

## Detailed Programme Notes provided by MAIASTRA

### Haydn (1732 - 1809) string quartet in D major 'The Lark' Opus 64 no. 5 allegro moderato; adagio cantabile; menuetto: allegretto; finale: vivace

Haydn enjoyed a long life of good health and his musical output was prolific. Between 1762 and 1803 he completed sixty-eight works for string quartet. He may not have invented the genre but there is no doubt that he pioneered its early development. Haydn was employed for over thirty years at the Esterházy court where he enjoyed almost complete control over the estate's musical activities. The Opus 64 set of string quartets, written in 1790 and 1791, were the last he wrote for this special environment. While he was completing them his patron died and Haydn was granted a pension and the freedom to travel abroad to London where he was adored as the greatest living international composer. It was here that he produced his first quartets written specifically for performance to the general public. The Opus 64 set can, therefore, be considered the last he composed for the traditional chamber music performances at court; by their nature they are necessarily infused with a spirit of intimacy and nuance.

Opus 64 no. 5 acquired its nickname 'The Lark' from the first violin's singing melody in the first movement. The perpetually lively tempo and upbeat mood of the finale suggested its alternative, but less popular, nickname - 'The Hornpipe'. Like the majority of string quartets throughout the history of the form its four movements provide a kind of entertainment in four acts aptly described by Paul Epstein, the American composer and academic, as 'a story, a song, a dance and a party'.

The **first movement** begins tersely with a sequence of staccato notes, punctuated with rests. Although this sounds like the accompaniment for the ensuing violin melody high on the E-string, this short motif is in fact the first theme; the violin melody with its lark-like trills is the second. The entire movement, marked more by serenity than by struggle, is based upon the interplay of the singing melody with the first motif. Some liken it to the flight of a bird contrasted with gravity and the ground!

The **second movement** has the first violin taking centre stage in an almost operatic mode with the other instruments playing a subsidiary role. This movement in A major has a middle section which slides into the wistful melancholy of A minor, and then back again. Haydn is not regarded as a fluent melodist and therefore lovely ariosos such as this one are particularly prized.

The **third movement** dances to the traditional form of a minuet with a contrasting trio temporarily clouding the mood with an excursion into D minor.

The **fourth movement** is a whirligig for violin with the other instruments hammering out a staccato accompaniment. After a shift into the darker D minor fugal section, modulations through A major to D major are a showcase of a brilliantly executed and non-stop perpetuum mobile. Here we have a wonderful example of young man's music from an older hand.

### Shostakovich (1906 - 1975) string quartet no. 10 in A flat major Opus 118 andante; allegretto furioso; adagio; allegretto - andante

There are a few canons of string quartets in the repertoire, from the sixteen by Beethoven to the six by Bartók, which explore the full range of extraordinary possibilities afforded by the medium. Almost rivalling the Bartók quartets in the twentieth century are the fifteen composed by Shostakovich, written between 1938 and 1974. It isn't clear what persuaded him to start writing string quartets at a point when he had already matured as a composer. It may be because chamber music in Russia at that time had the advantage of not having a strong locus in the public domain and so it was unlikely that his quartets, as opposed to his works for larger forces, would attract adverse criticism. Many of Shostakovich's quartets were premiered by the Beethoven Quartet, formed in Moscow in 1923, which continued with the same players for more than forty years. They premiered the 10th quartet in 1964 just a few weeks after it had been written. It was dedicated to the little-known Polish composer Mieczyslaw Weinberg who was a good friend of Shostakovich. The 10th quartet is seen as being the link between the somewhat uncertain mood of the earlier quartets and the austerity and emotional distance of those which followed.

The **first movement** opens with a four-note bugle motif played on the first violin which is answered by the other instruments playing a rhythm of the form short-short-long which in poetic metre is called an 'anapest'. Many motifs and themes are introduced which will appear, often heavily disguised, later in the work. The opening movement also features 'sul ponticello' playing where the bow is drawn near to the bridge to produce an eerie effect.

The **second movement** is unusual in that it is the only one in the Shostakovich cycle of quartets which is marked 'furioso'. Here the violence is incessant. This is tense and exciting music which makes the contrast with the **third movement** passacaglia all the more effective. It starts with a nine-bar theme played on the cello followed by eight subtle variations. It is one of the composer's most sublime and heartbreaking passacaglias.

The **fourth movement**, which follows without a break, makes extensive use of drones and folk song rhythms. A viola solo provides a jaunty air at the start which is replaced by the violins playing a more expansive and lugubrious theme. A third theme is presented which is followed by a section in which all the themes are heard in a fizzing cocktail finally becoming agitated and volatile. The last surprise is at the end when the music dies away leaving a feeling of uncertainty. The effect is enhanced by a fragment of the viola theme heard at the start of the movement now being played by the first violin over the final subdued notes.

## **Webern (1883 - 1945) Langsamer Satz** langsam, mit bewegtem Ausdruck

Anton Webern, together with Alban Berg and Arnold Schoenberg, are well-known both as the founding fathers of the Second Viennese School and as leading proponents of the 12 tone system. What is not so well-known, however, is that Webern, encouraged by Schoenberg, wrote at least two short tonal movements for string quartet. Tonight we are to hear one of them, the Langsamer Satz. Webern was twenty-one when he wrote this single slow movement. Although it dates from 1905, it didn't receive its first performance until 1962. Webern's inspiration for the composition came from a hiking holiday in the mountains outside Vienna with his soon to be fiancée and later wife. He intended to write an entire quartet but put it aside after completing this one movement.

It is a highly charged work, clearly rooted in post-Brahmsian romanticism and tonality, which expresses the plethora of emotions of a 21-year old composer. Webern later wrote of the trip in his diary: 'We wandered through forests. It was a fairyland! High tree trunks all around us, a green luminescence in between, and here and there floods of gold on the green moss. The forest symphony resounded... A walk in the moonlight on flowery meadows - then the night'. Webern concluded with a quotation: 'What the night gave to me, will long make me tremble. Two souls had wed.'

## **Beethoven (1770 - 1827) string quartet in F major Opus 135** allegretto; vivace; lento assai e cantante tranquillo; grave ma non troppo tratto-allegro

In 2019 Maiastra decided to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the birth of Beethoven with performances over the following four years of the complete cycle of his sixteen quartets in order of their publication. The pandemic inevitably led to delays in completing the project but this evening we are delighted that the journey is about to reach its conclusion with the performance of the last quartet. He composed it in 1826 and in a letter to a publisher said it was to be his last. At the time he was feeling much happier following the reconciliation with his tormented nephew and his improved health now that he was again taking delight in country walks. It was no surprise that he chose F major for Opus 135 which for him had a strong pastoral affinity.

Listeners who have heard the complete cycle will be strongly aware of the development of the composer's genius and imagination from the early quartets (1798-1800), through the middle period quartets (1806-1810), to the late quartets (1825-1826) which are characterised by their intellectual depth, their formal innovations and their intense, highly personal expression. In the last six quartets listeners are taken on a journey during which all human and spiritual feelings are explored and experienced. Audiences today will undoubtedly perceive them very differently from the way in which Beethoven's contemporaries viewed them. Audiences then were only familiar with the quartets of Haydn, Mozart and early Beethoven. Nowadays, audiences are well acquainted with these and all the works in this genre which have been written since then.

Opus 135 is dedicated to Johann Wolfmayer, a longstanding friend of the composer, who was cultured, wealthy and yet a lowly cloth merchant! (By contrast Beethoven's first quartet had been dedicated to a prince.) One of the principal ideas for the quartet came from a humorous piece by Beethoven, catalogued as WoO 196 (Werke ohne Opuszahl), a canon entitled 'Es muss sein!' written for an amateur cellist friend, Ignaz Dembscher. This was to become the opening motif of the last movement of the quartet and its influence is also felt in the first and third movements.

The **first movement** recalls the remark from Goethe who likened a string quartet to 'a stimulating conversation between four intelligent people'. The subject for debate is presented by the viola alone. There follows a series of questions and answers which involves three engaging themes. The second subject is played by all four instruments in octaves. The movement develops all these ideas sometimes in a witty manner, sometimes in complex textures. The conversation is clearly far-reaching!

The **second movement** is quite unlike any of Beethoven's earlier scherzos. It begins with two themes played together: one is a drone and the other a spritely folk dance. The result is a highly syncopated passage which, for most of the first section, is whispered. The middle trio section proves to be very different. The music comprises upward scales in a range of different keys and culminates in extraordinary writing with the first violin playing a rustic motif high in its register accompanied by the other instruments playing a drone in octaves for fifty bars!

The **third movement** is a short but intensely beautiful slow movement. It is superficially simple but at the same time deeply profound.

The heading of the **fourth movement** is 'Der schwer gefasste Entschluss', 'The difficult decision'. Above the opening question posed by the viola and cello Beethoven wrote 'Muss es sein?', 'Must it be?'. This slow introduction is in a dark, minor key which is answered in a faster section with a triumphant but still troubled response. Here Beethoven wrote 'Es muss sein!', 'It must be!'. The movement ends confidently with the 'It must be motif!' played in octaves, perhaps offering gracious thanks from the composer to the Almighty.

The final question on everyone's minds probably relates to the reason for Beethoven writing what he did at the start of the last movement. It is reasonably clear that with WoO 196 he was alluding to a story involving Ignaz Dembscher. It seems that his friend was unable to attend the first performance of his Opus 130 quartet and was requesting the parts from the composer. Beethoven responded saying that it would cost him the price of the ticket which he had not bought! His friend was never clear if Beethoven was teasing him or not. Given the music of the last movement of Opus 135 it would seem unlikely that Beethoven was here in a teasing mood. It is much more likely that in a resigned manner he recognised his own mortality.