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**West Cork Chamber Music Festival 2021**

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## **Bantry and Beyond**

***Festival Echoes***

### **22. Roaring Twenties**

Filmed at Studio 150 Bethlehemkerk, Amsterdam

**Ragazze Quartet**

**Rosa Arnold, Jeanita Vriens** [violins]

**Annemijn Bergkotte** [viola]

**Rebecca Wise** [cello]

**Korngold**

*Quartet No.2 Op.26*

**Bartók**

*Quartet No.3 Sz.85*

**Garth Knox**

*Four Into Twenty*

**FESTIVAL PREMIERE**

**Béla Bartók** [1881–1945]

**String Quartet No. 3 Sz. 85** [1927]

1. *Prima parte: Moderato – attacca*
  2. *Seconda parte: Allegro – attacca*
  3. *Ricapitolazione della prima parte: Moderato*
- Coda: Allegro molto*

The size and musical significance of the string quartet has changed radically ever since the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Haydn's quartets were pre-eminent and quartets were generally published in sets of six. Then in Beethoven's lifetime cycles of even two or three quartets became rarer, and this trend culminated in his late string quartets, just one of which could stand alone and carry the same weight as a symphony. Bartók's six string quartets, which he wrote between 1908 and 1939, continued the transformation of the character and function of composition in general, and the string quartet in particular, and his quartets occupy a central position, both in his output and in 20<sup>th</sup> century music.

Bartók wrote his Third String Quartet in September 1927, by which time his style had become much more personal. So the work is a distillation of his most distinctive stylistic traits, including his fascination with the characteristics of the music of the many ethnic minorities in the Hungarian section of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which included Slovak, Romanian, Ruthenian, Serbian, Bulgarian and Transylvanian communities. He had collected peasant music with Kodály in the early years of the century and believed that the music of the rural peasants was a natural phenomenon, which had the potential to reform both the nation's musical life and his own musical approach. In his quartets he relied on short motifs and so the peasant music particularly appealed to him because of its small-scale completeness.

His Third Quartet is renowned for the extreme concentration and violence of its language. The *prima parte*, after a mysterious 5-bar introduction, takes the form of a triptych whose central episode metamorphoses into strange and rarified nocturnal music punctuated by growls and cries. Moments of aggression are tempered by unexpected glimpses of lyricism, swiftly forgotten. The strongly contrasted *seconda parte* features Hungarian folk dance elements especially a driving rhythmic energy. His language is harsh, using pitilessly dissonant intervals and a veritable dictionary of sound effects, which drive the expressive tension to a peak. Mastering this music is a huge test of a Quartet's resolve and technical ability. The *Ricapitolazione* sets out to concentrate even further the already highly compressed *prima parte*, giving the listener brief reminiscences of a half-forgotten dream before a virtuoso summary of the *seconda parte* drives to an explosive finish.

*Sarah Burn*

Erich Korngold [1897-1957]

***String Quartet No.2 in E flat major Op.26*** [1933]

1. *Allegro*
2. *Intermezzo: Allegretto con moto*
3. *Larghetto: Lento – Con molto sentiment*
4. *Waltz: Tempo di Valse*

Korngold and Bartók, who are both featured in this concert, could not offer a greater contrast, both in their lives and in their music. Korngold was a *Wunderkind* born under a lucky star, admired by Mahler, Strauss and Puccini. Prodigiously talented he grew up in the incredible, musically rich milieu of the final years of imperial Vienna before developing into a major operatic composer. Unlike other prominent Jewish composers and musicians, he already had Jack Warner in Hollywood showering him with contracts before Hitler took over Austria so he was able to escape in time. Bartók is rightly considered a much more serious and innovative composer, whose quartets are spoken of in the same breath as Beethoven's. He too escaped to USA once Hungary took the Axis side and had some initial success and several famous commissions, but his agent was soon pointing out that Bartók's music was too difficult for a nation at war.

The Roaring Twenties saw the two composers flourish in very different ways. Both were active musicians touring in Europe and USA as well as composing. Bartók was on the teaching staff at the Academy and took an active part in the debates on New Music. Meanwhile Korngold turned to arranging and conducting operettas – most famously his collaboration with Max Reinhardt on Johann Strauss' *Die Fledermaus* - as a way to supplement his income after his major opera *Das Wunder der Heliane* flopped. *Heliane* had to compete with the runaway success of Ernst Krenek's jazz-infused *Jonny spielt auf* with its glorification of the Charleston. By the end of the Twenties Korngold was writing less and less original music, between 1927 and 1935 he wrote only seven original works, one of which was his Second Quartet. He composed it in the summer of 1933 just before his first visit to Hollywood. In retrospect this delightful work can be seen as his farewell to the Vienna of the Roaring Twenties.

The opening movement is a classically structured Allegro contrasting an agitated first subject with the slow Viennese second theme. The Intermezzo is full of wit and charm, just like the composer himself. The slow movement opens with a series of mysterious harmonics before a sad, nostalgic theme appears. The music becomes almost static floating in a cloud of long-breathed phrases drenched in harmony, *con molto sentiment*. The Finale leaps to life with Vienna's most famous dance, the waltz. Korngold revels in its heady rhythm and treats us to a dazzling series of variations, ending in a brilliant flourish.

*Francis Humphrys*

**Garth Knox** [b.1956]

***Four Into Twenty for String Quartet*** [2020]

Commissioned by and dedicated to the Ragazze Quartet

1: *Four into Twenty*

2: *Up above our heads*

3: *Lockdown Blues*

4: *Open Spaces*

5: *Charleston*

Near the end of 2019, the wonderfully creative Ragazze Quartet asked me to write a quartet which would somehow make a connection between the 1920s and the decade we were about to enter, the 2020s. Themes such as the liberation of women, prohibition, the economic crash and the promise of a new era all came to mind. I also thought of some important developments in musical history which originated in this decade such as the invention of the microphone, film with sound, and the inclusion of 'noise' as musical content. The quartet starts in a conventional concert situation, and the musical discussion in the first movement (*Four into Twenty*) is a rhythmic exploration of the three numbers involved in the title : 4 into 20 (= 5). Playing with the conflictual divisions between groups of 4 and groups of 5 and their combinations creates an atmosphere of struggle, which one by one the players, starting with the second violin, decide to opt out of. As each player opts out, she starts to play a gentler, slower, higher music, floating above the conflict. By the end of the movement, all the players have opted out into this dream-like state, and float in free suspension. The second movement (*Up above our heads*), written almost entirely in high glassy harmonics continues to explore this large and lofty space, with antiphony between the 'distanced' violins like Swiss alphorns answering each other across the valley. It slowly builds up to a folky, almost Celtic-sounding virtuosic dance, and ends in a fireworks display of shooting harmonics. In the middle of the composition of the piece, in March 2020, the Coronavirus brought everything to a standstill, and I couldn't ignore the huge effect this had on my creative inspiration. I found I had to write something which spoke about what was affecting us all, and so the middle movement, the *Lockdown Blues* came into being. The cello here develops a technique of what I call "looping pizzicato", a kind of circular slide on each note which creates the illusion of perpetual movement, but actually stays in the same place, like an Escher drawing in sound. The two middle parts answer each other in detached boredom, and the first violin sings her frustration at such imposed inaction. A central middle section reduces the action even further, being almost completely static in spite of the false dawns, before the repetition of the Blues underlines the pointlessness of the situation. The fourth movement, *Open Spaces*, is a half improvised transition movement where the individual members are temporarily freed from the constraints of playing together, before the happy physical dance pleasures of the *Charleston* brings the quartet back together again in the last movement. A liberated and liberating dance, championed by the flappers, this music appeared at the moment in history when it was becoming possible to manipulate time, through recording

(microphones, cameras) and reproduction techniques (wax cylinders, film). A film can be artificially slowed down, speeded up, paused or even stopped, and this is what happens to the music in this movement. It can even be played so slowly that the noise element inherent in all music becomes the dominant feature. But in the end, the infectious enthusiasm of the flappers gains the upper hand, and leads to a joyous conclusion.  
*Garth Knox (June 2021)*

*Thank you for watching*

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