

Elias String Quartet 21 Feb 2016

Programme notes by Chris Darwin

Josef Haydn (1732-1809) String Quartet in C Op 54 No 2 (1788)

Vivace

Adagio

Menuetto – Trio

Finale: Adagio – Presto – Adagio

The three Op 54 quartets are the first of 12 quartets that Haydn dedicated to the Hungarian violinist Johann Tost. From 1783 to 1788 Tost led the second violins in the Esterházy orchestra of which Haydn was music director. When Tost left Esterházy in 1788 to freelance in Paris, Haydn entrusted 6 quartets to Tost the 'wholesale dealer' with a view to finding a publisher. Tost was successful, though not entirely financially transparent with Haydn, and they were published in Paris as Op 54 & 55.

This C major quartet is a masterpiece, the best of the bunch, profound and original, fiery and eloquent. The opening



6 bars set the scene with a bold statement, but where a lesser composer might have ended the opening phrase on the F at the beginning of bar 5 (*), Haydn adds, *piano*, an interrogatory two notes: "Really?". There is a reflective pause, followed by a repeat of the statement and question before Haydn shifts into a remote key and we stride off into the rest of the movement.

This questioning forms the heart of the extraordinary slow movement. It starts with a solemn chorale-like 8-bar phrase in the lower three parts. The motif repeats almost unchanged



whilst Tost's Hungarian violin weaves a searching, improvisatory magic. The uncertainty is unresolved, with the violin inserting anguished discords just before the end.

The mood lightens in the directly following Menuetto, which just before its end echoes the "Really?" motif, this time in rising chromatic quavers. The doubts are roundly dismissed but immediately reappear more forcefully in the minor key Trio, again with jabbing



anguished discords. The *Finale* is one of Haydn's most original: a long *Adagio*, interrupted by a short, skittish *Presto*, and ending with more of the *Adagio*. The rising question opens the movement, but after a few bars consideration, Haydn gives us one of his most sublime passages: the cello plays simple, long, slow, rising arpeggios while the violin weaves a very different magic from that of the slow movement, resolving all doubts. The brilliant *Presto* acts as a comic foil, but the returning *Adagio* restores calm content.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) String Quartet No. 1 in D major (1941)

Andante sostenuto (Tempo I), Allegro vivo (Tempo II) Allegretto con slancio ('with dash')
Andante calmo
Molto vivace

Britten's compositions for string quartet fall into three groups that were written at very different times of his life: a number of early works from his teens (1928-33) reflect his growing independence from his teacher Frank Bridge; then, his first two numbered quartets published in 1941 and 1945, around the time of *Peter Grimes*; and finally, his third quartet composed after the opera *Death in Venice* shortly before he died.

Britten had met Bridge through his first violin teacher, Audrey Alston, who had been a fellow student of Bridge at the Royal College. Although Bridge, an established composer, was only teaching violin rather than composition, he was so impressed by Britten's precocious compositions, that he befriended him and took him under his compositional wing, probably also encouraging Britten's pacifism. When Britten and Pears left England at the end of April 1939, sailing on the SS *Ausonia* for Canada, Frank Bridge saw them off, giving Britten his viola. It was their last sight of him, since he died in 1941, the year Britten finished this D major String Quartet. It was commissioned by Mrs Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge to whom Britten had been introduced through Bridge. The first performance was given in Los Angeles in September 1941 by the Coolidge Quartet, and as a result Britten received the Library of Congress Medal for services to chamber music.

The work immediately demonstrates Britten's extraordinary ear for instrumental sound with the high close intervals of the two violins and viola on three adjacent tones (F#, E, D) against cello pizzicato, a soundscape that he would return to in *Peter Grimes'* Dawn Sea Interlude. This *Tempo I* episode contrasts in a Rondo form with the faster, lower sounds of the *Tempo II Allegro vivo*. After the brittle, march-like *Scherzo* and its parallels with Shostakovich, premonitions of *Grimes* (the Moonlight Sea Interlude) return in the 5/4 gently rocking sea swell of the *Andantino calmo*, a calm which is interrupted by a forceful, declamatory middle section. Further contrasting passages in the last movement include the scherzo-like rapidly running counterpoint of its opening, sharp, punctuated chords and the strong unison theme from the two violins and viola.

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



The image shows a musical staff in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The melody begins with a quarter note G, followed by a quarter rest, then a quarter note A, a quarter rest, a quarter note B, a quarter rest, a quarter note C, a quarter rest, a quarter note D, and finally a quarter note E. The lyrics "Ist es wahr? dass du stets dort in dem Laubgang" are written below the staff, aligned with the notes.

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 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 returns in the last movement:

the first violin's *ad libitum* recalls the beginning of the last movement of the Ninth Symphony. The 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.

The image displays three staves of musical notation for the first movement of Mendelssohn's Quartet in A major, Op. 13. The top staff is marked 'Adagio' with a tempo range '< >' and dynamics 'mf', 'p', and 'cresc'. The middle staff is marked 'Adagio ma non troppo' with dynamics 'p' and 'p'. The bottom staff is marked 'Presto' with dynamics 'ff' and 'ad libitum'. The notation includes treble clefs, key signatures of one sharp (F#) and one flat (Bb), and various rhythmic values such as quarter notes, eighth notes, and sixteenth notes.