

Heath Quartet Sunday 27 March 2016

W. A. Mozart (1756-1791) Adagio and Fugue in C minor K.546 (1788)

This short work is an extension and rearrangement of a Fugue in C minor for 2 Pianos (K 426) that Mozart wrote in 1783 (around the time of the Linz Symphony and the Eb string quartet). It is not known why Mozart returned to this fugue although he could have been honing his fugal skills in preparation for the C major fugal finale of his Jupiter Symphony. The arrangement was probably intended for string orchestra since the bass line has plural violoncelli and contra bassi, but it is now usually performed by string quartet. The fugue was admired by Beethoven, who wrote it out himself, with some alterations and 'improvements'.



Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) String Quartet No.1 in D Op. 11 (1871)

Moderato e semplice – Allegro non troppo ma con fuoco

Andante cantabile

Scherzo & Trio: Allegro non tanto e con fuoco

Finale: Allegro giusto

Though better known as a master orchestral writer of symphonies and ballet music, Tchaikovsky also published successful chamber music: three string quartets (1871, 1874, 1876), a piano trio (1882) and a string sextet (*Souvenir de Florence*, 1892).

Verbally precocious – he read in French and German aged six, and at seven wrote in French on metaphysical topics – Tchaikovsky had only above average musical ability as a child. His unusual musical talent only emerged in his twenties. Denied promotion as a qualified lawyer in the Department of Justice, in 1862 he joined Anton Rubinstein's new 'music school', the St Petersburg Conservatory. There Rubinstein taught him good classical composing habits and he absorbed the craftsmanship of Western music: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. One of his classmates prophesied 'You are the greatest musical talent in present-day Russia ... I see in you the greatest, or, better said, the sole hope of our musical future'.

He moved to Moscow at the invitation of Anton's brother Nikolai, to teach harmony at the Moscow Conservatoire, and in 1868 was introduced to "The Five" (aka "The Mighty Handful"): Mily Balakirev (the leader), César Cui, Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Borodin. The group aimed to produce a specifically Russian kind of art music, rather than one based on the Western European style taught in the conservatories. As a pupil of Anton Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky was initially a target for their antagonism. But Balakirev, who had had no formal musical training, crucially helped Tchaikovsky with his *Romeo and Juliet* overture, forcing numerous re-writings. Arguably Balakirev was responsible for the emergence of Tchaikovsky's unique voice, incorporating some of the distinctively Russian musical elements promoted by The Five into forms grounded in his conservatory training.

By the time of Tchaikovsky's first quartet, 1871, The Five had dispersed: Cui to fortifications engineering, Borodin to a chair of chemistry, Moussorgsky to the bottle, and the influential Balakirev to a nervous breakdown. Tchaikovsky was still teaching at the Moscow Conservatory, but was short of funds. Nikolai Rubinstein suggested he prepare a

benefit concert of his own music. An orchestra would have been too expensive, so Tchaikovsky composed this D major string quartet to go with some solo piano items.

The long opening section of smooth syncopated chords inspired a Moscow reviewer to give the piece its apparently derogatory nickname of "Accordion", but accordions are taken more seriously in Eastern than in Western Europe. A rapid semiquaver figure is introduced in contrast to this slow-moving passage, which it decorates as the music becomes more exciting. The second subject is expansive, *largamente e cantabile*, and also gets decorated with

increasingly persistent and florid semiquavers. Notice the natural way that Tchaikovsky's



melody embraces a change in the number of beats in the bar – a feature it shares the famous tune of the second movement. The tempo increases to a fiery Allegro and accelerates to an exciting ending.

The success of the quartet both at its first performance, and ever since, is substantially due to its famous *Andante Cantabile*.



Tolstoy heard it in 1876 at a musical evening organised by the Moscow Conservatoire in his honour and was moved to tears. The theme is an old Russian folk song that Tchaikovsky had heard two years earlier from a carpenter on his sister's Ukrainian estate and it contrasts with a minor section that uses a theme of Tchaikovsky's own composition accompanied *pizzicato*. The *Scherzo* is a heavily accented peasant dance and the *Finale* a combination of Russian vigour and soulfulness, generously decorated with energetic semiquavers, but within an overall reworking of classical rondo and sonata forms.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) String Quartet in F (1903)

Moderato très doux
Assez vif-Très rythmé
Très lent
Vif et agité

Ravel's only string quartet dates from 1902-3 while he was still (aged 28) a student at the Paris Conservatoire. It was dedicated to his teacher Fauré and the first movement was submitted to the annual composition contest at the Conservatoire. The contest's judges rejected Ravel's work, and he was expelled for the third and last time. Fauré was more appreciative, though he did not like the last movement: "*stunted, badly balanced, in fact a failure.*" Debussy was more prescient: "*In the name of the gods of Music and for my sake personally, do not touch a note of what you have written.*" First performed in 1904, the quartet was not published until 1910 after Ravel had in fact made some changes. Quite what these changes were we don't know, since the original score is lost.

The opening is one of the most memorable in the quartet literature, transporting at least this listener to the balmy warmth of a French summer. The cello and second violin play a simple rising scale an octave and a third



apart, while the viola with another rising figure fills out the harmonies to the first violin's simple tune. In the next four bars the three lower parts just go down a scale. But the overall effect? Magic!

The quartet has great thematic unity, with the two main themes of the first movement returning in various guises in the other three. But the treatment of the material is wonderfully varied – rhythmically, harmonically and in tone-colour. Notice particularly the second theme in the first movement with the first violin and viola two octaves apart (*illustrated*), the exciting pizzicato cross-rhythms of the second movement and the complex 5-beat rhythms of the last.

The image shows a musical score for a string quartet, consisting of four staves. The top staff is for Violin I, the second for Violin II, the third for Viola, and the bottom for Cello/Double Bass. The score is in a key with one flat (B-flat) and a 3/4 time signature. The first four bars of the score are shown. The Violin I part starts with a *pp* dynamic and *très expr.* articulation, playing a simple melody with triplets. The Violin II part plays a rising figure. The Viola part plays a rising figure two octaves above the Cello/Double Bass part. The Cello/Double Bass part plays a descending scale with triplets. The dynamics are *pp* for all parts, and the articulation is *très expr.* for the Violin I and Viola parts, and *pizz.* for the Cello/Double Bass part.