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CELLO QUARTET

with William Butt, Rosalie Curlett,
Martin Johnson & Ailbhe McDonagh

12th – 21th May 2021

A digital tour presented in partnership with **Waterford Music**,
The Courthouse Arts Centre, **Riverbank Arts Centre**, **St. John's
Theatre & Arts Centre** and **glór**.

Programme

Claude Debussy *Arr. David Johnstone* Clair de lune

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart *Arr. David Johnstone* Ave verum corpus KV 618

J.S. Bach *Arr. Claudio Jaffe and Johanne Perron* Chaconne from Partita No. 2 in D minor (BWV 1004)

Ludwig van Beethoven *Arr. Ailbhe McDonagh* Adagio cantabile (2nd movement) from Sonata No. 8,
Op. 13 "Pathétique"

Conor Linehan An Autumn Night's Dream *New Music Network Commission*

Ailbhe McDonagh Cellango

Jean-Baptiste Barrière Sonata No. 10 in G major

George Gershwin *Arr. Lee Armstrong* 'Summertime' from Porgy and Bess

Béla Bartók *Arr. Lee Armstrong* Romanian Folk Dances (Sz68)



Programme Notes

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Arr. by David Johnstone

Clair de lune

Paul Verlaine's poem *Clair de lune* ('Moonlight') inspired three composers who re-defined French music in the early years of the 19th century, Gabriel Fauré and Louis Vierne included. But it is Claude Debussy's setting, composed in 1890 as the third movement of his *Suite bergamasque*, that has proved the most indelible and enduring. Debussy was not yet out of his twenties when he wrote this beautifully elegant, gossamer-soft miniature masterpiece. David Johnstone's arrangement for cello quartet gently accents its long, liquid, lyrical lines, spinning them out into a tapestry of diaphanous threads woven together by a veritable choir of cellos.

J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

Arr. by Claudio Jaffe and Johanne Perron

Chaconne

from Violin Partita No. 2 in D minor (BWV 1004)

Yehudi Menuhin described the Chaconne, the final movement of the BWV 1004 Violin Partita, as "the greatest structure for solo violin that exists". Much adapted for other instruments, it lends itself easily to the plangent mahogany timbres of the cello.

It was published along with five siblings as *Sei Solo a Violino senza Basso accompagnato* (BWV 1001-06) in 1720. Then Kapellmeister to the Köthen court of Prince Leopold, Bach's access to experienced musicians, a number of virtuoso instrumentalists among them, encouraged him to strive towards new heights of technical accomplishment and expressive intensity.

What's striking about the Chaconne is its disguising of such ambition. Never has concentrated complexity seemed so loose, natural and free-flowing, qualities accented by Claudio Jaffe and Johanne Perron's nimble, nuanced arrangement for two cellos.

In the warp and weft of their layered voices, the dark-hued, contemplative interiority of the cello's baritone voice captures the music's shifting gradations and dynamic contours to reveal new textures, hidden depths and unexpected peaks within the remarkable subtlety of design.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

(1756-1791)

Arr. by David Johnstone

Ave verum corpus, K.618

Mozart composed his motet *Ave verum corpus* ('Hail, true body') to the text of a 14th-century Latin hymn for the feast of Corpus Christi in June 1791, six months before his death at the age of 35. Lasting only 46 bars and originally scored for SATB choir, strings and organ, David Johnstone's gently sombre arrangement for four cellos accentuates the gravity of the Latin text and the profundity of the most consecrated element of the Catholic Mass it was intended to accompany and illustrate.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Arr. by Ailbhe McDonagh

Adagio cantabile (2nd movement)

from Sonata No. 8, Op. 13 "Pathétique"

Completed during the summer of 1798 and published in the autumn of the following year as *Grande sonate Pathétique*, Beethoven's Op. 13 gave the Romantic era a new anthem.

It shares an inherited (or appropriated) kinship with Bach's Partita No. 2 (BWV 826) and Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 14 (K.457), both also cast in melancholically reflective C minor. In Beethoven's middle-movement *Adagio cantabile*, it's possible to discern a distinct echo of an equally delicate, similarly placed theme in Mozart's Sonata. Whatever influences may have fed Beethoven's tragedy-laced sonorities, they were transformed into one of the high-watermarks of the piano repertoire.

It is tempting (if fanciful) to think that Ailbhe McDonagh's arrangement finds in the original that particularly Irish fascination with music that seems more articulate and revealing than mere words. Perhaps it is the faux-religious serenity of the music's measured heart-beat pulse that speaks most eloquently? Or the sweetly sincere, whispered sense of a soul-baring confessional and the promise of forgiveness it contains that most immediately connects. These are questions that McDonagh's arrangement explores with exquisite poetry.

Conor Linehan

An Autumn Night's Dream

New Music Network Commission

Composer's note:

The title of this piece comes from the fact that its main theme literally came to me in my sleep. I was staying in Galway last September, writing music for *Druid Gregory*, Druid Theatre's production of six Lady Gregory plays, staged in the grounds of her former home of Coole Park. One night, the opening melody came to me in a dream. On waking up, I quickly sang it into my phone before the mist cleared and it would be forgotten forever!

The piece is in an almost palindromic form. It opens with the 'dream tune', a slow, meditative melody, which then transforms into a graceful dance for one bowed and three pizzicato cellos in ever shifting time signatures.

The dance is interrupted by a more driven, playful, section which alternates between 4/4 and 6/8 bars, subsequently incorporating the initial melody. This moves back into a variation on the more pensive opening music before a brief coda of the 'pizzicato' dance.

The brief, such as it was, when writing the piece was to compose music which is optimistic and warm, in the face of such difficult times. It also distributes the material evenly between Martin, Ailbhe, Rosalie and Bill. After all, in a quartet of four cellos there is no musical hierarchy!

I hope that the piece invokes a little of the tone of Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* music. I also hope that it also might have absorbed some of the magical spirit of Coole Park.

I'm very grateful to have been asked to compose this piece for four such superb musicians. I hope you enjoy it.

Conor Linehan

Ailbhe McDonagh

Cellango

Composer's note:

Cellango is a cello quartet composed by Ailbhe McDonagh based on the tango dance form. A cello tango, it is an homage to the Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla who is famous for his tango writing. The cello quartet ensemble is perfectly suited to the tango because of its range as both high and low areas of the instrument are explored in the piece, giving it the ability to sound lyrical but also rhythmic and sultry.

The opening sets an energetic scene with both first and second themes but then becomes more tranquil towards the middle section of the piece. The rhythmic tango bassline is heard in pizzicato celli here in a lyrical interplay between the other instrumental voices. As the opening theme returns, it adds more layers, textures and techniques to the original, gathering excitement as the piece approaches its end. Segments of all the themes return towards the finale and with dramatic glissandi the piece rushes to an exciting finish. *Cellango* is dedicated to Aisling Drury-Byrne with whom I studied the cello.

Ailbhe McDonagh



Jean-Baptiste Barrière (1707-1747)

Sonata for two cellos, No. 10 in G major

1. Andante
2. Adagio
3. Allegro prestissimo

Cello champion and pioneer Jean-Baptiste Barrière helped bring the recently developed instrument to prominence to end the long dominance of the viol. A lauded virtuoso cellist, he was also a composer of note. One for whom an enamoured Louis XV broke with the convention of conferring royal privilege only for six years to grant Barrière a life-long dispensation, all too briefly enjoyed before his death, aged 40, in 1747.

He published four books of cello sonatas, all for solo cello with figured bass line (accompanied solos, in other words). Uniquely, the fourth sonata from Book IV, No. 10 in G major, adds a second cello voice as accompaniment. It opens with a stately Andante which treats both voices equally, the ensuing short Adagio a sobering arioso for the lower voice complemented by the higher voice's ornamented melody. The Allegro prestissimo finale is a helter-skelter dialogue between the two, fluid, quicksilver-fleet and a dazzling display of Baroque exuberance.

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

Arr. by Lee Armstrong

'Summertime' from Porgy and Bess

George Gershwin's 1935 "American folk opera" *Porgy and Bess* is one of musical theatre's seminal works. Set in the fictional African-American ghetto of Catfish Row in early-1920s' Charleston, South Carolina, it tells the story of a beggar, his drug-addicted girlfriend, her violent ex-boyfriend and their long-suffering, hard-praying neighbours.

Now securely in the repertoire of theatre and opera companies the world over, several of its songs have become popular standards. None more so than the heat-hazed lullaby-like 'Summertime'. Its blending of African-American temperament, Blues attitude and jazz-inflected tone produced one of the most evocative and unforgettable of songs to come out of Broadway.

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Arr. by Lee Armstrong

Romanian Folk Dances (Sz68)

1. Jocul cu bâta (Stick dance)
2. Brâul (Sash Dance)
3. Pe loc (Stamping Dance)
4. Buciumeana (Horn (Bucium) Dance)
5. Poarga Românească (Romanian Polka)
6. Măruntel (Fast Dance)

Composed for solo piano in 1915 and orchestrated for chamber ensemble in 1917, Bartók's *Romanian Folk Dances* are based on traditional tunes from Transylvania that would originally have been played on rustic fiddle or flute.

One of the first composers to recognise the rich vitality of folk music, Bartók avidly collected and arranged tunes from what was then his native Hungary. His interests ranged across Eastern Europe to embrace the musical heritages of modern-day Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania.

Each of the six miniature, played-through dances have a distinctive signature of their own, variously conjuring a pirouetting soloist, the romance of celebrations around a gypsy camp fire, a lively polka and a languid moment of introspection, with the finale a fast, celebratory affair intertwining two vivacious melodies. Lee Armstrong's arrangement deftly distils the music's blend of pastoral vibrancy, peasant charm and Arcadian delicacy.

Programme notes by Michael Quinn

Biographies

William Butt cello

William Butt was born in London. His musical career started early, as a chorister in St. George's Chapel, Windsor. Later he studied at the Royal Northern College of Music with Moray Welsh and after winning awards and scholarships such as the Royal Society of Arts, Martin Trust and first prize in the Muriel Taylor competition, he furthered his studies with Antonio Lysy in Montreal. He now enjoys a busy career as soloist and chamber musician, and is professor of cello at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin. On the concert platform he has performed extensively throughout Ireland, the UK, Europe and the Far East. He is a much-admired exponent of the solo cello repertoire, having performed and broadcast numerous works by contemporary composers, as well as the formidable solo sonatas by Kodály and Ligeti and the suites of Bach and Britten. In recent seasons he has appeared as soloist with the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra, the Orchestra of St Cecilia and the Ulster Orchestra for BBC Radio 3. He has worked with conductors such as Alexander Anissimov, Gerhard Markson, Rumon Gamba, Vernon Handley and Barry Douglas.

His 2004 recording of the three suites for solo cello by Benjamin Britten by Warner Music UK (Warner Classics/Apex) received very positive reviews in the English press. He has performed and given masterclasses throughout Europe and China, and is constantly in demand as a chamber music player, something that he is passionate about.

William plays on a fine cello made by Giovanni Grancino in Milan (1690), and works regularly with his own string quartet the Esposito Quartet.



Rosalie Curlett cello

Rosalie began her studies at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, graduating with a first-class honours degree in 2012. After several years of freelancing Rosalie was awarded a full-time position with the Ulster Orchestra, and moved to Belfast in February 2018.

Rosalie has performed regularly with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, Philharmonia Orchestra, Manchester Camerata and the Hallé Orchestra, and has also performed with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. She has been fortunate enough to perform all over the world in countries such as Germany, Poland, Spain and China, to name a few, and has recorded under Chandos and Deutsche Grammophon record labels.

Rosalie is a passionate teacher, and holds teaching positions at the Ulster College of Music, Victoria College and Campbell College in Belfast. She is a former string sectional coach at the prestigious Chetham's School of Music and now works closely with the outreach and education department of the Ulster Orchestra.



Martin Johnson cello

Martin studied cello at the Royal College of Music, London, under the direction of Anna Shuttleworth and the Philharmonia Orchestra's Cello Concertmaster, Andrew Shulman.

In 2000, he joined the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra and moved to Dublin, where he was subsequently appointed Section Leader.

In January 2008 Martin made his debut as a soloist with the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra, performing Saint-Saëns Concerto No. 1 in A minor Op.33. In January 2015 Martin gave the world premiere of Grainne Mulvey's new cello concerto *Excursions and Ascents* as part of the RTÉ NSO's 2015 Horizons Concert Series. Shortly afterwards, in March 2015, Martin made his eighth appearance as soloist with the RTÉ NSO performing the world premiere of Frank Corcoran's brand-new Cello Concerto to critical acclaim. This has since been recorded on the RTÉ lyric fm Label and was released in June 2017.

As a soloist, Martin has given many other performances of concerti by Elgar, Robert Schumann, Joseph Haydn, Lalo, Saint-Saëns, Sir Michael Tippett, Delius, Corelli, Ibert, Beethoven's Triple Concerto and perhaps most notably Richard Strauss's tone poem *Don Quixote* op.35 for cello and orchestra with the RTÉ NSO and conductor Pascal Rophé at Ireland's National Concert Hall. Martin is due to give the World Premiere of a brand-new Cello Concerto by Shaun Davey in the autumn of 2021 with the RTÉ NSO.

Martin plays a fine cello by Thomas Kennedy of London c.1810 and an exceptional French bow by Eugene Sartory from the personal collection of the late and celebrated bow maker, Bernard Millant.

In 2006 Martin was invited to become a lifetime member of the World Philharmonic Orchestra. He is a Countess of Muster Scholar and is also supported by Music Network's Music Capital Scheme, funded by The Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. Music Network is funded by The Arts Council.



Ailbhe McDonagh cello

Irish cellist Ailbhe McDonagh performs internationally as a soloist and chamber musician. She is a graduate of the Eastman School of Music, Rochester, U.S.A. and the Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM), Ireland.

Ailbhe gave her debut recital at the National Concert Hall, Dublin with celebrated Irish pianist John O'Connor with whom she has recently recorded Beethoven's five cello and piano sonatas. Ailbhe has appeared as a concerto soloist numerous times in Ireland and abroad. Performances include concerts at Carnegie Hall, the Yale Norfolk Festival, Schleswig Holstein Music Festival, St. Martin in the Fields and on television and radio.

As a chamber musician, Ailbhe performs as part of The McDonagh Sisters with pianist Orla McDonagh. She is also a member of the Ficino Ensemble, The Belisama Trio and traditional Irish music group Trio Elatha.

Ailbhe is also an established composer with numerous compositions and commissions to date. Boosey & Hawkes have published two books of her piano music entitled *It's a Piano Thing*. Current projects include *It's a Cello Thing*, a collection of two books of cello music which will be published shortly. Keenly interested in performing contemporary music, Ailbhe collaborates with many composers worldwide and has recorded several CDs of contemporary music.

Ailbhe joined the cello faculty of the RIAM in 2010. Her debut solo CD *It's a Cello Thing* was named 'CD of the Week' on Ireland's national classical music station RTÉ lyric fm. Her *Skellig* album was released in 2020. She performs on a Postaccini cello.

