

Heath Quartet Sunday 19th November 2023

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 – 1750)

Gott in der Höh sei Ehr BWV 662 To God on high be honour

O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde gross BWV 622 Oh man, bewail thy sin so great

The two chorale preludes that are performed today come from the Great Eighteen Chorale Preludes and the Orgelbüchlein respectively. They demonstrate Bach's development of organ music for solo players in the mid seventeenth century and its separation from other keyboard instruments of the time. Hitherto there had been little distinction and much common use of any available keyboards.

These two short pieces are examples of Bach's rhetorical language and in the stringed instrument performance the direction and intention of the four lines is made clear.

Allein Gott... is based on a German hymn known here as Gloria in excelsis. It is one of the oldest known hymns of the reformation, dating from the 1530s. Bach set this seven times during his lifetime. There are two fugal lines over the pedal and a more florid top line.

O Mensch... comes from an early collection in which Bach intended to include a setting of each chorale sung during any one year. Here the four parts are densely written and the cantus on the top line draws us onwards with long phrases highly ornamented and purposeful in their shapes.

Joseph Haydn (1732 – 1809)

String Quartet Op 9 no 2

This is in a set of quartets written by Haydn when he was in the service of Paul Anton Esterházy. The string quartet was a new form developing from the older divertimenti for small instrumental groups. The literary movement Sturm und Drang, or storm and stress was pre-empted by these early quartets. Passionate and strong expressive music was quite new for Haydn's audiences and his isolation in Eisenstadt from old friends and colleagues meant that he had simply his own imagination from which to draw musical inspiration, unhindered by contemporary styles or fashions. In this way Haydn was free to develop his own sound.

The first movement marked Moderato has a simple opening from which counterpoint and harmonic twists are developed. The Minuet and Trio are stylish and elegant and show fine rhythmic and melodic balance presaging many later such movements. The slow movement, marked Adagio Cantabile is characterised by off beat accompaniment supporting the first violin's rhetorical phrases. The Allegro Molto final movement begins with the opening four bars drawing all instruments together in readiness for the spirited closing movement. In this short quartet Haydn shows us how he expanded musical conventions and techniques for this ensemble of four instruments.

Joseph Suk (1874 – 1935)

Meditation on an old Czech Chorale St Wenceslas

Joseph Suk was a student of Violin at the conservatory in Prague. His piano quintet won first prize at his graduation. Dvorak was Suk's composition teacher and also his father in law. Suk played 2nd violin in in the Bohemian Quartet. In 1922 he became professor of composition and one of his students was Martinu.

The meditation on the old Czech hymn St Wenceslas was written to be played as a

companion piece to the Austrian national anthem which was mandatory at the opening of every concert after 1914. St Wenceslas was well known and was immediately recognised by the listeners as an appeal to their patron saint.

The first performance was by the Bohemian string quartet on September 27th 1914. There are also versions for string orchestra, piano and organ.

It is one short movement which is contemplative, emotionally expressive and beautifully nostalgic. A clear cry for peace and independence from Austria's rule.

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!

Allegro Moderato - Très doux

The image shows the first four measures of the first movement of Ravel's String Quartet in F. It features four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello/Double Bass. The key signature is one flat (F major/D minor) and the time signature is 3/4. The first violin part begins with a simple melody in the first measure, followed by a rising scale in the second measure. The second violin and cello parts play a rising scale an octave and a third apart. The viola part fills out the harmonies. The first three lower parts (Violin II, Viola, and Cello/Double Bass) play a descending scale in the second measure.

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 measures 5-8 of the first movement. The first violin part features a second theme with triplets, marked *pp* and *très expr.*. The second violin and viola parts also feature triplets, marked *pp* and *très expr.*. The cello and double bass parts play a pizzicato cross-rhythm, marked *pp* and *pizz.*.

Programme notes by Helen Simpson (Bach, Haydn and Suk) and Chris Darwin (Ravel)