

Carducci Quartet, Ivor Gurney Hall, 26 January 2020

Since their formative years, the Carducci String Quartet have been an ensemble with that elusive x-factor. Yet over time they have evolved into an even more exciting and dynamic package capable of drawing in new listeners to classical music, such that it's fair to say that the Carducci's have reached a level in performance that other quartets of their generation would envy. The Gloucester Music Society audience has been privileged to witness that evolution at closer hand than most.

Their concert began with Beethoven's Quartet in F minor, and the Carducci's consummate musicianship was immediately apparent. Here were four players so utterly in tune with each other: moving and breathing as one, blending like the finest malt whisky – most apt on this Burns' Weekend. Such symbiosis can only come from years of playing together, and they have the knack of making everything they play sound vital and new – including Ludwig!

Although subtitled 'Serioso', the quartet contains much lively and joyous music, and we have to be grateful that the Carducci's didn't heed Beethoven's instruction that the work “is never to be performed in public.” As it is, the piece has become one of Beethoven's most accessible of his mid-period quartets and offers a delicious foretaste of what is to come in the later quartets.

Moeran's much less familiar Quartet no.2 in E flat major is replete with emotional surges which the quartet pull off with passion and conviction. Matthew Denton remarked that it “starts out as Vaughan Williams and gets more Irish as the work wears on”. Moeran's piece occupies a lush, romantic, verdant landscape underlain with a melancholy air, and has a yearning, spacious quality which is very appealing, particularly the plaintive viola melody in second movement. And the vigorous vivace – resembling a gleeful Irish jig – sent us into the interval with spring in our step.

Rebecca Clarke's Poem comes across as if we were eavesdropping on an intense conversation amongst the four instruments, each commenting on the deceptively simple theme that passed around them. The piece is all the more affective for being concentrated into a relatively short duration.

Britten's Quartet no.1 in D major, on the other hand, is still capable of dividing opinion. It opens with screeching high strings above pizzicato cello – an unsettling effect my listening companion likened to nails down a blackboard! Yet in contrast, the energetic marcato theme juxtaposed with it takes the edge off the music.

First violinist Matthew Denton's makes animated leaps from his chair which just adds to the drama and excitement as Britten's score increases in intensity. The music presses forward in the second movement with a spiccato theme, while the searing climax of the third movement erupts from a period of anxious introspection, before embarking on a finale full of wit and surprise.

Peter Gregson's 'The Day Before' – a brief morsel in the minimal mould of Howard Skempton or Arvo Part – proved a pleasing encore to this marvellous concert.