Programme Notes

**Madrigals Old and New**

Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) arr. A Ruisi  *Tu se' morta*

Stefano Scodanibbio (1956 – 2012)- Mas lugares (su madrigali di Monteverdi):

*Que augellin, che canta*

*Che se tu se' 'l cor mio*

These three movements will run seamlessly from one to the other.

Monteverdi is one of those composers whose importance was recognised in his own time but who had largely disappeared off the musical radar by the end of the 17th century. Interest was growing again two centuries later – his entry in the first edition of Groves Dictionary (1885) just about manages to fill three pages; in the latest edition he easily fills more than thirty pages. Remembered chiefly as the first great opera composer, he brought his considerable dramatic gifts to the composition of choral music too; both his church music and his madrigals explore the widest range of colour and effect and as such have fascinated many 20th century musicians. Some aimed only to perform them with the highest level of historical authenticity; others, such as Stefano Scodanibbio (a virtuoso double bassist) sought to reinterpret them in the light of more recent musical developments.

**String Quartet in G minor Opus 20 No. 3 Joseph Haydn (1732 – 1809)**

I: Allegro con spirito II: Minuetto – allegretto III: Poco adagio IV: Finale – allegro di molto

The six quartets Opus 20 belong to 1772, the sixth year of Haydn’s tenure of the positon of Kapellmeister to Prince Nikolaus Esteházy. The Prince was a passionate music lover whose enormous wealth allowed him amply to indulge his enthusiasm; the musical establishment at his vast new palace was considerable both in its size and its accomplishment, affording tremendous opportunities to a hard-working composer such as Haydn, keen both to satisfy his employer’s considerable demands but also to explore new technical and expressive musical territory. The leading string players at Esterházy were amongst the best in Europe, so it is little wonder that Haydn wrote up to their abilities, thereby establishing the string quartet as the most expressive and sophisticated form of chamber music.

This was the composer’s third set of mature quartets. The four movement plan is now securely established with the minuet nearly always placed second, the gradual spread of the musical interest amongst all four players is well under way and a new range of expression is explored under the influence of the emerging ‘Storm and Stress’ literary current. There are technical innovations too: irregular phrase lengths (phrase seven bars long in the first movement, five bars long in the minuet), the avoidance of emphatic cadences to round off paragraphs (all four movements of this quartet end quietly), dramatic changes of texture and dynamic and thoroughgoing exploration of the different sonorities of which the four instruments are capable. We should remember that Haydn’s quartets were written mainly for him and his colleagues to play in private – this was not music to entertain his employer and his aristocratic guests. A man blessed with a rock-solid faith, Haydn invariably praised God with a ‘Laus Deo’ at the end of a manuscript; at the end of this quartet, the Blessed Virgin Mary is included in the inscription.

**Two Motets Anton Bruckner (1824 – 1896)**

The output of Anton Bruckner is of course dominated by his symphonies although there is also a substantial quantity of church music ranging from full-scale mass settings with orchestral accompaniment to motets, some with organ and brass accompaniment, others for voices alone. There is, however, a small quantity of chamber music: a fully-fledged string quintet of 1879 and a handful of quartet movements regarded more as curiosities than significant parts of the composer’s *oeuvre*. So it is well within the Ruisi Quartet’s policy of “enterprising programming” to hear their take on two of the motets. We may not be able to offer an acoustic as generous as that of the St. Florian Monastery with which Bruckner was associated for much of his life, but that of the museum’s Victorian Hall (of which we are justly proud) will surely be better suited to a chamber performance.

**String Quartet in A minor Opus 51 No 2 Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897)**

I: Allegro ma non troppo II: Andante moderato III: Quasi menuetto – moderato/allegretto vivace IV: Finale – allegro non assai

Brahms’ delay in producing the long-awaited first symphony is well known – it was until he was forty three and had reached opus 68 in his tally of compositions that the C minor symphony was first heard. But the delay in the appearance of his first string quartet is almost as striking; it wasn’t until 1873 that he finally allowed not one but two quartets to be published and publicly performed. (It is said that he had composed and destroyed some twenty quartets before this and early versions of both the quartets that became Opus 51 were heard in private many years earlier – heard and then reworked). Alarmingly early the frightening title of ‘Beethoven’s successor’ had been applied to him – hence his *cri de coeur* “You can’t have any idea what it’s like to have such giant footsteps marching behind you”. And of course it was the symphony and the string quartet for which Beethoven was most revered.

When they were first given in public, the quartets were received with respect rather than enthusiasm by the notoriously conservative Viennese public and they have never enjoyed the same widespread popularity as other of his chamber works. Perhaps early hearers found the close workmanship daunting – the A minor quartet was one of the works which Arnold Schoenberg singled out for praise on account of its advanced harmony and extreme economy of material in his famous essay ‘Brahms the Progressive’. Indeed the material is highly concentrated and in the ingenuity of its contrapuntal treatment shows the composer’s reverence for Bach just as much as for Beethoven. But the heart is engaged as well as the brain and, as ever with Brahms, there is great depth of emotion and variety of mood to overlay the intellectual aspects of the work.

Formed in 2013 by the British/Sicilian brothers Alessandro and Max Ruisi, the Ruisi Quartet quickly emerged as one of the leading young British ensembles, noted for their equal commitment to established repertoire as well as progressive new work, often combining both in what ‘The Strad’ magazine dubs “ingenious programming”. Winners of a Royal Philharmonic Society Award for Young British String Players, they now perform regularly at leading venues both in the UK and across Europe and also broadcast regularly on BBC Radio 3.