Music at Woolmers 3

Saturday 7 September, 11am
Woolmers Estate, Longford

Hayato Simpson violin
Lucy Carrig-Jones violin
Jennifer Owen viola
Nicholas McManus cello

BRITTEN Cello Suite No 1, Op 72 (25')
BORODIN String Quartet No 2 in D (30')
Allegro moderato
Scherzo. Allegro
Notturno. Andante
Andante – Vivace

Benjamin Britten's (1913-1976) Cello Suite No 1, Op 72, composed in 1964, is a landmark work in the solo cello repertoire. Commissioned by the famous Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, Britten's suite is notable for its inventive structure, technical demands, and expressive depth. The suite consists of nine interconnected movements, each showcasing different techniques and characters, demonstrating the cello's full range of expressive possibilities. These movements, while not traditional dance forms, carry echoes of the Baroque suite format, creating a fascinating blend of old and new styles.

Britten incorporates an array of extended techniques, such as pizzicato, harmonics, and complex bowings, to push the performer's virtuosity. However, this technical complexity is always in service of the music's emotional content, reflecting a wide spectrum of moods, from the lyrical to the dramatic. The first movement, Canto primo, establishes the recurring thematic material, while subsequent movements explore contrasting textures and ideas, including a lively fugue and a mournful elegy.

The suite reflects Britten's unique voice, blending modernism with a deep respect for earlier musical traditions. His understanding of the cello's capabilities is evident throughout, especially in the way he uses it to create multi-voiced textures that mimic polyphony. As with much of Britten's music, there is a sense of underlying tension and emotional intensity in the work. Cello Suite No 1 remains a challenging and rewarding piece for performers and is widely regarded as one of the 20th century's finest compositions for solo cello.

Alexander Borodin's (1833-1877) String Quartet No 2 in D Major, composed in 1881, is one of the most beloved works in the string quartet repertoire. Written during a particularly happy period of Borodin's life, the quartet radiates warmth, lyrical beauty, and a sense of serenity. It is structured in four movements and showcases Borodin's distinctive blend of Russian folk music with classical form.

The first movement, Allegro moderato, opens with a charming and flowing theme, displaying Borodin's gift for melody. The second movement, Scherzo, marked Allegro, is lively and playful, featuring intricate rhythms and dynamic contrasts. The third movement, Notturno (Andante), is perhaps the quartet's most famous section. It is a tender, lyrical nocturne with a deeply romantic quality, often performed on its own in concert settings. The final movement, Finale (Andante – Vivace), returns to a lively, upbeat character, featuring a joyful interplay between the instruments.

Throughout the quartet, Borodin demonstrates his mastery of the ensemble, with lush harmonies and exquisite dialogues between the instruments. The quartet is known for its lyricism and folk-inspired themes, as well as its fluid transitions between contrasting sections, creating a sense of seamless continuity.

Borodin's second quartet not only showcases his melodic genius but also his ability to integrate the spirit of Russian music with Western classical traditions. It remains a staple in the chamber music repertoire, widely admired for its beauty and emotional depth.