Quartet's most recent project has been recording the complete Mendelssohn quartet cycle for Meridian Records.

The Maggini Quartet's commitment to new music has led to important commissions including works by James MacMillan, Robert Simpson, Eleanor Alberga and Roxanna Panufnik. Their collaboration with Sir Peter Maxwell Davies in his ten 'Naxos Quartets' was hailed as "a 21st century landmark". The Quartet appears frequently in prestigious concert series at home and abroad and makes regular media broadcasts. Recent international visits have included Dubai, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany and France. They also have an annual summer tour in Norway and returned to Denmark for a major tour in 2017.

The Magginis are renowned for their interpretations of British Repertoire and 'The Glory of the English String Quartet' continues to be an important ongoing initiative, drawing upon the wonderful repertoire which the Quartet is committed to bringing to a worldwide audience.

In addition to their concert activity, the members of the Quartet have an international reputation as chamber music coaches. They hold several UK residencies and have worked at the UK's senior music institutions.

Wolfgang Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet No.15 in D minor K421

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

After his glittering youth was over, and having failed to secure a suitable post in a variety of European cities, including Paris, where his mother died, Mozart spent the years 1779-80 in Salzburg, playing in the cathedral and at court, composing sacred works, symphonies, concertos, serenades and dramatic music. But opera remained at the centre of his ambitions, and an opportunity came with a commission for a serious opera for Munich. The work, *Idomeneo*, was a success. In it Mozart depicted serious, heroic emotion with a richness unparalleled elsewhere in his works, with vivid orchestral writing and an abundance of profoundly expressive orchestral recitative.

Mozart was then summoned from Munich to Vienna, where the Salzburg court was in residence on the accession of a new emperor. Fresh from his success, he found himself placed between the valets and the cooks; his resentment towards his employer, exacerbated by the Prince-Archbishop's refusal to let him perform at events the emperor was attending, soon led to conflict, and in May 1781 he resigned, or was kicked out of, his job. He wanted a post at the Imperial court in Vienna, but was content to do freelance work in a city that apparently offered golden opportunities. He made his living over the ensuing years by teaching, by publishing his music, by playing at patrons' houses or in public, by composing to commission (particularly operas); in 1787 he obtained a minor court post as Kammermusicus, which gave him a reasonable salary and required nothing beyond the writing of dance music for court balls. He always earned, by musicians' standards, a good income, and had a carriage and servants but, through lavish spending and poor management, he suffered times of financial difficulty and had to borrow. In 1782 he married Constanze Weber, his former sweetheart Aloysia's younger sister.

In his early years in Vienna, Mozart built up his reputation by publishing (sonatas for piano, some with violin), by playing the piano and, in 1782, by having an opera performed: *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, a German *Singspiel* which went far beyond the usual limits of the tradition with its long, elaborately written songs (hence Emperor Joseph II's famous observation, 'Too many notes, my dear Mozart'). The work was successful and was taken into the repertoires of many provincial companies (for which Mozart was not however paid).

During his life, Mozart composed 23 string quartets but in the years 1782 to 1785, he wrote six string quartets (K387 'Spring' to K465 'Dissonance') which he dedicated to the creator and master of the form, Joseph Haydn. Haydn had completed his influential Opus 33 set of quartets in 1781, the year that Mozart arrived in Vienna and the young man studied Haydn's string quartets and began composing this set of six, which were published in 1785. During this time, Haydn and Mozart had become friends, and sometimes played quartets together in Mozart's apartment, with Mozart playing the viola, and Haydn playing violin. Mozart lavished extreme care on these scores and, unlike the pristine scores that characterise his output, these clearly show his many rewrites and second thoughts. They are marked not only by their variety of expression but by their complex textures, conceived as four-part discourse, with the musical ideas linked to this freshly integrated treatment of the medium.

K421 is the second of the set and the only one of the set in a minor key. Though undated in the autograph, it is believed to have been completed in 1783, while his wife was in labour with her first child Raimund. Constanze stated that the rising string figures in the second movement corresponded to her cries from the other room.

Haydn first heard the quartets at two gatherings at Mozart's home, on 15 January and 12 February 1785 (on these occasions he apparently just listened, rather than playing a part himself). After hearing them all, Haydn made a now-famous remark to Mozart's father Leopold, who was visiting from Salzburg: "Before God, and as an honest man, I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name. He has taste, and, what is more, the most profound knowledge of composition." The comment was preserved in a letter Leopold wrote on 16 February to his daughter Nannerl.

Mozart's published page (1 Sept. 1785) dedicating the set to his friend repays Haydn's wondrous comment:

To my dear friend Haydn,

A father who had resolved to send his children out into the great world took it to be his duty to confide them to the protection and guidance of a very celebrated Man, especially when the latter by good fortune was at the same time his best Friend. Here they are then, O great Man and dearest Friend, these six children of mine. They are, it is true, the fruit of a long and laborious endeavour, yet the hope inspired in me by several Friends that it may be at least partly compensated encourages me, and I flatter myself that this offspring will serve to afford me solace one day. You, yourself, dearest friend, told me of your satisfaction with them during your last Visit to this Capital. It is this indulgence above all which urges me to commend them to you and encourages me to hope that they will not seem to you altogether unworthy of your favour. May it therefore please you to receive them kindly and to be their Father, Guide and Friend! From this moment I resign to you all my rights in them, begging you however to look indulgently upon the defects which the partiality of a Father's eye may have concealed from me, and in spite of them to continue in your generous Friendship for him who so greatly values it, in expectation of which I am, with all of my Heart, my dearest Friend, your most Sincere Friend,

W.A. Mozart

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

String Quartet in E minor op.83

1. Allegro moderato; 2. Piacevole (poco andante); 3. Allegro molto.

Elgar composed two part-quartets in 1878 and a complete one in 1887 but these were set aside and/or destroyed. Years later, the violinist Adolf Brodsky had been urging Elgar to compose a string quartet since 1900 when, as leader of the Hallé Orchestra, he performed several of Elgar's works. Consequently, Elgar first set about composing a String Quartet in 1907 after enjoying a concert in Malvern by the Brodsky Quartet. However, he put it aside when he embarked with determination on his long-delayed **First Symphony**. It appears that the composer subsequently used themes intended for this earlier quartet in other works, including the symphony. When he eventually returned to the genre, it was to compose an entirely fresh work. It was after enjoying an evening of chamber music in London with Billy Reed's quartet, just before entering hospital for a tonsillitis operation, that Elgar decided on writing the quartet, and he began it whilst convalescing, completing the first movement by the end of March 1918. He composed that first movement at his home, Severn House, in Hampstead, depressed by the war news and debilitated from his operation. By May, he could move to the peaceful surroundings of Brinkwells, the country cottage that Lady Elgar had found for them in the depth of the Sussex countryside. The String Quartet was thus the first of three chamber works that he tackled in 1918, inspired by his Sussex surroundings.

Following the delivery of a piano to Brinkwells in mid-August of that year, however, Elgar tempted fate a second time by putting aside the quartet, firstly to compose the **Violin Sonata** and then to make a start on the **Piano Quintet**. Fortunately, he resumed work on the quartet in October 1918, beginning the second movement on his wife's birthday and producing a work she likened to "captured sunshine" and subsequently requested that it be played at her funeral. After her death on 7 April 1920, this movement was indeed played by Albert Sammons, Billy Reed, Felix Salmond and Lionel Tertis at the service in Malvern. Elgar began the third movement on 8 December and finished it on Christmas Eve.

Elgar was himself an accomplished violinist, having played in various chamber ensembles in his youth and, according to Billy Reed, "his ambition was to become a famous violinist". In this he did not succeed, subsequently earning his living as player and teacher until he could become a full-time composer. The quartet combines the skills thus acquired from those days with a high level of compositional inspiration. But this supreme choral and orchestral composer was not naturally a chamber music composer, and it has been argued that only the *piacevole* (peaceful) movement of his string quartet has the natural flow of chamber music, whilst the other movements strive for a broader orchestral effect. That, of course, is up to each listener to decide.

Three of the four great works from this period (including the **Cello Concerto**) are nominally in E minor, although Elgar included the key on the title page of neither the sonata nor this quartet, and their moods and indeed themes all have resemblances. In the opening movement, two ideas make up the first

subject: one is a probing, questioning figure rising in stepwise movement over a 2-bar phrase; the other is an answer of descending fourths, always in pairs. These two motifs determine the musical character: the rising semitones suggest tension, conflict; the open intervals, usually descending, suggest emotional resolution. The central section displays ever more jagged chromaticism up to the moment of climax, after which Elgar ends the movement with the question he asked at the beginning, but closing on the reassuring security of E major.

The slow movement, *piacevole*, was begun in October, when the end of the war was in sight. It was finished on 26 November, after the Armistice. As in the first movement, two motifs dominate the songlike *andante*, with a gently moving triple metre. The long sequential *cantabile* theme occurs, in full, three times, separated by subsidiary episodes which are consistent with the principal theme, and derived from it, using chromatic development.

After the probing of the first movement, and the peace of the second, the impassioned ecstasy of the third movement completes the artistic wholeness of Elgar's vision. Lady Elgar likened this movement to the "galloping of stallions". This should not be read to imply a deeper programme for the work, simply that Elgar had captured the atmosphere and spirit of the woodlands around Brinkwells that were his inspiration.

Elgar honoured his commitment to the now ageing Brodsky Quartet by dedicating the piece to them but, after a private performance at the composer's Hampstead home on 7 January 1919, all three works were given by Billy Reed's ensemble, led by Albert Sammons and with Raymond Jeremy (viola) and Felix Salmond (cello), at a Wigmore Hall concert on 21 May, 1919, constituting the official premières of the Quintet and Quartet together with an early performance of the **Violin Sonata**. In *The Times*, four days after these performances, H.C. Colles wrote "An immediate effect of listening to Sir Edward Elgar's opp. 82, 83, and 84 in succession is to give one a new sympathy with the modern revolt against beauty of line and colour. A stab of crude ugliness would be a relief from that overwhelming sense of beauty." Nearly a century farther on, we take perhaps a more balanced view of these late flowerings of Elgar's genius.

Antonín Dvorák (1841-1904)

String Quartet No.11 in F, op.96 'American'

Antonín Dvorák was born in 1841, the son of a butcher and innkeeper in the village of Nelahozeves, near the Bohemian town of Kralupy, some forty miles north of Prague. It was natural that he should at first have been expected to follow the family trade, as the eldest son. His musical abilities, however, soon became apparent and were encouraged by his father, who in later years abandoned his original trade, to earn something of a living as a zither player. After primary schooling he was sent to lodge with an uncle in Zlonice and was there able to acquire the necessary knowledge of German and improve his abilities as a musician, hitherto acquired at home in the village band and in church. Further study of German and of music at Kamenice, a town in northern Bohemia, led to his admission in 1857 to the Prague Organ School, where he studied for the following two years.

On leaving the Organ School, Dvorák earned his living as a viola player in a band under the direction of Karel Komzák, an ensemble that was to form the nucleus of the Czech Provisional Theatre Orchestra, established in 1862. Four years later Smetana was appointed conductor at the theatre, where his operas *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* and *The Bartered Bride* had already been performed. It was not until 1871 that Dvorák resigned from the orchestra, devoting himself more fully to composition, as his music began to attract favourable local attention. In 1873 he married a singer from the chorus of the theatre and in 1874 became organist of the church of St Adalbert. During this period he continued to support himself by private teaching, while busy on a series of compositions that gradually became known to a wider circle.

Further recognition came to Dvorák in 1874, when his application for an Austrian government award brought his music to the attention of the critic Eduard Hanslick in Vienna and subsequently to that of Brahms, a later member of the examining committee. The granting of this award for five consecutive years was of material assistance. It was through this contact that, impressed by Dvorák's *Moravian Duets* entered for the award of 1877, Brahms was able to arrange for their publication by Simrock, who commissioned a further work, *Slavonic Dances*, for piano duet. The success of these publications

introduced Dvorák's music to a much wider public, for which it held some exotic appeal. As his reputation grew, there were visits to Germany and to England, where he was always received with greater enthusiasm than might initially have been accorded a Czech composer in Vienna.

In 1883 Dvorák had rejected a tempting proposal that he should write a German opera for Vienna. At home he continued to contribute to Czech operatic repertoire, an important element in re-establishing national musical identity. The invitation to take up a position in New York was another matter. In 1891 he had become professor of composition at Prague Conservatory and in the summer of the same year he was invited to become director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York. With the backing of Jeannette Thurber and her husband, this institution was intended to foster American music, hitherto dominated by musicians from Europe or largely trained there. Whatever the ultimate success or failure of the venture, Dvorák's contribution was seen as that of providing a blue-print for American national music, following the example of Czech national music. Dvorák's time in America influenced his own, notably his Symphony 'From the New World', his American Quartet and American Quintet and his Violin Sonata, works that rely strongly on the European tradition that he had inherited, while making use of melodies and rhythms that might be associated in one way or another with America. By 1895 Dvorák was home for good, resuming work at the Prague Conservatory, of which he became director in 1901. His final works included a series of symphonic poems and two more operas, to add to the nine he had already composed. He died in Prague in 1904.

During his American stay, Dvořák encountered American folk music in the form of Native-American drumming and African-American spirituals, the latter of which he regarded as profoundly original music that might serve as a basis for a national style. Many find strong influences of both genres in Dvořák's own "American" compositions while others claim that his music is entirely consistent with his own European folk and classical traditions. Dvořák himself denied that he intentionally incorporated any American elements. Nonetheless, the 'American' String Quartet in particular bears the stamp of the time and place of its composition.

Ironically, Dvořák composed the American quartet while on holiday in the predominantly Bohemian farming community of Spillville, Iowa. A spirit of relaxation and perhaps joyful homecoming inspired him to swiftly compose the quartet within a few weeks: he began the piece in early June 1893, only three days after his arrival in Iowa, and finished it before the month was out. Flowing, spacious, and bright, the music seems to reflect his disposition, if not, as some claim, the expanse of the American plains. The most pervasive aspect of the quartet supporting these qualities, as well as reflecting Dvořák's general preoccupation with folk idioms, is the use of the pentatonic or five-note scale: nearly every primary and secondary theme throughout the quartet uses a form of it. Common in folk music around the world, the pentatonic scale omits the semitones found at the 4th and the 7th degrees of the more common classical scale yielding a specific quality of broadness, stability and a lack of tension (even in a minor key). Whatever influences or expressive intentions lay behind this choice, it imbues the quartet with a personality and a continuity that is distinctive and strongly evocative. The most particular trace of the quartet's rural, American origin, however, is birdsong. The third movement Scherzo features the song of the Scarlet Tanager, a bird that Dvořák heard and transcribed while hiking the countryside. After an initial statement of a sprightly, rustic theme, the first violin sings the birdsong high in the treble range. The instantaneous evocation of dance, the outdoors, and the piercing simplicity of nature's own music define a pure moment of folk music as high art. The quartet was premiered on 1 January 1894 in Boston and has since become the most frequently performed of Dvořák's many chamber works.