

Patrick Allen/operacomia



# Benjamin Grosvenor & Doric Quartet

Sunday 26 May 2019 7.30pm,  
Milton Court Concert Hall

**Janáček** String Quartet No 1, 'Kreutzer Sonata'  
**Chopin** Piano Concerto No 2 in F minor  
(chamber version)

**interval** 20 minutes

**Dvořák** Piano Quintet No 2 in A major

**Benjamin Grosvenor** piano  
**Laurène Durantel** double bass  
**Doric Quartet**  
**Alex Redington** violin (*leader*)  
**Ying Xue** violin  
**Hélène Clément** viola  
**John Myerscough** cello

**Part of Barbican Presents 2018–19**

George Garnier



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# Welcome

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A warm welcome to this evening's concert given by one of the most acclaimed string quartets around today – the Doric Quartet – together with the wonderfully gifted young British pianist Benjamin Grosvenor.

This is the second of a pair of concerts they are giving together (the first, in February, was a memorable feast of Schubert, Chopin and Fauré). Central to the two programmes are Chopin's piano concertos in their chamber-music incarnations. Chopin's orchestral writing lends itself particularly well to this treatment, and in effect turns the pieces into piano sextets, with the addition of a double bass (tonight played by Laurène Durantel) to the string ensemble.

This evening we hear the Second Piano Concerto in F minor, its dreamy central

Larghetto framed by outer movements that are by turns majestic and folk-infused.

We begin with Janáček, and his First String Quartet, which was written during the extraordinary fruitful final decade of his life. The inspiration for this searingly intense piece came from Tolstoy's dark tale of betrayal and violence *The Kreutzer Sonata*.

Benjamin Grosvenor and the Doric Quartet end with one of the great masterpieces of the piano quintet literature: Dvořák's Second, a piece as sunny as the Janáček is dark.

It promises to be an amazing evening. I hope you enjoy it.

Huw Humphreys  
Head of Music, Barbican

# Leoš Janáček (1854–1928)

## String Quartet No 1, 'Kreutzer Sonata'

(1923–4)

1 Adagio – Con moto

2 Con moto

3 Con moto

4 Con moto (Adagio) – Più mosso

It has been said that all Janáček's large-scale instrumental works are really veiled operas. An overstatement perhaps, but it's one that contains an important nugget of truth. In many of the major orchestral and chamber compositions of Janáček's astonishingly fertile last decade, psychological drama and expression are central. Not only that, but the writing for solo instruments is as much influenced by Janáček's researches into the musical characteristics of everyday speech as is the quasi-realistic writing for voices in his operas. It is music that seems not merely to sing, but also to speak. Czech-speakers have often claimed that they can hear particular words and phrases, as though they were being addressed personally. But the impact doesn't depend on nationality: you don't have to know a word of Czech to get the message.

In the case of the First String Quartet (1923–4) there was at least one clear outside stimulus. Janáček had been deeply stirred by reading Tolstoy's harrowing novella *The Kreutzer Sonata*. It tells of a woman trapped in an unhappy marriage, impelled into the arms of an unworthy lover by the experience of playing Beethoven's 'Kreutzer' Violin Sonata with him, and goes on to relate how she is killed by her maniacally jealous husband. But Janáček reached a very different ethical conclusion from Tolstoy, whose struggles with his own powerful sexual urges led him to adopt a puritanical, misogynist morality. (It is hard to tell whether he ultimately lays the blame for the sin of adultery more on the woman or on Beethoven's music.) Janáček, however, was much more moved by the woman's plight, just as he had been in his opera *Katya Kabanová* (1919–21). It is one of the enduring mysteries of art that a composer whose treatment of women in

everyday life (his wife very much included) wasn't always admirable could be so compassionate and perceptive in his work. But there it is, and Janáček's sense of impassioned indignation on behalf of Tolstoy's oppressed heroine, and his sympathy for her desperate yearning for happiness, well over and pour out in the music of the First String Quartet.

The great Adagio sigh that begins the First Quartet, and returns tragically transformed at the end, has been compared to the elemental yearning motif that opens *Katya Kabanová*. The Con moto solo figures that follow could be thwarted attempts to escape confinement – bursts of forward movement halted by the initial 'sigh'. Janáček's biographer Jaroslav Vogel compared the viola motif in the second movement to the heroine's 'foppish' lover, while the steadily intensifying *sul ponticello* tremolo figures that follow could suggest both the thrill and the dread of illicit desire.

A much clearer programmatic element appears in the third movement: violin and cello in close imitation intertwine to a version of the tender second theme from the opening movement of Beethoven's 'Kreutzer' Sonata, provoking harsh, angry protests from the other two strings – the husband's seething jealousy? The effect of these vivid juxtapositions and confrontations is to generate enormous tension, which is finally released, to cathartic effect, in the finale. Slow and plaintive at first, this builds to a frenzied, catastrophic climax, then a short but impassioned coda. Tolstoy had condemned both adulterous womanhood and music; Janáček here seems to plead for their vindication.

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# Fryderyk Chopin (1810–49)

## Piano Concerto No 2 in F minor, Op 21

(1829–30) (chamber version)

1 **Maestoso**

2 **Larghetto**

3 **Allegro vivace**

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Chopin wrote both of his two piano concertos during the years 1829–30, just as he was turning twenty. The fact that he was so young has to some extent skewed subsequent critical judgements. It has led some writers to stress what they see as ‘precocious’ brilliance and audacity in the writing, which inevitably carries with it the implication that in some ways the music isn’t quite mature. Add to this the fact that Chopin’s attitude to the concerto as a dynamic form is, by the standards of its time, highly unusual, and misunderstanding is heightened. For the Baroque and Classical masters of the solo concerto, a key ingredient had been the dramatic opposition of soloist and orchestra; this had been taken to a new level of theatricality by Beethoven, most famously in the slow movement of his Fourth Piano Concerto, in which the soloist’s gradual ‘calming’ of the initially stern orchestra would be compared to that of the legendary divine musician Orpheus taming wild beasts, or souls in Hades. As manufacturers had found ways of constructing pianos with more strength of tone and sustaining power, the dynamic, psychologically multi-layered relationship between piano and orchestra had become the central ingredient in the Romantic concerto. For some composers it remains so even today.

No-one would seriously argue that Chopin’s involvement with the orchestra came anywhere near his thrilling, exquisitely poetic identification with the piano (to the extent that every single surviving Chopin composition at least includes a part for the instrument). But disregard Beethoven – and for that matter Bach and Vivaldi – and accept that this is a type of concerto in which the relationship

between piano and orchestra is of an entirely different character, and surely its beauty and originality should speak for themselves. Although the orchestra sets the scene, as it does in most concertos of the Classical and early Romantic eras, most of the time the orchestral instruments enhance and amplify the piano’s thoughts – almost as a painter might add colour, texture and depth to a line drawing or etching. At times the effect is more like a composition for solo piano with orchestral accompaniment than a conventional concerto. But as such it clearly had a powerful effect on the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin, whose only Piano Concerto (1896) has a similar non-dynamic, but often highly poetic interplay between piano and orchestra; the revealingly entitled *Symphonie concertante* (‘Symphony-Concerto’, 1932) by another Pole, Karol Szymanowski, also acknowledges Chopin’s example in its ambiguous, semi-concerto nature.

The character of Chopin’s orchestral accompaniment has also made it perfect for translation to a string quintet, arguably losing little in the way of colour and gaining an intimacy that is very telling.

In any case, Chopin appears to have had very different ideas in mind from the notion of the Romantic ‘artist-hero versus society/nature/fate’ that left its mark on so many 19th-century piano concertos. The work published as No 2 was actually the first of the two to be written, and in it Chopin grappled for the first time with the effects of his apparently unrequited, certainly undeclared, love for the singer Konstancja Gładowska. ‘I have met my ideal’,

he told a friend. 'I dream about her, and the Adagio of my new concerto has taken shape under her influence ... It is unbearable not to be able to free oneself from an oppressive burden. You know to what I am alluding. I am therefore entrusting to the piano what I have sometimes spoken to you.' In other words, this work has much more the nature of an intimate confession than a public gladiatorial contest. It isn't just the Adagio: for all its virtuosic brilliance, the turbulent first movement often seems poised between technical display and private revelation. But in the finale something

else glimmers hopefully on the horizon – another love, that of Chopin's native Polish folk music. In the central theme we hear the characteristic irregular rhythms of the mazurka, the effect heightened by the upper strings' use of *col legno* bowing (the string struck with the wood of the bow). By the end the mood does seem to have lightened considerably: despite what he said, has Chopin begun to find a way, through art, to free himself from his 'oppressive burden'?

**interval** 20 minutes

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## Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)

### Piano Quintet No 2 in A major, Op 81 (1887)

**1 Allegro ma non tanto**

**2 Dumka: Andante con moto**

**3 Scherzo (Furiant): Molto vivace**

**4 Finale: Allegro**

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In 1887 Dvořák began work on a revision of a Piano Quintet he'd written 15 years earlier. Although he was critical of the work as a whole, he still felt there was enough material in it worth saving. But before long things had taken a new course: fresh ideas were occurring to him in such profusion that it soon became clear that the only solution was to write a new Piano Quintet. We should be grateful that he did: the result is one of the gems of the repertoire, worthy to be ranked alongside the piano quintets of Schumann, Franck and Shostakovich, and that of Dvořák's great friend and champion Brahms. It is however an entirely different work from Brahms's darkly impassioned masterpiece. Dvořák was 46 at the time, and therefore in prime position for a mid-life crisis, but in fact he was in excellent spirits, and well aware he was reaching new levels of confidence and mastery in his work. If the lasting impression made by Dvořák's Second Piano

Quintet is of a man full of enthusiasm for life, the biographical facts bear this out. Several of his letters at the time contain the phrase 'Thank God I am in good health!'. This could almost stand as a motto for the music.

But do health and happiness mean denial of pain and sadness? If this work has a message, then it contains an emphatic 'no' to that question. The opening of the first movement – a long, serene, relaxed cello melody above rippling figurations – seems to come from a land of pure contentment. When the full ensemble enters, however, it is agitated, impassioned and firmly in the minor key. (Dvořák doesn't indicate a tempo change, but most performers feel a need to speed up here.) But could there be an element of comedy here? The composer has given us an opening that sounds like a cello sonata: the way the other three voices storm in and change the

mood could be read as a frustrated 'Aren't we supposed to be part of this too?'. As so often in this quintet, the music's abundant vitality is reflected as much in the relationship between the instruments as in the character of the ideas themselves.

The slow movement places the relationship between happiness and sadness at its heart. It is cast in the form of a dumka, a traditional Slavic folk-dance form in which melancholic and upbeat episodes are juxtaposed without any attempt to form a bridge between the two states, as though the music were simply saying, 'Life's like that'. Dvořák loved the dumka and used it again and again in his music, but this is one of his richest and most beguiling examples. Now

the instrumental dialogue has become even more intimate, with passing echoes on the strings of the mysterious slow movement of Schumann's quintet. Another folk dance, the Bohemian furiant, is acknowledged in the Scherzo. Although rhythmically more straightforward than some of Dvořák's other furiant (at least until the slightly calmer central Trio section), it lives up to its name in its exuberant forward sweep.

And the Finale is boisterous good-hearted fun, with all five instruments kept pretty active most of the time. There's still plenty of lively dialogue between the players however – unlike several of his eminent contemporaries, Dvořák knew perfectly well what 'chamber music' meant.

Programme notes © Stephen Johnson

# About the performers

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Benjamin Grosvenor

## Benjamin Grosvenor piano

British pianist Benjamin Grosvenor is internationally recognised for his electrifying performances, distinctive sound and perceptive interpretations. His virtuosic command over the most arduous technical complexities underpins the depth and understanding of his music-making.

He first came to prominence when he won the Keyboard Final of the 2004 BBC Young Musician Competition at the age of 11. He performed at the First Night of the 2011 BBC Proms aged just 19. He was announced as the inaugural recipient of The Ronnie and Lawrence Ackman Classical Piano Prize with the New York Philharmonic in 2016.

Recent and forthcoming concerto highlights include engagements with the Boston, Chicago, Finnish Radio, London, Melbourne, San Francisco and Washington National Symphony orchestras, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the La Scala, London and New York Philharmonic orchestras, Gürzenich Orchestra Cologne, Hallé, Orchestre National de Lyon and the Orquesta Nacional de España. He has worked with esteemed conductors, including Vladimir Ashkenazy, Andrey Boreyko, Semyon Bychkov, Riccardo Chailly, Sir Mark Elder, Edward Gardner, Alan Gilbert, Manfred Honeck, Vladimir Jurowski, Emmanuel Krivine, Andrew Manze, Ludovic Morlot, Kent Nagano, Sir Roger Norrington, Gianandrea Noseda, François-

Xavier Roth, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Leonard Slatkin, Nathalie Stutzmann, Michael Tilson Thomas, Krzysztof Urbanski and Kazuki Yamada.

Highlights among this season's recitals are concerts at the Barbican, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, Munich's Herkulessaal, Palau de la Música Catalana Barcelona and in Madrid's Ciclo Grandes Intérpretes, San Francisco Performances, Sydney Symphony Orchestra's recital series and Milan's Società dei Concerti. Also a keen chamber musician, he joins Tabea Zimmermann and others for Schubert's 'Trout' Quintet at Bonn's Beethovenwoche 2019, and together with the Doric Quartet performs piano quintets by Fauré and Dvořák, as well as chamber settings of Chopin's piano concertos, here at Milton Court.

In 2011 Benjamin Grosvenor signed to Decca Classics – the youngest British musician ever, and the first British pianist in almost 60 years, to sign to the label. His fourth Decca CD, *Homages* (2016), presents works in which great composers pay tribute to their predecessors, including the Bach/Busoni *Chaconne*, Franck's *Choral, Prélude et Fugue* and Liszt's tribute to Italian folk song, *Venezia e Napoli*. The disc was warmly received and won a *Diapason d'Or*.

During his career to date, he has received *Gramophone's* Young Artist of the Year and Instrumental Awards, a Classic BRITs Critics' Award, UK Critics' Circle Award and a *Diapason d'Or* Jeune Talent Award. He has been featured in two BBC television documentaries as well as in CNN's *Human to Hero* series.

The youngest of five brothers, Benjamin Grosvenor began playing the piano aged 6. He studied at the Royal Academy of Music with Christopher Elton and Daniel-Ben Pienaar, graduating in 2012 with the Queen's Commendation for Excellence. In 2016 he was awarded an RAM Fellowship. He has been supported since 2013 by EFG International, the global private banking group.



Laurène Durantel

### Laurène Durantel double bass

French double-bassist Laurène Durantel is one of the most distinctive advocates of her instrument in a wide range of repertoire, from the Baroque to contemporary music and musical theatre. She is active as a soloist and chamber musician, as well as giving one-woman shows. She has appeared at leading European venues and has worked with the *Ébène Quartet*, Matthias Goerne and Jean-Guihen Queyras, among others. She is also a member of *Ensemble Variances*, founded by composer and pianist Thierry Pécou.

Antwerp De Singel, and is a regular visitor to the Wigmore Hall. The quartet tours annually to North America and made its Carnegie Hall debut in 2017.

It also has a busy festival schedule and has performed at the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, West Cork, North Norfolk, Cheltenham, Delft, Grafenegg, Schubertiade, Risør and Schwetzingen festivals. Last year it took over artistic directorship of the Mendelssohn on Mull Festival where it coaches and mentors young professionals in the field of string chamber music.

A recent highlight has seen the quartet take on John Adams's *Absolute Jest* for string quartet and orchestra with performances at the Vienna Konzerthaus conducted by the composer, with the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic at the Concertgebouw and with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra conducted by Markus Stenz. Its recording of the piece with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra under Peter Oundjian, released on Chandos last year, was named Recording of the Month in *BBC Music Magazine*.

Highlights of this season include a residency at Aldeburgh's Britten Weekend where the group will perform and subsequently record Britten's complete quartets. It returns to the Wigmore Hall three times and elsewhere performs at the Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, Dortmund Konzerthaus and Musée du Louvre in Paris. Further afield the quartet undertakes its annual North American tour. It returns to Australia for a nationwide tour with *Musica Viva*, including the world premiere of a new quartet by Brett Dean co-commissioned for the Doric by *Musica Viva*, the Berlin Konzerthaus, Carnegie Hall, Amsterdam String Quartet Biennale and the Edinburgh International Festival.



Doric Quartet

### Doric Quartet

**Alex Redington** violin (leader)

**Ying Xue** violin

**Hélène Clément** viola

**John Myerscough** cello

The Doric Quartet has firmly established itself as one of the leading quartets of its generation, receiving enthusiastic responses from audiences and critics across the globe. It performs in leading concert halls throughout Europe, including the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Vienna Konzerthaus, Berlin Konzerthaus, Frankfurt Alte Oper, Hamburg Laeiszhalle and

Since 2010 the Doric Quartet has recorded exclusively for Chandos Records. Its 2017 release of Schubert's *Quartettsatz* and G major Quartet was named Editor's Choice by *Gramophone* and nominated for a *Gramophone Award*. Recent and future releases include quartets by Mendelssohn and Britten, and the complete Haydn Op 33 Quartets.

The quartet's violist Hélène Clément plays an 1843 viola by Giussani, generously on loan from the Britten-Pears Foundation and previously owned by Frank Bridge and Benjamin Britten.