

Programme notes for Heath Quartet concert Feb 19 2023 at ACCA

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)
String Quartet in F minor Op. 20 No. 5
Allegro
Minuetto
Adagio
Fuga a due soggetti

Haydn's string quartets Op. 9 of 1769 and Op. 17 of 1771 had developed the form away from the divertimento style of writing for strings to one where the instruments were on more equal terms, but also with a degree of independence, though there are still examples of the more florid writing of the divertimento style, especially in the first violin.

With the six quartets Op. 20 of 1772 Haydn really now establishes the four instruments on an equal base, each with their own character but in dialogue with each other. His ability to see the developmental potential in his thematic material, such a wonderful feature of his writing, and one which Beethoven learnt from, becomes more evident, as well as a strong sense of form and structure.

The quartet opens with the poignant first theme. There is an exquisite exchange between the first and second violins before the second theme in the major key is stated which is characterized by a dotted and more lively rhythm. After an intense Development and Recapitulation with the second theme now in the minor key, the movement ends with a quiet cadence.

There were two forms of the minuet in the 18th century, a slow dignified court dance, and a more swiftly moving version, one which Beethoven was very much to make his own. Haydn here uses the more lively style, though the mood, like the first movement, is still dark but with the central trio section in the major key.

The adagio third movement features a gentle lilting theme, though still with tinges of sadness to it. The first violin has some more elaborate writing where it decorates the theme (an echo of the earlier concertante style of writing). The movement ends simply and quietly.

The second violin announces the first of the fugal themes (similar to the fugal theme Handel uses in 'And with His stripes' in Messiah, and one which was common in the early 18th century).

Haydn explores the contrapuntal potential in the themes, at times creating some wonderful complex textures, and further exploring the dialogue between the four instruments. The movement ends strongly and concisely.

Fanny Mendelssohn (1805-1847)
String Quartet in E flat
Adagio ma non troppo
Allegretto
Romanze
Allegro Molto Vivace

Fanny Mendelssohn wrote over 450 works, though this is her only string quartet. Of her 250 lieder, six were published in 1826/7 under Felix's name in his Op 8 and 9 collections.

When in 1842 Felix was invited to Buckingham Palace and Queen Victoria announced she would sing her favourite song of his, '*Italian*', he had to confess it was by Fanny!

In 1827 Goethe wrote a poem dedicated to Fanny and she set it as a lied in 1828.

Her husband Wilhelm Hensel was one of the few people who encouraged her to publish her works. Her father had written to her in 1820 'Music will perhaps become his (i.e. Felix) profession, while for you it can and must be only an ornament'.

A collection of her songs Op. 1 were published in 1846 under her name and six months before his death, also in 1847, Felix did plan to send many of her works to his own publisher.

The first movement opens darkly, then moves into some beautiful and expressive dialogue between the four instruments. The music builds to an agitated and intense climax leading to a calm ending.

The Allegretto opens with a lively dance like theme which is developed and leads into an exhilarating fugal section launched by a scurrying figure on the viola. A wonderful moment is when the cello has this scurrying figure in its low register, over which the top three strings have a long sustained line.

The Romanza opens with a poignant theme and the movement features some intensely expressive writing building to an almost angry outburst. A second even more intense climax leads into a delicate, high ethereal passage and a serene close.

The last movement has a joyful energy with some delightful bustling accompanying figures on the viola. Striking passages are when a strong sustained theme in unison on the two violins is accompanied by restless semiquavers on the viola and cello, who then take up the theme accompanied by the violins. Towards the end there is lovely carefree melody high up on the first violin dispelling all memories of the darker moments of the work, and the movement ends with a decisive gesture.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) String Quartet in D minor, D.810 (Death and the Maiden) (1824)

Allegro

Andante con moto

Scherzo: Allegro molto

Presto

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 the surviving first movement of a C minor quartet ("Quartettsatz") written in 1820 set the scene for the great chamber works of his later years: in 1824 the Octet, the A minor "Rosamunde" quartet and tonight's D minor

“Death and the Maiden”; 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.

The opening four bars of the D minor quartet set it in a different world from the understated charms of the “Rosamunde” quartet. The hammered out *fortissimo* triplet figure demands our serious attention, but is immediately transformed into an almost apologetically tender *pianissimo* phrase.



After a pause, the tension mounts, driven by the triplets, to a reinforced version of the opening. This emotional roller-coaster continues throughout the movement. The triplets sometimes give way to the dotted rhythm of a yearning tune that



Jack Westrup attributes to Schubert's admiration for Rossini; this theme in turn gets transformed into more serious matter against running semiquavers. The emotional intensity and tightness of construction of the movement recall the later Beethoven but it was written the year before the first of Beethoven's late quartets. The repeated notes of the opening bars and their rhythm are echoed in the themes of the other three movements.

The theme for the variations of the G minor *Andante* comes from Death's contribution to a short Schubert song of 1817, inviting a terrified young girl to sleep safely in his arms. The quartet version is altogether lighter: a fourth higher, more transparently scored and *con moto*. Resignation has replaced the sinister threat of the song. The calm of the first two variations is shattered by the brutal dactyls (–vv) of the third, a more rapid version of the rhythm of the theme; calm returns only to be broken again by the long crescendo of the repeat of the fifth variation to yet more terrifying dactyls. The terror subsides to a serene end and a Schubert hallmark switch to the major.



The fiercely syncopated energy of the *Scherzo* and its tranquil *Trio*, lead to the tarantella-form finale. The tarantella folk-dance hails from Taranto in southern Italy: a courting couple dance encircled by others as the music gets faster and faster. Taranto independently gave its name to the tarantula spider, the effects of whose allegedly serious bite could, it was thought, be ameliorated by wild dancing. Pepys records tales of itinerant fiddlers cashing in on this belief especially during the harvest when bites were more frequent. It is quite possible that Schubert intends the allusion to cheating death, but either way this energetic dance with its *prestissimo* ending provides a rousing climax to the quartet.

Programme notes by Guy Richardson (Haydn and Fanny Mendelssohn) and Chris Darwin (Schubert)