

**Gildas Quartet**

19-21 April 2024

Bridport Arts Centre, Ilminster Arts Centre

The Dance House, Crewkerne, St Peter’s Church, Shaftesbury

The short tour of four venues by the Gildas Quartet was accompanied with some precious Spring sunshine and drew very warm responses from the audiences.

The Gildas, formed in 2010, performed an enticing programme of quartet music that featured contemporary, classical, the more familiar, and the unusual.

Among their attributes was the care taken with collective tuning and their individual intonation. In addition, they gave a sense of shared responses to the scores: the players pooled their energies with equal commitment when the music commanded and found a communal discernment for a more relaxed response when it was required.

The first item of the Gildas programme, *Break Away* by Jessie Montgomery was no easy piece to ‘break the ice’ for listeners and musicians. Each of the five short movements had a title – *Lilting; Songbird; Smoke; Quick Pass; Break Away –* and each felt like a different gem set into the whole. The gems were of different colours, but each had a cohesiveness and added its own distinctive character to the entity. When the unfamiliar is presented well, any prejudices that one has brought about the unfamiliar are challenged. Full marks to Gildas for the confidence they placed in their audiences and themselves.

If there were lingering doubts in the minds of some listeners and about such contemporary sounds, they were no doubt assuaged by the nicknamed *Friedhofsquartett* Opus 76 by Joseph Haydn. The ‘Graveyard Quartet’ doesn’t sound very promising perhaps, but it is a wonder of melody, sometime sunny, sometimes sad, sometimes dance-inspired, sometimes furious, but invariably magical. The contrasts of mood posed by this quartet were deftly handled by Gildas with nuanced phrasing and nimble technique.

The theme of death might have been seen as being overplayed with the Quartet’s inclusion of Puccini’ *Crisantemi.* But this single-movement piece of barely seven minutes in length was conceived and written in one evening by one of the great masters of moving melody in response to hearing of a close friend’s death. The Gildas Quartet performance spoke with great affection and sincerity from the very first cello notes avoiding indulgent sentiment and allowing the natural warmth of the music to express the poignancy of Puccini’s pain.

Debussy’s G minor Quartet of 1893 is always a welcome inclusion for string quartet audiences. Each time this work is played it opens a colourful palette of sound for which that creative master of sound, Debussy, is justly famous. However, it is not by accident that richness of the quartet’s colouristic landscape will be heard. The performers need to discover and reveal to their listeners the extraordinary details of the harmonies and demonstrate an ongoing and intense regard for the aspects of the dynamics, accents and tempo changes. Debussy’s work will always be a glorious work to end a string quartet programme. A mature thinking string quartet will be aware of the mental and physical demands that this quartet makes and will devise an earlier content that acknowledges these facts. The Gildas Quartet did just that and their audiences were rewarded with a performance that always felt it had energy and commitment.

Andrew Maddocks 2024