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THE SOLEM QUARTET

4-6 February 2022

Bridport Arts Centre  
Ilminster Arts Centre

The Dance House, Crewkerne   
St Laurence Church, Upwey

Concerts in the West could not have wished for a more sublime opening tour to launch their 17th annual season. The Solem Quartet (Amy Tress, William Newell, Stephen Upshaw and Stephanie Tress) are young, accomplished, and experienced musicians with an all-round depth of maturity in their playing that is quite extraordinary. The individual skills of musicianship and performing can be assumed. What is significant about Solem is their synergy that produces a combined effect much greater than the sum of their individual and distinctive accomplishments. The Quartet conveys a keen sense of intuitive awareness that one can assume comes from a depth of agreement and understanding of how the music will be presented and go forward.

The programme contained music of two giants of the medium: Beethoven’s C sharp minor Op 131 and Bartók’s Quartet No 1, Op 7. About eighty years separate these compositions. Idiomatically they are worlds apart but structurally and emotionally they share several common elements. Each quartet starts with a slow movement in which personal pain and anxiety in the lives of both composers at the time of composition. Counterpoint is central to the writing of each. Bartók seems to have been fully conversant with Beethoven’s use of fugue and imitative invention, no more so than in the opening movement. The element of frenetic country dancing pervades Beethoven’s *Presto* movement and Bartók’s *Allegro vivace* with incrementally feverish energy. The stature and complexity of Beethoven’s late Quartet requires a high degree of individual and collective concentration. It is a long journey and Solem were well equipped for the lengthy pilgrimage that the work demands. The Bartók felt like a journey in progress.

The Solem Quartet opened their programme with *Sunrise,* in-house arrangements of excerpts by Henry Purcell, Ivor Gurney, Cassandra Miller and the Scottish folksong, *Ca’ the Yowes.* The sequence began with music from Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* slipping seamlessly into Gurney’s restful song, *Sleep.* We were awakened bythe dawn chorus as imagined in Miller’s *Warblework*. Finally, Purcell’s *Now does the glorious day appear* concluded an imaginative opening to the rest of the concert.

Perhaps the most telling appraisal of The Solem Quartet’s short concert tour was made by one brand new concertgoer on departing one of the venues: “I’ve never been to an evening of string quartet music until tonight…… when will Solem be returning? I will be here, whenever that is” And so say all of us!

The quartet can be heard on their new CD *The Four Quarters* (Orchid Classics).

Andrew Maddocks 2022