***Blockley Chamber Concerts***

**Friday 22 March 2024, 7:30 - 9:15 pm**

**The Kucharsky Quartet**

**Valeria Kucharsky Violin**

**Julia Clare Violin**

**Ursula John Viola**

**Nicola Tait Baxter Cello**

**String Quartet in D Major *‘The Lark’*, Hob III:63**

**Josef Haydn (1732 - 1809)**

***Allegro Moderato***

***Adagio Cantabile***

***Menuetto. Allegretto***

***Finale. Vivace***

**Haydn wrote The Lark in 1790 at the height of his powers, but following a difficult year in his life. For 30 years, he had been Director of Music at Prince Nicholas’s Esterhazy court, where he was given complete reign over all musical activities, including of Europe’s best orchestras. The prince had died; his son Anton had no interest in music, disbanded the orchestra, and he ‘let Haydn go’, albeit with a generous pension. But *‘One door closes and another opens.* Haydn was free to move to London, where he enjoyed huge success and great affection, producing both his masterful 12 *‘London Symphonies’*, and chamber music including the outstanding Op 64 quartets, of which *The Lark* is considered to be the most popular of all his 83 string quartets.**

**The first movement is a soaring melody, flying high on the first violin E string, contrasting with the cheeky staccato on the ground for the three lower instruments, followed by the second movement - a beautiful song, often likened to an aria.**

**The third movement is a typically robust minuet, plus a darker trio in the minor key. The final movement is often thought of as a hornpipe, on the verge of chaotic, with its very many notes and moving parts, including a fugato section in the middle. This keeps the performers on their toes.**

**String Quartet No 7 in F sharp Minor, Op 108 (1960)**

**Dimitri Shostakovich (1906 - 75)**

***Allegretto***

***Lento***

***Allegro - Allegretto***

**The seventh quartet is surely one of the most significant works Shostakovich ever composed – a claim which has not generally been made on its behalf, maybe because its uncontested status as the shortest of the fifteen makes it a prime candidate for the metaphorical sweeping under the carpet. But it didn't just take Webern or the septo-octogenarian Stravinsky to prove that brevity need not be directly proportional**

**to content (witness the length of this particular programme note!); and even if this quartet is simply *short*, rather than “a novel expressed in a single gesture” (to paraphrase Schönberg on Webern's Op.9), its epigrammatic allusion to a whole range of emotions leaves an after-impression of something far more substantial and complete than the promise of twelve minutes' music might normally be expected to provide. It is “complete” also in another respect, in that its cyclic construction – whereby the music of the first movement's recapitulation returns as part of a sad little waltz to finish the whole work – gives the feeling of having come full circle.**

**Brevity is not the only channel through which this quartet demands attention – although if the popular image Shostakovich created for himself in his noisier and more protracted works should still abound, then an element of surprise might also contribute to that attention. Of course, the “noise” isn't here either; which doesn't mean there is no loud music – as will be heard in the wildly frenzied fugue, which surges relentlessly onwards with torrential fury in the first half of the finale. Rather, it is the very spareness of texture through the other two and a half sections of this quartet which helps to suggest new directions. Extended solos and duets are by no means absent in the first six quartets; but here they are immediately established as a norm, with the principal material of the first subject being presented in just a single line of notes. The opening of the *Lento* stretches this to two lines, thereafter extending to three with notable infrequency (the eventual calling on all four instruments is occasioned only by octave doubling).**

**And so we have touched on the essential nature of the seventh quartet and its formative influence on Shostakovich's later music. This central movement is the “inner sanctum” of the work, an encapsulation of loneliness and grief; dignified, objective, without tears. 1954 had seen the death of Shostakovich's dearly loved wife, Nina Vasilyevna. It was not his first experience of bereavement but it was certainly the cruellest, and he never really got over it. The timing was unfortunate too, in that he had only recently recovered his artistic communication with the musical public, since the death of Stalin in 1953 had enabled him to end his self imposed withholding of all works composed since the infamous Zhdanov attacks of 1948. But six years were to pass before a delayed reaction to the tragedy of Nina's death at length enshrined her memory in music.**

**On the surface this little quartet might seem an oddly elliptical tribute; but was there an apocalyptic ninth symphony to celebrate such a momentous event as the end of the war…? So a great Requiem might have been equally out of character. However, there is no doubt that he felt particularly close to the seventh quartet, as was clearly witnessed by the present author during the composer's visit to the Fitzwilliam Quartet in York in 1972, when he specifically asked to hear it. Its creation precipitated an obsession with human mortality which itself was not fully divulged in his music until some years later.**

**At a reception following a performance of Quartet No.7 in Lincoln Center Julius Bloom, late respected New York writer and connoisseur, was moved to compare the stillness of the *Lento* with the *Heiliger Dankgesang* in Beethoven's A minor quartet (Op.132) – his favourite chamber composition. He went on to remark that in this quartet Shostakovich "seemed to have touched a nerve so deep that even he may have been surprised by it". No more sensitive an appreciation could be made of the work, and no more touching a memorial could be created to a lost companion.**

**Interval**

**String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor, Op. 51, No. 2 (1873)**

**Johannes Brahms (1833 - 97)**

***Allegro non troppo***

***Andante moderato***

***Quasi Minuetto, moderato***

***Finale. Allegro non assai***

**This quartet stands as a testament to the composer's mastery of form, rich harmonic language, and profound emotional expression. Composed during a period of intense creativity, this quartet is the second in a set of three that Brahms dedicated to his friend and mentor, the renowned violinist Joseph Joachim.**

**The quartet opens with a dramatic and forceful Allegro non troppo. The restless energy of this movement immediately captures the listener's attention. Brahms skilfully weaves complex textures, with each instrument contributing to the overall intensity. The movement is characterized by its dynamic contrasts, ranging from bold, impassioned statements to more delicate and introspective moments. The thematic material undergoes intricate development, showcasing Brahms' command of counterpoint and motivic manipulation.**

**The second movement provides a contrasting lyrical respite. A serene and melancholic melody unfolds, shared among the instruments. Brahms employs rich chromaticism and poignant harmonies, creating an emotionally charged atmosphere. The movement unfolds with a sense of profound introspection, inviting the listener into a world of deep sentiment and introspective beauty.**

**The third movement presents a playful and dance-like character reminiscent of a minuet. Brahms employs a modified ternary form, infusing the movement with rhythmic vitality and engaging interplay between the instruments. The central trio section provides a contrasting, more relaxed episode before returning to the lively minuet. This movement showcases Brahms' ability to infuse classical forms with his unique voice, combining tradition with innovation.**

**The final movement brings the quartet to a powerful and triumphant conclusion. The relentless drive of the opening theme propels the movement forward, creating a sense of urgency and determination. Brahms incorporates elements of Hungarian folk music, adding a folkloric flavour to the vigorous and spirited character of the finale. The movement unfolds with a series of climactic episodes, building towards a grand and satisfying resolution.**

**In all, a work of profound emotional depth, intellectual rigour, and craftsmanship. Its exploration of contrasting moods, intricate counterpoint, and inventive formal structures exemplifies Brahms' mature style. As performers and listeners delve into the depths of this quartet, they will discover a rich tapestry of emotions and musical ideas that reflect Brahms' enduring contribution to the chamber music repertoire.**

**The Quartet**

**Members of the Kucharsky String Quartet have been friends for many years and hade played together on many occasions, including two performances at Buckingham Palace for private events hosted by members of the Royal Family. It is no surprise therefore that when they formally got together as the Kucharsky String Quartet, their bond was immediate and very exciting, with their inaugural performance of Debussy and Haydn quartets drawing exemplary comments - described as ‘*electrifying’*. They are each highly successful career musicians in their own right, performing in chamber groups and as principal players in the named orchestras around the UK.**

**Valeria Kucharsky was born in Hungary; started to play the violin at age 7. She holds a Master’s degree from the Franz Liszt Academy, Budapest, and an Artist Diploma from Montclair State University in the USA. Valeria studied with the Amadeus, Bartok and Shanghai Quartets, also as a soloist and orchestral performer, throughout Europe, Asia and the US, including the Carnegie Hall, the Tonhalle, the Vatican, Musikverein Wein and the Concertgebouw. She is a dedicated teacher, at the Yehudi Menuhin School and the Royal College of Music Junior Department, as well as privately.**

**Valeria tonight plays a violin from the school of Carlo Antonio Testore, c 1735.**

**Julia Clare attended Chetham’s School of Music Manchester, then awarded a scholarship to the Royal Northern College of Music. After graduating, she joined the first violins in the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra in Manchester and was also a member of the Degani Quartet. In 2021, Julia moved to London and has a busy freelance career playing with the English Chamber Orchestra, London Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic and London Mozart Players. She is also Senior Orchestral Tutor at the Royal College Junior Department.**

**Julia plays a recent copy of ‘The Lord Wilton’ violin by Guarneri, 1742.**

**After Ursula John’s undergraduate studies, she won awards from the Countess of Munster and Myra Hess Trusts to study in Amsterdam, and has since played with the London Symphony and BBC Symphony Orchestras, touring throughout Europe, the USA and China, working with Claudio Abbado, Rostropovich and Steven Isserlis, among others. Ever versatile, she has played at the top of a scaffolding towner in an industrial boilersuit in a disused Glasgow warehouse as soloist for Brith Gof, and as a circus musician at John Gage’s 100th anniversary celebration at the London Coliseum.**

**Ursula plays a viola by English maker Roderick Ward, 2012.**

**Nicola Tait Baxter graduated with first class honours at the Royal Academy of Music; won scholarships to study in Germany and Brussels; and gave her first solo Radio 3 broadcast at age 24. She joined the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, touring also with the Philharmonia Her repertoire includes most of the major cello concertos, and has performed all six solo suites by Bach in festivals in Scotland, England and Germany.**

**Nicola plays a cello by English maker William Forster, 1772.**

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| **Next *Blockley Chamber Concert* events**  **Sunday 14 April – Blockley Church. Coffee etc 10:45, BCC *New Generation* recital.**  **Amelia Parkin, organ**  **Music by Bach, Stanley, Stanford, Langlais, Reger, Dyson, Vierne**  **Friday 26 April – St George’s Hall. Drinks from 7:00 pm; Concert 7:30 to 9:15 pm.**  **The Geminiani Ensemble - Violin, Viola da gamba**  **Music by Buxtehude and Bach**  **Friday 7 June – Blockley Church. Drinks from 7:00 pm; Concert 7:30 – 9:15 pm.**  **Kate Semmens, Soprano; Steven Devine, Fortepiano**  **Music by Beethoven, Bach, Haydn and Mozart**  **Saturday 8 June – Blockley Church, 10:00 to 12:30 pm.**  **Student fortepiano masterclass with Steven Devine.**  **Audience welcome.** |