

23 October (Dome Concert Hall) Heath Quartet

Josef Haydn (1732-1809) String Quartet in F sharp minor, Op 50 No 4 (1787)

Allegro spiritoso

Andante

Menuetto: Poco allegretto

Fuga: Allegro molto

Sharp practice doesn't usually spring to mind when we think about Haydn ('*Anybody can see that I am a good-natured fellow*'), but around the time that he wrote the Op 50 quartets his dealings with his publishers were decidedly dodgy. In 1784, pressed for time and eager for cash, he responded to a request from the London publisher Forster for three new piano trios by sending just one of his own but padded by two more, under his own name, that his ex-pupil Pleyel had recently sent him. The fraud was soon discovered and Haydn settled with Pleyel out of court. Three years later he offered Forster his six Opus 50 quartets and six 'Paris' symphonies for 25 guineas claiming that neither set had been offered to anyone else. In truth, both sets had already been sold to Artaria, his local publisher. Haydn was caught out again; he tried to blame a copyist and the admittedly dilatory behaviour of Artaria.

The publishing history of Op 50 took an unexpected turn in 1982 after a Melbourne concert celebrating Haydn's 250th birthday. A local woman approached maestro Christopher Hogwood with a plastic bag which turned out to contain Haydn's autograph score of four of the Op 50 quartets. Her ancestor had emigrated to New Zealand in 1852, packing the manuscript, along with his Amati violin, as an insurance against hard times. Despite a microfiche being placed in a Wellington library and the manuscript itself being shown to a local professional quartet, main-stream scholarship remained unaware of its existence, with the result that there were serious errors in all published editions, some of which are now corrected.

The fourth quartet is an oddity, not only because it is the only one of the set in a minor key, but because of the way the minor is used. The whole work is unsettled, trading the witty, easy conversational style of his other, major-key Op 50 quartets and the passion of his earlier minor-key *Sturm und Drang* works for an unusually constricted inwardness. The music seems to express concerns, and then leave them hanging.

The work contrasts episodes in minor and major keys. The first movement starts in the 3 sharps of F# minor but turns to the 6 sharps of F# major shortly before the end of the second half. The second movement starts again with 3 sharps but in A major and then, in the first variation turns, to A minor. By contrast with what has gone before, A minor sounds eerily remote despite having no sharps or flats.

Characteristically of Haydn, the themes of the different movements share various elements. For instance, the last movement's somewhat inscrutable fugue theme echoes motifs from all three of the previous movements. It impressed Donald Tovey: '*the quietest and deepest of all instrumental fugues since Bach*'.



Michael Tippett (1905-1998) String Quartet No 5 (1990-91)

Medium fast - very fast

Slow – medium fast

The impetus for Tippett returning to quartet writing in 1977, more than 30 years after finishing his third quartet, was hearing late Beethoven. A television documentary on portraiture ended with a series of Rembrandt portraits and in Tippett's words:

At that moment, music started to play... of the utmost intensity and poignancy, the beginning of a late Beethoven slow movement. I said to myself: 'I must before I die find that sound in our own time! But I can't find that sound in our time, because it depends upon a purity of harmony and structure which is largely excluded from my own acidic, ironic world of harmony'... To try to find that sound meant to shut myself away and write my Fourth Quartet.

Today's fifth quartet, which followed 12 years later, also both rejects his previous acidic irony, and finds inspiration in late Beethoven. Like Tippett's early work it is lyrical and its often spare writing contains some of his most beautiful sounds. Beethoven's influence appears particularly in the feel and the structure of the second of the two movements, reflecting the 'Hymn of Thanksgiving' from Beethoven's A-minor quartet Op 132 (Tippett's final choice of record in his second appearance on 'Desert Island Disks'). Bartók was another enduring influence on Tippett; he had heard all six of his quartets performed in the 1940s. The plangent, falling *glissando* figure in the second movement reminds me of the opening of Bartók's first quartet, itself echoing the opening of Beethoven's C#-minor quartet Op 131. As you see, you can have fun spotting Tippett's references in this work!

The first movement contains a number of sharply contrasting episodes which are easy to identify as they recur and are developed. One is the opening call to attention – three loudly accented repeated chords. Another is an interesting 'clanging' chord whose special sound results from the two inner parts plucking the strings while the outer two bow. Seductively contrasting is an appealing little duet as the two violins link together in thirds (illustrated). Shortly after its appearance comes a dramatic abrupt increase in tempo as all four instruments scamper at high speed like disturbed ants; they are stopped by emphatically ringing bells. The third appearance of the ants is again stopped by the bells which eventually fade and the movement ends with an unexpectedly peremptory gesture (illustrated).

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is in 3/4 time, showing a duet in thirds between two violins. The dynamics are marked *p* and *poco f*. The bottom staff is in 4/8 time, showing a dramatic increase in tempo with a *ff* dynamic marking.

The overall structure of the second movement (as in Beethoven's Op 132)

is of contrasting episodes which are repeated, becoming more complex with each repetition. The movement

starts with chords hesitantly and ominously built up across the three lower instruments before the first violin enters with a high singing phrase that descends trippingly in triplets before a gentle *glissando* (illustrated). Tippett adds the following epigraph to the movement: 'Chantes, rossignol, chantes / Toi qui as le coeur gai'

('Sing, nightingale, sing / you who have a happy heart'). The folk-song, though not Tippett's

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is in 2/4 time, showing a high singing phrase in the first violin. The dynamics are marked *pp*, *p*, *mf*, and *f*. The bottom staff is in 2/4 time, showing chords built up across the three lower instruments. The dynamics are marked *pp*, *p*, *mf*, and *f*. The word *lunga* is written above the final measure.

quotation continues: 'Your heart is for laughing / Mine is for weeping'. The movement poignantly explores deep emotions before ending with an unexpected and ecstatic chord (illustrated).

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) String Quartet in G, Op 106 (B 192) (1895)

Allegro moderato

Adagio ma non troppo

Molto vivace

Finale: Andante sostenuto; Allegro con fuoco

Dvořák, a professional viola player, wrote chamber music throughout his life; his first official opus was a two-violin string quintet written when he was 20, closely followed by his first string quartet. Over the next 34 years he composed fourteen string quartets, three string quintets and a sextet as well as piano trios, quartets and quintets. Between his eleventh quartet in 1881 and his twelfth quartet (the well-known 'American') there is a twelve-year gap. This was the time when his international reputation grew thanks mainly to appreciative British audiences. Their admiration for his work, and lack of prejudice against his native folk music, gave him the freedom to develop his own musical style. The interest of the Novellos in publishing his music also gave him welcome leverage to secure increased fees from his long-standing publisher Simrock – he had six children to maintain. In August 1885 on the fourth of nine visits to England, he paid a brief visit to Brighton, staying for a couple of days with the Novellos at 7 Victoria Mansions. He was enchanted by the bathers (public, English, female, lovely), the boats (countless, large and small) and the band (playing Scottish folk-songs); he wrote home “*everything is enchantingly lovely so that nobody who has seen it can ever forget it.*”

His visits to England were interrupted by Mrs Jeanette Thurber's invitation to be artistic director of her new *National Conservatory of Music in America* based in New York. Her aim, to which Dvořák was sympathetic, was to develop a national American style of art music. Dvořák immersed himself in spirituals and plantation songs from the South, and transcriptions of Amerindian melodies. During his stay in America, Dvořák returned to quartet writing with what was to be his best-known quartet, the *American*, in his words something “melodious and simple” - and none the worse for that.

Today's G major quartet, his thirteenth, was written at the end of 1895 soon after his return home from America. He was living with his family in a house that he had built with the proceeds of his English trips on a country estate owned by his brother-in-law. Shortly afterwards he also finished what was to be his last quartet, which he had started towards the end of his stay in America.

The G major quartet is more complex than the melodic simplicity of the *American*. The raw material, presented at the beginning, is rhythmic and episodic rather than melodic, with each of the first four bars containing a different motif; however, these motifs are soon transformed into a confident *risoluto* theme. It contrasts with a more tender triplet-based second subject, which will reappear in the last movement.

The image displays three staves of musical notation in G major, 2/4 time. The top staff begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and features a series of rhythmic motifs, including a triplet of eighth notes. The middle staff is marked *risoluto* and *ff*, showing a more rhythmic and episodic theme. The bottom staff continues the theme with triplet-based motifs and a piano (*p*) dynamic.

The Adagio has a dark, melancholy, slavic theme, introduced by the violin. It is repeated throughout the movement in a variety of different moods and keys. Dvořák's good cheer returns in the *Scherzo*. In the first of its two trios the violin echoes a gentle theme from the viola.



A brief *Andante* introduces the theme of the final *Allegro con fuoco*. The *Andante* returns to introduce the middle section, which is a meditation on the second subject of the first movement. Other elements from that movement also contribute including the tumbling triplets of the opening third bar. The movement's main *Allegro* theme returns and after some characteristically Dvořák sliding key-changes we romp to the finish.

Programme notes by Chris Darwin