

20 September 2016 (Tuesday evening Corn Exchange) Doric String Quartet

Josef Haydn (1732-1809) String Quartet in D, Op 64 no 5 'The Lark' (1790)

Allegro moderato

Adagio cantabile

Menuetto. Allegretto

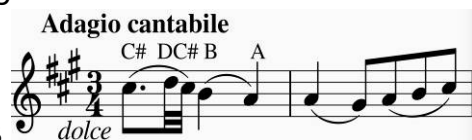
Finale. Vivace

This quartet is one of Haydn's 12 "Tost" quartets. From 1783 to 1788 the Hungarian Johann Tost was principal second violin 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 him with a view to finding a publisher. Tost was successful, and they were published in Paris in two sets of three as Op 54 and 55. A later set of six, Op 64, were written in 1790, the year that Haydn first visited London. Around this time Tost returned from Paris, married the housekeeper at Esterházy (of whom Haydn was also fond) and used her money to set up a successful cloth business in Vienna. There in 1791 he also found a publisher for the Op 64 set, which Haydn gratefully dedicated to him. Tost continued to play the violin and commission chamber works, especially from Spohr, whose performances in aristocratic homes provided an entrée for his cloth business; incidentally he is possibly also the dedicatee ("*composto per un amatore ongarese*") of the last two of Mozart's two-violin string quintets.

Haydn was notably economical with the material out of which he composed his quartets – many of his movements are based on only a single theme. 'The Lark' is more diverse, but nonetheless there are interesting links between the different movements. For example, the first movement's (*Allegro moderato*) innocuous opening phrase F# - G - F# - E - D



- D on the second violin not only carries the germ of the first violin's soaring song that it announces, but also provides the notes, a fifth higher (C# - D - C# - B - A), of the violin's equally beautiful melody in the *Adagio* second movement. Later, and less obviously, its last three notes provide the skeleton for the *Menuetto*'s theme.



Later, and less obviously, its last three notes provide the skeleton for the *Menuetto*'s theme.



The last movement, which gives the quartet its alternative sobriquet 'The Hornpipe', is relentlessly energetic - its semiquavers run continuously until the last few bars.



Incidentally, have a look at the second violin's accompaniment at the opening. Seen that before anywhere? Clever old Haydn.

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) String Quartet No 4 (1928)

Allegro

Prestissimo, con sordino

Non troppo lento

Allegretto pizzicato

Allegro molto

Bartók's third and fourth quartets were written within a year of each other, fully ten years after his second quartet. In July 1927 Bartók heard Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite* for string quartet at a concert in Germany. According to Stephen Walsh in his BBC guide to *Bartók's Chamber Music*, this was the likely stimulus for Bartók returning to quartet writing. Berg had incorporated Schoenberg's atonality into a wide range of techniques, producing extreme contrasts of mood, texture and tempo, whilst still aiming for the traditional virtue of beauty of sound. Bartók married Berg's eclectic approach to his own enthusiasm for Hungarian folk-music, with its powerful rhythms and harsh, dissonant sounds. Berg is said to have found the harsh energy of Bartók's fourth quartet 'too cacophonous'.

A significant theme in the first and last movement of the fourth quartet is a violent 6-note arch-shaped motif which first occurs near the beginning. The motif moves in semitones – one of the characteristic intervals of Hungarian folk-music. But notice also that the original motif in the first violin is immediately echoed by an inverted version in the second violin, to produce a powerfully dissonant series of seconds with the original.



A major structural feature of Bartók's Fourth Quartet is that the five movements form an arch-like structure ABCBA, with the middle, slow movement the heart of the work. Bartók described the quartet as follows:

'The slow movement is the nucleus of the piece, the other movements are, as it were, bedded around it: the fourth movement is a free variation of the second one, and the first and fifth movements are of the identical thematic material. Metaphorically speaking, the third movement is the kernel, movements I and V the outer shell and II and IV, as it were, the inner shell.'

Although the fourth movement is a 'free variation of the second one', the two movements have very different sounds. The second is extremely fast and muted, like fluttering moths but with a variety of strange sounds – slithering semitones, slides and strums; the fourth is from a land of darting invertebrates, punctuated by the 'Bartók pizzicato' where the string is pulled so that its release slaps the fingerboard.

Between all this restlessness, the third movement is a very different world – the stillness of Bartók's 'night music'. The upper strings hold long chords against the cello's initial plaintive melody. The slowly-changing chords become more dissonant, the melody more decorated and the tempo more agitated before settling back down again. The chords do not traditionally harmonise the melody, rather they supply notes that the melody lacks. For example, after about 20 bars the held chord has 6 of the notes of the chromatic scale, the cello melody the other six - a striking example of Bartók's intellectual rigour within a movement of undeniable beauty and emotional power.



The exciting last movement lashes us with harsh chords and leads us in a wild peasant dance throwing around and finally flinging in our face the 6-note motif that we started with.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) Quartettsatz in C minor, D.703 (1820)
Allegro assai

At the age of eight, Schubert started to learn the violin from his father; six years later he was composing for the family string quartet: brothers Ignaz and Ferdinand on violin, Franz on viola and his father on cello. However, the eleven or so quartets that Schubert wrote between the ages of 14 and 20 are now, like Mozart's early quartets, rarely played. The exuberant "Trout" piano quintet of 1819 and this *Quartettsatz*, a surviving first movement of a planned C minor quartet written in 1820, set the scene for the great chamber works of his later years: in 1824 the Octet, the "Rosamunde" and "Death and the Maiden" quartets; in 1826 the G major quartet; in 1827 his two piano trios; and in his last year, 1828, the incomparable C major two-cello quintet. It is not clear why Schubert failed to continue with the "*Quartettsatz*" quartet beyond its first movement and a sketch of 40 odd bars for an *Andante*. It may be that he was unable to match the power of the first movement to make a hoped-for great leap forward in quartet writing.

The movement opens with threatening, semi-tonal creepings. "The phrase itself has a dramatic intensity which is new in Schubert's chamber music, an intensity which is all the more powerful because it begins quietly" (Jack Westrup).

The tension is relaxed by the joyfully open, *dolce* second subject; it encourages the transformation of the opening phrase into more nostalgic versions of itself, before the opening phrase's final emphatic return.



Claude Debussy (1862-1918) "String Quartet No 1 in G minor Op 10" (1893)

Animé et très décidé

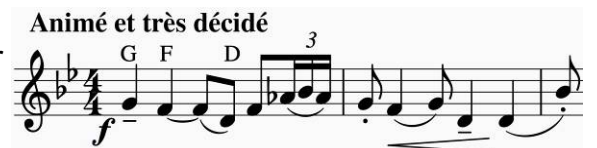
Assez vif et bien rythmé

Andantino, doucement expressif

Très modéré – Très mouvementé et avec passion

Debussy's own title for this work is rather misleading: he only wrote one string quartet and it was the only work to which he gave an opus number (10 sounds like an impressive number for the ambitious young composer to have arrived at); it was also the only work for which he specified the key. The quartet was written for a music society in Paris who admired the serious, classical Germanic tradition of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, in preference to the more frivolous path (operetta, opéra comique) that French music had taken in the 1860s. The piece's form is classical: four conventional movements all derived from its opening motif. Within this structure Debussy weaves his own densely detailed magic using modal along with tonal harmonies. Sadly, neither the society's audience nor Debussy's supporters, such as Ernest Chausson, were impressed; the best thing that anyone managed to say about the quartet was that it was '*bewilderingly full of originality and charm, but diabolically difficult*'. Subsequent generations have still found it full of originality and charm, but less bewilderingly difficult; indeed it is now a popular favourite.

Debussy admired César Franck's use of 'cyclical form' where material reappears in later movements. As with today's Haydn quartet, the opening contains the material that returns in various guises in the different movements. For example, it appears, with F# rather than F, in the viola's opening theme of the *Assez vif* second movement. Cyclical form asserts itself in a big way in the last movement – a movement that gave Debussy problems (*'I think I can finally show you the last movement of the quartet, which has made me really miserable!'*). After about a hundred bars the work's opening theme returns slowed to half speed and a third lower; it then grows to dominate the movement's native material before the triumphant close.



Programme notes by Chris Darwin