

Quatuor Arod Dec 2022

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 wrote just 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. The opening contains the material that returns in various guises in the different movements. For example, G-F-D appear as a triplet in the *Un peu retenu* theme later in the first movement and a larger sample, but with F# rather than F, forms 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 right down and a third lower; it then grows to dominate the last movement's native material before the triumphant close.

The image shows four staves of musical notation for the opening motif of Debussy's String Quartet No. 1 in G minor, Op. 10. The notation is presented in four staves, each with a different tempo and dynamic marking. The first staff is in G minor, 4/4 time, marked 'Animé et très décidé' and 'f'. The second staff is in G minor, 4/4 time, marked 'Un peu retenu' and 'p'. The third staff is in G minor, 6/8 time, marked 'Assez vif' and 'f'. The fourth staff is in G minor, 2/2 time, marked 'doux et expressif' and 'p'. The motif consists of a sequence of notes: G, F, D, followed by a triplet of G, F, D, and then a sequence of notes: G, F, D, G, F, D, G, F, D.

Benjamin Attahir (b.1989) Al 'Asr (2017)

Born in Toulouse in 1989, Benjamin Attahir initially learned the violin at the Toulouse conservatory but soon also became passionate about composition and conducting. He continued his studies at the CRR in Paris and then at the

Conservatoire National Supérieur de Paris. He is now well-known as a composer, a conductor and a concert violinist. His eclectic compositions combine Eastern and Western traditions, and bring new life to old forms, often with unusual combinations of instruments; they include operas and orchestral music as well as chamber music. For example, a residency at the Villa Medici (2016-2017) enabled him to explore the contemporary reworking of the continuo form in the composition of a chamber opera. With the tuba- and serpent-player Patrick Wibart, he founded the ÆNEA ensemble, which is dedicated to the rediscovery of the French romantic repertoire as well as the development of new works on historical instruments.

The term *Al 'Asr* refers to the 103rd Sūrah (chapter) of the Qur'ān - one of the shortest and most revered. Its three verses reflect on the loss that the passage of time produces if it is not offset by faith, good deeds, patience and truthfulness with others. *Al 'Asr* is also the afternoon prayer in the *salâh*, the daily cycle of Muslim prayer, and Attahir's string quartet is the third work in a varied sequence based on this prayer cycle: *Al Fajr* for piano and large ensemble (Sept 2017); *Adh dhouhr* for serpent and orchestra (Jan 2018); *Al 'Asr* for string quartet (2017-18); *Al Maghrib* for violin and orchestra (2019); *Al 'Icha* for orchestra (2018). Within a Muslim framework Attahir has tried to integrate references to other monotheistic religions by means of Gregorian, Jewish Klezmer and Oriental elements.

The Quatuor Arod gave the world premier of *Al 'Asr* at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in Paris in October 2017 and performed it at a Brighton Coffee Concert in April 2018. The work is gradually evolving with their successive performances.

Attahir says of it:

"*Al 'Asr* is the afternoon prayer. I tried to transcribe musically the atmosphere of this specific moment of the day. Raw light, overwhelming heat, iridescence of the air in contact with the surface of the ground - so many images that accompanied me when writing this piece. But *Al 'Asr* is also the 103rd Sūrah of the Qur'ān, which deals with the passage of time and the future of beings. Its structure in three verses dictated the form of this Quartet, without the sacred text being placed in the foreground. It is always the poetic and allegorical aspect that guided my work."

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) String Quartet Op.44 No.1 (1838)

Molto allegro vivace

Menuetto

Andante espressivo con moto

Presto con brio

There's something about marriage that brings out the string quartets in composers. Schumann was to write his three Opus 41 quartets within 2 years of marriage to Clara. But Mendelssohn got there first, starting his three Opus

44 quartets on his honeymoon with Cécile. He wrote today's quartet last but he liked it more than the other two so he had the publisher make it No.1.

We are so familiar with the extraordinary flowering of musical genius in the early to mid 19th century that we don't tend to notice how Mendelssohn stood out even then. Schumann, not a push-over when it came to praising others, wrote that he was "the Mozart of the nineteenth century, the most brilliant musician, the one who most clearly sees through the contradictions of the age and for the first time reconciles them". The comparison with Mozart refers partly to his precociousness; he wrote his First Symphony at the age of 15 and conducted it himself in London with the Orchestra of the Philharmonic Society at 20 (where, incidentally, the audience was astonished to see the conductor use a baton instead of his hands). It also refers to the way he was able to express the emotional intensity of Romanticism through the conventions of classical music. This conservatism may explain why he fell relatively out of favour in the late 19th century, although anti-Semitism may also have played a part.

The first movement begins with a shout of joy from the first violin. Tunes tumble over each other, the opening theme comes back again and again in different keys and a shimmering sound from the inner strings brings a *Midsummer Night's Dream* feeling to proceedings. The opening theme is elaborated on, passed around between the instruments, all players are skipping about, breathless, till the movement ends in triumph.

The Menuetto has all the features of a traditional minuet – triple time, short repeated passages – but it's made by the lovely flowing tune and rich harmonies. A totally new wild quaver passage intervenes but soon, with relief, we return to the swaying melody of the opening.

The third movement is the slowest of the four but it's not slow. The first violin's tune is tender rather than sad as it plays over the bouncing semiquavers in the second violin and the pizzicato in the lower strings. Soon it can't resist the lure of the semiquavers as the music swells then fades to the end.

The last movement is frantic. It feels like a movement looking for a soul. In fact it's based on a saltarello, a folk dance of medieval origin. Occasionally it seems to find its essence in brief lyrical passages but soon the lure of the dance proves too strong. There are plenty of modulations and variations in dynamics but the mood remains that of a race for the finish.

Programme notes by Andrew Polmear (Mendelssohn) and Chris Darwin (Debussy, Attahir)