

Sunday 13 October 11.00 a.m. Apollon Musagete Quartet

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) String Quartet No.2 in A Minor, Op 13 (1827)

Adagio - Allegro vivace

Adagio non lento

Intermezzo: Allegretto con moto - Allegro di molto

Presto - Adagio non lent

Two people unwittingly contributed to the composition of Mendelssohn's 1827 A minor quartet: Beethoven, who had recently died, and Betty Pistor, a 19-year old neighbour and friend of Mendelssohn's younger sister Rebekah. Earlier in the year Mendelssohn and Betty had sung in the same choir; he fell in love with her, wrote her a love-poem (under the pseudonym of H. Voss)

entitled *Frage* (Question. 'Is it true that you are always there ...?'), which



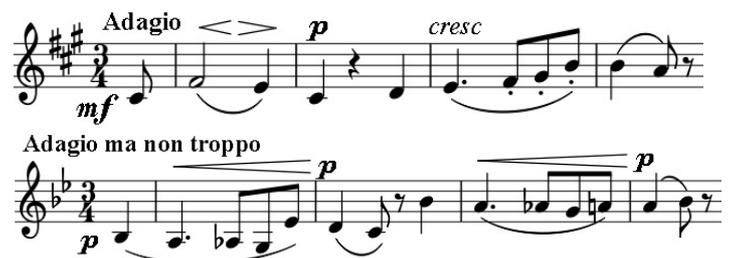
Ist es wahr? dass du stets dort in dem Laubgang

he turned into a short song. The theme of the song became the heart of the quartet.

Mendelssohn's infatuation with Betty persisted, although she regarded him simply as an admirable and talented friend, and she also appears in various coded guises the following year in his next quartet, the Op 12 in Eb. Sadly, the dedicatee's initials had to be changed from BP to BR when she married a law professor. Despite, or perhaps because of, her lack of interest in the young composer, she inspired two wonderful quartets.

Beethoven's contribution to Op 13 was less romantic. His late quartets had recently been published, but he was out of fashion; few recognised their value. Mendelssohn's own father agreed with Spohr's view that they were '*indecipherable, uncorrected horrors*'. But the 18 year-old Felix studied them closely and incorporated many of their compositional techniques and even motifs into his Op 13. It was a brave, liberating choice to take the late quartets as his model rather than the Mozartian early or heroic middle ones. That he was successful in capturing something of Beethoven is clear from an anecdote that Roger Parker recounts of Mendelssohn attending the Op 13 quartet's Parisian premiere: 'During the last movement, the person sitting next to [Mendelssohn] tugged on his coat and said: "*It's like that in one of his symphonies*". Mendelssohn was confused and asked for clarification. His companion explained: "*Beethoven, the composer of this quartet*".'

The A major *Adagio* introduction to the first movement is close to a simple inversion of the *Adagio ma non troppo* A minor start of Beethoven's Op 130. Mendelssohn then again follows Beethoven with rapid running semiquavers at the start of the main *Allegro vivace*. Mendelssohn's genius for melody blossoms in the glorious theme of the slow movement, which after a tender fugal passage



Adagio *mf* *p* *cresc*

gives way to a sprightlier episode reminiscent of the interruptions to the *Heiliger Dankgesang* slow movement of Beethoven's Op 132 A-minor quartet. A more purely Mendelssohn *Intermezzo* follows, with another early example of his Midsummer Night's Dream style in the *Allegro* section. But Beethoven



Presto *ff* *ad libitum*

returns in the last movement: the first violin's *ad libitum* recalls the Baritone's recitative near the beginning of the last movement of the Ninth Symphony. The



Baritone

O Freun - de, nicht die - se Töne

last section of the movement returns to the introductory *Adagio*, filling it out into the “Ist es wahr?” music which has always been behind this extraordinary quartet.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) Visions Fugitives (arr. Samsonov) Op 22 (1915-17)
Lentamente; Allegretto; Con eleganza; Dolente; Ridicolosamente; Poetico; Feroce

Visions fugitives are a series of 20 short (each lasting 1 or 2 minutes) piano pieces that Prokofiev wrote as whimsical vignettes of specific friends. The title comes from a phrase in the sonnet that the poet Konstantin Balmont composed on the spot when Prokofiev first played them to him. As a young teenager, Prokofiev had been encouraged by his teacher Glière to school himself by writing short pieces and arranging them into a larger structure, advice which led to '*Little Songs*', five series each of 12 piano pieces. In 1912 and 1913 he travelled to England, France and Switzerland where he heard works by Ravel and Stravinsky. By the time he wrote *Visions fugitives* Prokofiev had earned an established reputation in St Petersburg as an instrumental and operatic composer, and had had a resounding success for his first and, at least among progressives, his second piano concertos. Prokofiev was in the habit of working on a number of works in different styles at the same time. Around the time that he was composing *Visions fugitives* he was also writing his well-known *Classical Symphony*, which pre-dated Stravinsky's neo-classical *Pulcinella* by a couple of years.

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) Concertino for String Quartet (1920)

In the summer of 1920 Stravinsky was living in the Bretagne fishing village of Carantec just east of Roscoff, a place “*full of conventional middle-class trippers, who can't afford to go to Deauville.*” Summer in Carantec was a bridge between Switzerland and his future home in Paris under the patronage of Coco Chanel. While in Carantec, Stravinsky composed his Concertino for String Quartet to a commission from the Flonzaley Quartet. This ensemble was the creation of New York banker Edward De Coppet, whose support allowed the players to devote themselves entirely to rehearsing and performing, initially just for his family but later, as their reputation increased, in public. They spent the winter in New York and the summer at Flonzaley, the De Copett house in Lausanne. Nice work!

The Concertino itself is a short, 6-minute piece in free sonata form, playing on the harmonic tension of the opening: a rising scale in C-major on the first violin and cello against one in B major on the viola. The first violin is *concertante* with a cadenza-like central section and a heavily double-stopped central slower section.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) String Quartet No 4 in D Op 83 (1949)

Allegretto
Andantino
Allegretto
Allegretto

In 1948 Stalin's secretary in charge of ideological matters Andrei Zhdanov extended his critical doctrine of authors ('*The only conflict that is possible in Soviet culture is the conflict between good and best*') to composers: Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Khatchaturian were accused of 'formalist and decadent' tendencies, 'unhealthy individualism' and 'pessimism'. Shostakovich lost his job at the Moscow Conservatory and made a living by churning out music for the state-run film industry, keeping his serious music in his desk. Anti-semitism

was rife, culminating in the notorious 'Doctors plot' shortly before Stalin's death in 1953. Shostakovich identified with the Jews' ambivalent and precarious state:

'Jewish folk music ... is multifaceted, it can appear to be happy while it is tragic. It's almost always laughter through tears. This quality of Jewish folk music is close to my ideas of what music should be. There should always be two layers in music. Jews were tormented for so long that they learned to hide their despair. They express despair in dance music.' (Testimony, 1979)

The fourth quartet, which had its first public performance in 1953, expresses these two layers of meaning, the surface and the hidden, particularly in the humorous but menacingly muted Scherzo of the third movement. The quartet's melody, rhythm and texture all have a Middle-Eastern flavour: the wistful sadness of the violin's unbroken line in the second movement and the viola's incantation before the Klezmer-like last movement which unwinds to a death-like stasis.

Programme notes by Chris Darwin