

## 25 October 2015 Elias String Quartet (first concert)

### Programme Notes by Chris Darwin

#### Robert Schumann (1810-1856) String Quartet in F Op 41 No 2 (1842)

*Allegro vivace*

*Andante quasi variazioni*

*Scherzo. Presto - Trio. L'istesso tempo*

*Allegro molto vivace*

Coming after his 'Liederjahre' of 1840 and the subsequent 'Symphonic Year' of 1841, 1842 was Schumann's 'Chamber Music Year': three string quartets, a piano quartet and the particularly successful piano quintet. Such creativity may have been due to Schumann at last winning, in July 1840, the protracted legal case in which his ex-teacher Friedrich Wieck, attempted to forbid him from marrying Wieck's daughter Clara. They were married on 12 September 1840, the day before Clara's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

1842, however, did not start well for the Schumanns. Robert accompanied Clara at the start of her concert tour of North Germany, but he tired of being in her shadow, returned home to Leipzig in a state of deep melancholy, and comforted himself with beer, champagne and, unable to compose, contrapuntal exercises. Clara's father spread an unfounded and malicious rumour that the Schumanns had separated. However, in April Clara returned and Robert started a two-month study of the string quartets of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. During June he wrote the first two of his own three quartets, the third following in July. He dedicated them to his Leipzig friend and colleague Felix Mendelssohn. The three quartets were first performed on September 13, for Clara's birthday. She thought them 'new and, at the same time, lucid, finely worked and always in quartet idiom' - a comment reflecting Schumann the critic's own view that the 'proper' quartet style should avoid 'symphonic furore' and aim rather for a conversational tone in which 'everyone has something to say'.

The first movement of today's second quartet, like many of Haydn's, is based substantially on a single theme with which the first violin opens the work. Sunny geniality pervades this



movement, which though unambitious shows a mastery of the contrapuntal techniques necessary to let everyone have something to say. The next movement is more unusual – a set of variations, with a generally subdued mood. The first variation uses a rhythmic device that Schumann was fond of and uses again in the third quartet: misleading the listener as to where the beat is – it is actually a quaver later than it sounds.

The Scherzo lightens the mood in a movement reminiscent of Mendelssohn. The Trio plays another rhythmic trick (illustrated), with the opening accompaniment sounding to be on rather than off the beat. (Schumann uses this device again in the first



movement of his third quartet, in a way which is even more awkward for the players.) The movement's brief coda unites material from the Scherzo and the Trio. The last movement

is an energetic romp, with a fluent Mendelssohnian cheer triumphing over the darker, more sinister episodes characteristic of Schumann. Its opening employs another device of Schumann's: he appears not to start at the beginning – it is as if the music has already started when you open the door on the performance.

### Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) Three Pieces for string quartet (1914, rev 1918)

*Dance*  
*Eccentric*  
*Canticle*

Stravinsky wrote these three pieces early in 1914 at the end of a period when he and his young family were spending summers in Russia and winters in Switzerland, a pattern that was about to be broken by the outbreak of war. They follow *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring* and are every bit as iconoclastic: they are short (roughly 1, 2 & 4 minutes) and unconnected. The individual instruments in the first piece also appear unconnected: a peasant fiddler (on first violin) keeps repeating a wild dance motif, the viola drones like a bagpipe with toothache, the cello plucks and the second violin intermittently interjects, all out of synchrony with each other until, after less than a minute it finally all comes together. The second piece shares its inspiration with Michael Palin's contribution to the Monty Python "Ministry of Silly Walks" sketch: the polydactylic Little Tich whom Stravinsky encountered at a London music hall; the piece is an exploration of pathos and the grotesque. The third is a wordless chant, in glowing harmonies generated within a tightly controlled atonal system. When Stravinsky came to orchestrate the work, some years later, he added the titles: 'Dance', 'Eccentric' and 'Canticle'.



### Robert Schumann (1810-1856) String Quartet Op 41 No 3 (1842)

*Andante espressivo - Allegro molto moderato*  
*Assai agitato - Un poco adagio - Tempo risoluto*  
*Adagio molto*  
*Finale: Allegro molto vivace – Quasi Trio*

Schumann's third quartet was written very shortly after the second that we heard in the first half of today's programme and shares some of its qualities: Schumann's wonderful lyrical gift sings out to us, and we are again fooled by his rhythmic playfulness.

The brief introductory *Andante* opens with a sighing, falling fifth (\*). It sets the mood and also opens the main *Allegro* and recurs throughout it in various guises.



Schumann's rhythmic trickery pops up in the second subject of the *Allegro*. After a brief silence, the upper strings start their off-beat accompaniment just before the cello enters with the theme, not only is this deceptive for the listener, but it is a notorious pratfall for the unwary amateur player.



Another rhythmic trick starts the second movement. Here everyone enters on the last quaver of the bar, but the tune is tied over as if the first note were really the



downbeat. The theme is a decorated descent over an interval of a fifth. There follows a set of entertaining variations culminating in one of huge and relentless energy with the accent resolutely on the offbeat, dominated by leaps that rework the opening falling fifth. A calming coda prepares us for the beautiful Adagio molto, whose opening theme is based on a rising figure that again embraces an interval of a fifth. The serenity of this idea is twice challenged by a threatening transformation in the minor, but serenity prevails.



There are more rhythmic tricks in the Finale. The rustic dotted theme starts with an accented up-beat which sounds like a down-beat as if the rustics are also tipsy. The movement is a Rondo with the opening episode alternating with a variety of others, including a "Quasi Trio" - compensation for the absence of a traditional Minuet/Scherzo & Trio movement.