

TRISKEL ARTS CENTRE – SPRING 2021 ONLINE QUARTET SERIES



CONTEMPO QUARTET

Bogdan Sofei, violin

Ingrid Nicola, violin

Andreea Banciu, viola

Adrian Mantu, cello

The Contempo Quartet is the resident quartet of the Galway Music Residency and was RTE's Resident Quartet from 2014 until 2019. Praised as a "fabulous foursome" (Irish Independent) and noted for performances which are "exceptional" (The Strad) and "full of imaginative daring" (The Irish Times), RTÉ ConTempo Quartet has forged a unique place in Irish musical life.

Since its formation in Bucharest in 1995, the quartet has performed more than 1,800 concerts world-wide in 46 countries, including prestigious venues such as Wigmore Hall; Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris; St Martin-in-the-Fields; Berliner Philharmonie; Palazzo del Quirinale, Rome; Carnegie Hall and the Opera House Tel-Aviv. ConTempo have had the honour to meet and play in front of world personalities such as Prince Charles, Nelson Mandela, Pope John Paul II, EU Ministers, Michael D. Higgins, Hollywood stars and Nobel Prize winners. The ensemble has won a record of 14 international prizes (including Munich, Rome, Berlin, Prague and London) and worked alongside artists of the highest calibre including Emma Johnson, Yuko Inoue, Hugh Tinney, Chen Zimbalista, Jérôme Pernoo, Peter Donohue and Martin Roscoe. Collaborations with other distinguished quartets have also been a feature, such as the Amadeus, Arditti, Vanbrugh, Casals and Endellion.

Ina Boyle [1889-1967]

Quartet in E minor [1934]

1. *Allegro moderato*
2. *Adagio*
3. *Allegro molto*

Ina Boyle was a prolific composer of vocal, choral, chamber and orchestral music, but her works are rarely performed today and few were published. She lived all her life in the family home, Bushey Park, Enniskerry, in the shadow of the great Sugarloaf. Her first music lessons were with her father, Rev. William Foster Boyle, who was curate at St. Patrick's Church, Powerscourt. With her younger sister,

Phyllis, she was taught the violin and cello by their governess, and she started to compose at an early age.

She initially studied composition with several private teachers in Dublin as well as by correspondence with her cousin Charles Wood. She had her greatest success with her orchestral rhapsody, *The Magic Harp*, which was selected for publication in 1920 by the prestigious Carnegie United Kingdom Trust. She was the only female composer to be honoured by the scheme.

From 1923 she crossed the Irish Sea by steamship for lessons with Ralph Vaughan Williams, who thought highly of her music and encouraged her to have it performed. Unfortunately the outbreak of the Second World War ended her travels and cut her off from musical opportunities in London. She continued to compose throughout her life and never ceased to promote her music by sending scores to conductors and choir directors. Her friend Elizabeth Maconchy noted that as a result of her isolation she made few musical contacts and her music remained little known and almost unperformed.

Ina Boyles's Quartet was completed in 1934 and revised in 1937. It was written for Irish violinist Anne Macnaghten who both through her playing and through the long running Macnaghten Concerts in London, was a tireless champion of contemporary music. Trinity College and the Contemporary Music Centre hold a recording of the Macnaghten Quartet playing this work. Charles Wood and Charles Villiers Stanford had been prolific writers of string quartets over the turn of the century but the only other string quartets of note with an Irish connection from the 1930s were those of Elizabeth Maconchy and Frederick May. Maconchy wrote the first of her thirteen quartets in 1933 and May's Quartet in C minor was written in 1936 following his return to Dublin from Vienna.

Johannes Brahms [1833-1897]

Quartet No 2 in A minor Op.51 No.2 [1873]

1. *Allegro non troppo*
2. *Andante moderato*
3. *Quasi Minuetto - moderato*
4. *Allegro non assai*

I have often reflected on the subject of what happiness is for humanity. Well, today in listening to your music, that was happiness. Theodor Billroth, dedicatee of this Quartet, to Brahms in 1890. It was Billroth who observed to the dedicatee of the Third Quartet; *I'm afraid these dedications will keep our names known longer than our best work.*

The two Opus 51 quartets were composed on the brink of Brahms' sustained attack on the symphony. Their publication represented a pivotal moment in his development as a composer. He often claimed that he had written as many as twenty quartets before 1873, all of which he destroyed. Only three quartets composed by Brahms survive, whereas Haydn published sixty-eight, Mozart twenty-three and Beethoven sixteen. The spectre of the past, in particular Beethoven, haunted Brahms until he finally overcame his intense self-criticism with these quartets and the First Symphony three years later.

Brahms was not only a composer but also a dedicated music scholar at the forefront of the musicological developments of his day. He had a vast music library and owned such treasures as the autograph of Mozart's G minor Symphony K.550, Haydn's opus 20 string quartets, a Beethoven sketch book including the sketches of the *Hammerklavier* Sonata, songs and piano pieces by Schubert and Schumann's D minor Symphony. He was close friends with the leading musicological scholar of the day, Gustav Nottebohm, who pioneered the study of Beethoven's sketchbooks. Inevitably this acute awareness of the shadow cast by history exacerbated Brahms' natural self-consciousness, thus the terrible rate of attrition on his first attempts to write string quartets.

However in the superb A minor Quartet Brahms manages to leaven this deadly serious business of confronting history with his innate and irresistible lyricism. The first movement contrasts these conflicting states of mind in the two subjects, the close-woven texture of the motto-like opening figure followed by the suavely Viennese *grazioso* second subject. The substantial exposition, which is repeated in classical fashion, has a wealth of ideas that is perhaps more Schubert than Beethoven, though the development has a Beethoven-like grittiness about it. The Andante moderato moves to the major key with an intricate and sophisticated theme of dark beauty, whose smallest phrases mirror and dovetail into each other. The central section is a brief passionate duet for violin and cello set against dramatic tremolandi. The main theme eventually returns in F major and has to be eased back to A major by the cello before a peaceful coda. The *Quasi Minuetto* is an incorporeal dance, seemingly removed from all physical concerns, which alternates with an all-too-physical Allegretto, a distant, contrapuntal variation of itself. The Finale opens in a burst of energy. It retains the 3/4 time of the minuet but sets out as a Hungarian dance, doubtless in honour of his violinist friend Joachim, whose quartet premiered the work. The virtuoso main theme keeps returning as in a rondo but it is also subjected to remarkable developments through a dazzling array of cross-rhythms. The coda brings the work to a brilliant conclusion. *Francis Humphrys*

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