

Bennewitz

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) String Quartet in Bb K.458 'The Hunt'

(1784)

Allegro vivace assai

Menuetto and Trio. Moderato

Adagio

Allegro assai

The "Hunt" quartet is one of the set of six quartets that were inspired by Haydn and were dedicated to him. This season the Heath quartet has played the Eb major K.428 from the same set and last season the Chilingirian played the A major K.464 and the Kuss the "Dissonant" K.465.



The "Hunt" nickname for the Bb quartet was not

Mozart's; it refers to the jaunty opening theme, with the violins moving in parallel

thirds and fourths in a Bb arpeggio, reminiscent of hunting

horns. A contrasting simple figure with a semiquaver flourish (*) appears first on the 1st violin and then is passed down to

the 2nd violin, viola and cello and then back up in turn to the 1st again before turning

into the second subject proper. The development generously starts with a new

theme, but then a variant of the semiquaver flourish (*) becomes the main material

for the development. For contemporary Vienna, in the words of Carl Ditters von

Dittersdorf, these quartets "*because of their overwhelming and unrelenting artfulness*

are not to everyone's taste". However, to modern ears, the entertaining exuberance

of the whole movement sounds effortless.



The short Minuet and its Trio with metronomic accompaniment lead to a very

substantial *Adagio*. Its opening figure is

hesitant, with significant silences (**).

These silences set up the subsequent

flowing song lines from the first violin and

the cello against a pulsing accompaniment. One of the magic moments of the

movement comes when the lower parts build up a *piano*

pulsing chord and the first violin enters *piano* with the tenderest

of motifs. Mozart famously achieved a similar effect in the Eb



Adagio of the Serenade K.361 for 13 wind instruments when the oboe enters on a high Bb above a pulsing accompaniment. Why are these entries so poignant?

The boisterous mood of the first movement returns with the energetically engaging finale. In Mozart's codas we often get just a glimpse of the fertility of Mozart's imaginative creativity: "Here's a taste of what else I might have done if only I'd had the space". But in this glorious movement it blossoms. Perhaps the prime attribute that makes classical string quartets so rewarding both to play and to listen to is the independence of the four parts. Haydn pioneered this development, but Mozart brought the full weight of his genius to developing it. David Waterman (of the

Endellion Quartet) points to one passage in the last movement where each instrument represents a different character, just as in, say a vocal quartet from *The Marriage of Figaro*.

Indeed Mozart's operatic writing, as well as his quartet writing,

was developing rapidly at this time. He had had great success with *The Abduction from the Seraglio* in 1782 and in 1783-4 was in the process of writing two other operas - *The Deluded Bridegroom, or The Rivalry of Three Women for One Lover* and *The Goose of Cairo*. These were abandoned when da Ponte produced the libretto of *Figaro* which was performed just two years after the Bb quartet in 1786.



Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) Selection from “Cypresses” for string quartet (1887)

In 1865 Dvořák was working as a viola player in the orchestra pit of the Prague Provisional Theatre, which had lured Smetana back from Göteborg to be its conductor. To help make ends meet Dvořák gave piano lessons, and fell in love with one of his pupils Josefína Čermáková. He composed 18 love songs for her, settings of poems by Gustav Pflieger-Moravský. She did not return his affection and so Dvořák, like Mozart, eventually married the younger sister. Dvořák retained an affection for Josefína; in 1894, news that she was dying inspired the slow movement of his cello concerto. Some 20 years after writing the songs, in 1887, Dvořák made an arrangement for string quartet of twelve of them.

The poet Moravský was a member of the *Májovci* ("May School"), a significant group of Czech writers, who, after the fall of the old order in the Revolution of 1848, reintroduced Czech as a literary language and promoted liberty, democracy and social justice. Moravský's Cypress poems, however, tell of unrequited love and of the attractiveness of death, given the circumstances. The cypress tree is rich in associations with death. Ovid tells how Cyparissus mistakenly killed his friend Apollo's pet deer, threw himself onto the ground in inconsolable grief and was metamorphosed into a Cypress tree with tears of sap on its trunk. All good stuff for a lovelorn young composer.

Bedrich Smetana (1824-1884) String Quartet No. 1 in E minor 'From my Life' (1876)

Allegro vivo appassionato

Allegro moderato à la Polka

Largo sostenuto

Vivace

Smetana, the son of an affluent brewer, heard string quartets played at home, and learned the violin from an early age. As a piano and composition student in Prague he also played in a string quartet for which he wrote arrangements of pieces he had heard played by military bands at promenade concerts. Although he wrote both a string quartet (now lost) at the age of 15, and a passionate piano trio in his early 30s after the death of his favourite daughter, it was not until his last decade that he returned to quartet writing.

In 1874, after conducting Prague's National Provisional Theatre's orchestra for 8 years, Smetana was forced to resign his post because of increasingly troublesome tinnitus. Despite rest and quiet, the noises in his ears became worse and soon he lost all hearing in both ears. In 1876, he moved from Prague to Jabkenice to live with his eldest daughter. His continuing profound deafness did not impair his ability to compose, and soon after arriving in Jabkenice he wrote his first string quartet – what he described as an intimate confession depicting the course of his life "... using four instruments speaking among themselves in something like a friendly circle".

The work opens with a long declamatory solo by the viola. At the first private performance of



the work, the viola was played by Dvorák, who had been a violist in Smetana's Prague orchestra. In a letter to a friend Smetana described the autobiographical nature of the work as follows:

“My intention was to paint a tone picture of my life. The first movement depicts my youthful leanings toward art, the Romantic atmosphere, the inexpressible yearning for something I could neither express nor define, and also a kind of warning of my future misfortune . . . The long insistent note in the finale owes its origin to this. It is the fateful ringing in my ears of the high-pitched tones which in 1874 announced the beginning of my deafness. I permitted myself this little joke, because it was so disastrous to me. The second movement, a quasi- polka, brings to mind the joyful days of youth when I composed dance tunes and was known everywhere as a passionate lover of dancing. The third movement . . . reminds me of the happiness of my first love, the girl who later became my wife. The fourth movement describes the discovery that I could treat national elements in music and my joy in following this path until it was checked by the catastrophe of the onset of my deafness, the outlook into the sad future, the tiny rays of hope of recovery, but remembering all the promise of my early career, a feeling of painful regret.”