

transcendentalism of the *Young Poland* movement in literature: 'Art has no aim... art stands above life, penetrates the essence of the universe.' He visited Berlin and Vienna, and was much influenced by Scriabin and by the late German romantics, particularly Richard Strauss. He later travelled more widely to London, Paris, Italy, Sicily and North Africa, and his style moved away from Strauss towards Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky and the exotic imagery of Arab mythology. It was in this style - 'a wondrously seductive developmental process that was both static and mobile' (Adrian Thomas) - that he composed prolifically during the first world war. Major works from this period include his first violin concerto, his third symphony and today's first string quartet. They are regarded as among his finest achievements, showing 'his ability to meld high romanticism with the subtle harmonic shadings and instrumental textures of recent French music'.

The first quartet was written towards the end of this period in the autumn of 1917, when the upheavals of the October Revolution destroyed his family home. Perhaps because of this, the originally planned fourth, fugal movement was never written. Shortly afterwards his musical creativity temporarily waned and he wrote an erotic novel, *The Ephebe*, 'as a solace and sweet remembrance of things past, in order to exorcise the black pit of an endless succession of days, weeks, months spent amidst the most atrocious external conditions by a magic vision of Italy.'

Hearing the opening few bars of the first quartet with a drooping motif in the first violin accompanied by three notes of an ascending scale of major triads, you might be forgiven for thinking that the performers had put a newly discovered quartet by Vaughan Williams on their stands by mistake. But we soon enter a sound world of intense, lush chromaticism and frequent tempo changes nearer to that of Schoenberg's 1899 *Verklärte Nacht*. The range of sound textures is extended by frequent long sliding *portamento* (as in the third bar) and the thin sounds of high harmonics and of rapid *tremolo* bowed near the bridge (*sul ponticello*). The slow movement is an intense song, perhaps allowing Szymanowski to indulge his 'magic vision of Italy'. It starts with another long upward *portamento* and again the sound texture is extended with harmonics and varied bowing techniques.

Lento assai

The image shows the first three bars of the first quartet. The tempo is marked 'Lento assai'. The first violin part begins with a drooping motif, marked *ppp*. The other three instruments (violin 2, viola, and cello) play an ascending scale of major triads, marked *pp*. The score is in 3/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#).

Except for the opening surprise call to attention, the whole of the *Scherzo* last movement, is written polytonally, with each instrument playing in a different key: initially cello C, viola Eb, violin 2 F#, violin 1 A - the four notes of a diminished seventh chord. Mid-movement the keys all shift up a tone for 30 or so bars again with a range of textural effects (illustrated) and then come back down. Curiously, the sound of the movement is not particularly dissonant but it has the lawlessness of a grotesque burlesque. Now we might wonder whether the players have a very early quartet by Shostakovich on their stands – he was only 11 in 1917.

The image shows a section of the *Scherzo* last movement. It is polytonal, with each instrument playing in a different key. The score includes various textural effects: *flautando* (flute-like), *p dolce* (piano dolce), *pizzicato*, *p ma poco marcato* (piano ma poco marcato), and *ppp sul ponticello* (pianissimo sul ponticello). The tempo is 3/4 and the key signature is one sharp (F#).

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) String Quartet in C major, Op 61 (1881)

Allegro

Poco adagio et molto cantabile

Allegro vivo

Finale. Vivace

This work was commissioned by the Hellmesberger Quartet, a group that had been formed in Vienna in 1849 and which was the first permanent string quartet named after its leader. In October 1881, Dvořák was working on a new opera, *Dimitrij*, when he read in the newspaper that the Hellmesberger Quartet was proposing to perform his new string quartet in December in Vienna's Ringtheater. He was thus forced to interrupt work on the opera, in order to begin to compose the quartet. He finished it in time (10th November), but on December 8th, just a week before the intended performance, the Ringtheater burned down in a catastrophic fire that killed over 600 people. The tragedy led to legislation on safety curtains and outward-opening doors, and also to Dvořák's quartet receiving its first performance by a different group in Bonn.

Dvořák's previous quartet, Op 51 in Eb, had been commissioned in 1879 by Jean Becker of the Florence-based Florentine Quartet. They specifically asked for a "Slavonic Quartet". Dvořák had just sprung to fame thanks to a helping hand from Brahms who had recommended Dvořák to his own publisher Simrock. Simrock in turn suggested that he write a set of *Slavonic Dances* analogous to Brahms' *Hungarian Dances*. These *Slavonic Dances* were a tremendous success and brought Dvořák immediate acclaim. His slavonic style owed much to Smetana and from studying collections of folk music. Its characteristics include: the absence of an upbeat in the melody (mirroring Czech word-stress), pentatonic phrasing, the sharpened fourth in the minor and strongly syncopated traditional dance rhythms.

The Hellmesberger Quartet, by contrast, had made no such Slavonic request (perhaps as an insurance against the growing anti-Czech political feelings in Vienna at that time) and today's quartet (Op 61) is built in a more classical mould. Its composition marks the start of a new phase in Dvořák's style. The writing, though subtly detailed and retaining some Czech character, is more dramatic, with rapid, strong contrasts of dynamics and expression, large melodic leaps and forceful rhythms. Dvořák had written to Joseph Hellmesberger in response to the commission: "*Rest assured I will work on my new quartet with the utmost élan, deploying all my art and knowledge, only to be able to give you a composition well done and accomplished, and certainly the good Lord will also inspire me with some melodies.*" All the movements do indeed demonstrate Dvořák's natural melodic gift.

The amiable theme that the first violin announces at the start of the first movement is later extensively developed in a classical style. Listen out particularly for the rising triplet and dotted figure (**)



figure (**) occurring again and again. The initial raw material for the second movement seems nothing special, but Dvořák spins wonders from the inter-twining of the two violins. The rising triplet and dotted figure (**) from the first movement provides the main theme for the Scherzo, and a modified version of the first bar and a half of the example (*) provide the material for its substantial Trio section. The last movement's simple theme is elaborated with daunting pyrotechnics for the first violin, which no doubt Joseph Hellmesberger relished - after all his concert programmes did have the heading: "*Hellmesberger Quartet, with the assistance of ... [names of the three other players]*"!