

VERTAVO QUARTET

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Team players

It is 20 years since the Vertavo Quartet started playing together as schoolchildren, but the line-up of Norway's only full-time professional quartet remains unchanged.

Tim Homfray reports

Aldeburgh must be a pleasant place to celebrate a 20th anniversary. The Vertavo String Quartet, 20 years old this year, is going to the festival to play Bartók and Haydn, along with the resident Belcea Quartet.

It is a notable anniversary. A lot of quartets do not last this long; those that do rarely have the same personnel they started out with; and few of those, if any,

have managed it while they were still all in their thirties. This all-female Norwegian quartet came together when they were in their mid-teens to enter a competition in Finland, and, without having particularly planned on doing so, they just kept going. As the cellist Bjørg Værnes explains: 'We didn't have a long-term strategy. People just kept asking us to play. We were doing more and more concerts.'

They were also, of course, still in full-time education, and as one of the violinists, Berit Cardas, points out, to describe them as a professional quartet back then 'might be taking things a bit far'. Nevertheless, says Værnes, 'We were being offered tours all the time, in Norway and Sweden, and gradually we turned into a professional group. We don't really know how it happened.'

They didn't even have an agent. 'Every time we did a concert we got another one out of it,' explains Værnes. 'In the early days we would find ourselves away from home for months every summer.'

The quartet's name, cobbled together from their own names to enter the Finnish competition, began to worry them. 'At first we thought it might be a bit silly,' says Værnes, 'and as we travel to so many different countries with different languages, we are always worrying that it might mean something embarrassing! We wondered if we should call ourselves the Oslo Quartet or something, but nobody seemed to mind.'

So Vertavo it remained, and the name became more internationally known when they won four awards, including first prize, in the second Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition in 1995. A string of other awards followed, including the Nordic Chamber Music Prize in 1996 and more recently the Nordea prize in 2003.

But being a young quartet player riding a tide of success is one thing. As they grow older many performers find the strain of constant travelling and, crucially, the demands of new and expanding families impossible to endure and they give up in favour of a more settled existence. The Vertavo players have taken it all in their stride. They are still the best of friends (not always the case with ensemble players),

with six children between them and a seventh imminent. 'Nowadays we travel with babies all the time,' says Cardas. 'At least our partners knew what they were getting into.'

But travelling *en familles*, along with a nanny or two and a cello that needs its own seat on the aeroplane, is quite a financial burden. Værnes estimates their flight expenses alone come to some £70,000 a year. Until recently the players received sponsorship from Wallensius Wilhelmsen Lines, which stepped in to fund their trip to the Melbourne competition and continued to support them afterwards. But then the boss retired. They are not particularly looking for other sponsorship although, as Værnes says, 'It would be nice.'

They also receive support from the Norwegian Cultural Council, which makes yearly grants available to Norwegian musicians. Each year the Vertavos have to submit details of their plans and projects to qualify for a grant. But, as Værnes points out, 'It's hard for them to ignore us, because we are such a full-time ensemble. If they don't give it to us who are they going to give it to?'

Today they are the only full-time quartet in Norway. They have a full diary which takes them all over Europe and includes the artistic directorship of the annual Elverum Music Festival ('It's really good – we can invite all our friends,' says Værnes) and a residency in Hedmark County. They also boast an impressive discography covering everything from music by their compatriots Alf Hulum and Kjell Mørk Karlsen, via some excursions into jazz and rock, to a disc of Debussy and Grieg which won them the Diapason d'or in October 2001. They have an enviable relationship with the Simax Classics label. 'We can record whatever we want,' says Volle. 'That's the advantage of a small label.' There is a recording of short 19th-century Russian works (called *Les Vendredis* after the club to which all the composers belonged), due out soon.

The quartet's discography also includes a critically lauded set of the complete Bartók quartets, which brings us back to Aldeburgh. The Vertavo Quartet was invited to the festival by the resident Belcea Quartet, which has been doing an intensive study of Bartók's works. They will be sharing a series of six concerts pairing Bartók with Haydn's opus 20 quartets, as well as joining forces for Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* and Enescu's Octet. The Vertavos are excited by the juxtaposition of Haydn and Bartók. 'You can see the whole development of the string quartet,' says Cardas. Enescu's passionate, rarely-aired octet, written at the turn of the 19th century, forms part of a series of his works being performed at the festival.

With their diary chock-a-block already, the Vertavos have no plans for any major new projects, although the players would like to spend some time with late Beethoven. 'There are so many things we would like to do,' says Volle. 'We want to keep the group together for another 20 years.'

www.vertavo.com
www.aldeburgh.co.uk



Bring out the bubbly: The Vertavo Quartet celebrates its 20th birthday

Yvonne Holtz