

Ilkley Concert Club



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LEON McCRAWLEY piano
with the
CASTALIAN QUARTET

Mendelssohn

String quartet no. 6 in F minor, op 80

Elgar

Piano quintet in A minor, op 84

Wednesday 6th October 2021
Kings' Hall

PROGRAMME NOTES

FELIX MENDELSSOHN
(1809-1847)

String quartet no. 6 in F minor, op 80

Allegro vivace assai

Allegro assai

Adagio

Allegro molto

The life-long close and affectionate relationship between Mendelssohn and his sister Fanny (1805-1847) is well-attested. They were brought up in a highly cultured, wealthy household and received a first-class musical training from an early age. Throughout their lives, Felix and Fanny exchanged musical works and Felix was always generous in his praise both of his sister's works and her considerable abilities as a pianist.

On her part, Fanny was her brother's chief critic and, at least in his youth, he showed her all his compositions for her comments and suggestions. Although the intense relationship between the siblings naturally lessened as they grew to adulthood, their mutual love and affection remained undiminished, as their correspondence amply documents.

Mendelssohn was a workaholic with a perpetually excessive workload. During the 1840s this took its toll of his health and on 17th May 1847, while returning from his final visit to England, ill and exhausted, he was told that his sister had died, following a stroke. Mendelssohn collapsed and for many weeks was inconsolable and incapable of any work. However, three months after Fanny's death he wrote the F minor quartet, in which he musically expressed his acute anguish at her loss. Mendelssohn himself heard the quartet only once, at a private performance almost exactly one month before his own death on 5th November 1847. It was finally published in 1850.

The F minor is a disturbing work, unlike anything else in Mendelssohn's chamber music output. It was his last major composition and one in which his characteristic restraint, elegance and stylistic perfection disappears in a tremendously expressive and emotionally charged outpouring of grief, reminiscent in many ways of the last quartets of Beethoven. The quartet is in four movements: one, three and four in sonata form and the second movement a scherzo although as unlike Mendelssohn's usual airy charming scherzos as it is possible to be.

The fierce angry tremolos that open the first movement of the quartet set the overall dark tone of the work. The more gentle middle section lasts for only a short time before the development culminates in an anguished five bars where the violin, in its highest register, holds one note over the rushing tremolos in the low registers of the other instruments. The movement ends *Presto*, with a gradually accelerating coda.

The second movement is an aggressive and fiery scherzo, rhythmically very complex, full of syncopation and dissonance. The strange dialogue between the pairs of upper and lower voices that comprises the trio maintains the unsettling tone of the entire movement.

The adagio of the quartet is known as the *Requiem for Fanny* and resembles many of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*. It is intensely lyrical and peaceful, with a melancholic elegiac atmosphere that is particularly evident in the contrasting middle section.

The finale returns to the turbulent first two movements, with agitated tremolos and jarring syncopations. Repeated aggressive sequences lead into the conclusion, a tempestuous coda, in which Mendelssohn seems to be working through his angry and almost unbearable distress.

Last performance at ICC 01/11/1995

Duration: approx. 25 minutes

EDWARD ELGAR
(1857-1934)

Piano quintet in A minor, op 84

Moderato

Allegro

Adagio

Andante – Allegro

In Flexham Park near Brinkwells, the cottage in the Sussex countryside to which the Elgars had retreated as the horrors of war drew to a close, ‘there are a number of trees with gnarled and twisted branches, bare of bark and leaves — a ghastly sight in the evening, when the branches seem to be beckoning and holding up gaunt arms in derision’ as William (‘Billy’) Reed, leader of the London Symphony Orchestra and one of Elgar’s closest friends remarked. Reed was picking up on a local legend that the trees held the spirits of Spanish monks struck by lightning as they enacted impious rites, their ‘dance ... unstilled regret for their evil fate – or rather curse – which brought it on’ as Lady Alice Elgar noted in her diary.

Elgar loved the supernatural. In 1907, he set his own rather creepy poem ‘Owls’ as a part song. In mid-September 1918, when she first heard Elgar playing through the first movement of the Piano Quintet, Alice remarked on its ‘wonderful weird beginning ... the same atmosphere as Owls ...’ The first movement does indeed open a little uneasily with echoes in the piano of medieval plainchant. Elgar’s friend and supporter, George Bernard Shaw considered the opening ‘the finest thing of its kind since [Beethoven’s] Coriolan.’ He was, however, less impressed with the development section of the movement: ‘You cannot begin a movement in such a magical way as you have begun the Quintet and then suddenly relapse into the expected.’ Elgar replied that, ‘it was meant to be square at that point & goes wild again — as man does.’ The recapitulation works itself into a pitch of high drama on an almost orchestral scale justifying Elgar’s description of the music as ‘[running] gigantically and in a large mood’.

Shaw fully approved of the beautiful Adagio: ‘a fine slow movement is a matter of course with you: nobody else has really done it since Beethoven: at least the others have never been able to take me in. Intermezzos and romances at best, never a genuine adagio.’ The movement opens with a ravishing melody on the viola. The development works itself into a state of high excitement before subsiding. Writing in the Times after the premiere of the Quintet in May 1919, the critic H. C. Colles asked, ‘is there not something of Nimrod in the sustained loftiness of the slow movement?’ He considered that the Quintet has ‘convinced us that Elgar is still a force among the many currents of the musical tide’. Sadly, his optimism was to be confounded. After the great chamber works of 1918-1919 (in addition to the Quintet, Elgar composed his String Quartet and Violin Sonata whilst in Sussex) and the death of Lady Elgar in April 1920, Elgar composed very little before his death in February 1934.

The third movement starts cautiously but soon launches into one of Elgar’s bold ‘outdoors’ tunes marked ‘with dignity’. The music dissipates into a variety of keys before the plainchant from the opening movement returns together with a wistful, waltz-like passage for the two violins. The opening theme returns before an extended coda brings matters to a thunderous close.

Last performance at ICC 13/03/2013

Duration: approx. 37 minutes

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LEON McCAWLEY

Leon McCawley, known for his early success as a 1993 prize winner at both the Vienna International Piano and the Leeds Piano competitions, is truly one of Britain's foremost pianists. Described in the *Gramophone* in January 2021 as 'a thoughtful, keenly intelligent artist in peak form' and in *International Piano* January/February 2021 as 'one of today's most impeccably musical pianists' we are delighted to welcome back Leon McCawley, this time as a chamber musician. Leon has enjoyed fruitful collaborations with a range of ensembles and musicians at many prestigious concert venues so we had no hesitation when he suggested a

CASTALIAN QUARTET

Sini Simonen, Daniel Roberts *violins* **Charlotte Bonneton** *viola*
Christopher Graves *cello*

Establishing a mature string quartet has a long gestation period: first formed in 2011 the Castalian String Quartet studied in Hannover, won prizes in Lyon and Banff, and were selected for support by prestigious YCAT and the Borletti-Buitoni Trust. By these stages young musicians make the turbulent transition from education to professional life. When you see that our concert in Ilkley is sandwiched between engagements at the Philharmonie Berlin and the Liszt Academy in Budapest and know that the quartet were chosen as the chamber ensemble to accompany semi-finalists in the recent Leeds Piano competition, a role demanding extreme empathy and versatility, it is not surprising to read the Castalian Quartet are 'emerging as one of the most exciting and in-demand on the world stage'.

NEXT CONCERT – 10th NOVEMBER 2021

(Consisting again of two identical socially-distanced performances)

EMMA JOHNSON clarinet **RAPHAEL WALLFISCH** cello

MARTIN ROSCOE piano

Ilkley Concert Club

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