

Adelphi Quartet Sunday 10th December 2023

Haydn Born 1732 Died 1809

String Quartet in C minor OP 17 no 4

1. *Moderato*
2. *Menuetto: Allegretto*
3. *Adagio Cantabile*
4. *Finale Allegro*

In 1771 Haydn wrote six strings quartets and published them as Op17. No 4 is in a minor key and is unusual as a result. There is no known reason for such a large output of string quartets in this year and no known players, but it's clear that good amateurs could perform them well. From 1770 until the death of Franz Schubert in 1828 the string quartet was firmly established as a chamber music development that had grown out of the older Divertimento form. This period settled the pre-eminence of the triad and harmony that was based on tonic/dominant movement. So called dissonant intervals and lines acted to confirm the stability set up by the triad harmony where each instrument takes one note and depending on context one or other is doubled. Four part vocal music had set up this aural convention and the string quartet was an extension of the technique. These straightforward beginnings grew in complexity over time as can be seen in later string quartets.

Op 17 no 4 demonstrates an elegance and spareness in the writing, with emotional restraint. The charge against such writing is that it seems academic and overly correct; not sufficiently engaging, but that depends on personal preference and willingness to listen actively and closely.

Shostakovich Born 1906 Died 1975

String Quartet no 7 in F sharp Op 108

1. *Allegretto*
2. *Lento*
3. *Allegro-Allegretto*

This quartet written in 1960, was dedicated to Shostakovich's first wife who died in 1954. It is short with just three movements and is often played as one through composed piece with no breaks. The choice of F sharp minor relates the suffering of bereavement that Shostakovich was enduring to previous composers' depictions of grief. For example, Bach's St John Passion shows Peter's remorseful passage in F sharp minor and Mahler, when dealing with the collapse of his marriage chose the same key and its associated agonised aesthetic.

Shostakovich's seventh quartet is nervy and prickly from the start. Tumbling passages set against pizzicato pulsing notes make for an agitated and unsettling sound-world. The second movement is very spare in contrast and there are long sinuous lines played above and below the second Violin's repetitions. The first Violin, Viola and Cello take the relaxed lyrical phrases and weave them in turn around the second Violin.

The calm atmosphere is utterly broken by the third movement which is in Canonic form with familiar material from the first movement now being tossed from one part to another and broken up into fragments. The high density and aggravation dissolves and in its place is a waltz-like closing section in which echoes of the middle movement are heard before the piece is rounded off with pizzicatos from the opening movement. The cyclical nature of

this short quartet is an impressive demonstration of the formal structure.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 - 1827) String Quartet in A minor, Op.132 (1825)

Assai sostenuto – Allegro

Allegro ma non troppo

Molto adagio

Alla marcia, assai vivace – piú allegro

Finale (allegro appassionato)

Beethoven's last three years (1824-7) were predominantly occupied in composing what we now refer to as his late string quartets: Ops 127, 132, 130 (with its original ending the Great Fugue Op 133), 131 and 135. In November 1822, it had been 12 years since he had completed a quartet - the F minor Op 95 *Serioso* - and his interest in quartet writing might never have seriously revived had he not had a commission for "one, two or three quartets" from Prince Nicholas Galitzin, an excellent young amateur cellist from St Petersburg, living in Vienna. It is said that the commission almost went to Weber, whose recent opera *Die Freischütz*, had excited Galitzin; but fortunately Karl Zeuner, the viola player in Galitzin's own quartet, nudged him towards Beethoven instead. Completing the *Missa Solemnis* and the *Ninth Symphony* occupied Beethoven for another eighteen months, but he finished three quartets for Galitzin, Ops 127, 132 and 130, in February, July and November of 1825. Op 131 followed, uncommissioned, immediately after.

The germinal idea of Op 132 is a pair of semitones (G#-A, E-F) in the cello's opening phrase (illustrated), which is joined by the other three instruments playing variants of the same motif. This slow introduction is broken by rapid semiquavers from the first violin leading into an important motif (illustrated) which starts with one of the opening's semitone pairs (E-F). The dotted rhythm (under y) provides a rhythmic engine to the movement and ends with the other semitone pair (G#-A).



The lilting opening of the following movement – a sort of Minuet and Trio - is again rich in pairs of semitones. Its mixture of the gentle and the acid always surprises, as does the curious Trio section with its bagpipe-like drone, its tricky part for the viola and the violent buffeting of a section in duple rather than triple time.

Beethoven had become worryingly ill with stomach problems in April 1825. His doctor strictly implored him (he admired Beethoven's music) to forgo wine, coffee and all spices. Beethoven obeyed, the change in diet worked and a few weeks later Beethoven was back to composing. The gratefully heartfelt slow movement is entitled "A Hymn of Thanksgiving from a Convalescent to



God, in the prayerful Lydian mode". Like a Bach chorale prelude, the movement opens (illustrated) with the lines of a hymn (under x) interleaved by faster moving phrases. After the hymn, there is a dramatic change to the optimism of D major for a faster variation section marked "New Strength" in which the two violins dance around each other. The hymn, with its interleaving phrases now more syncopated, returns followed again by a variation and finally by a yet more syncopated fantasia on the hymn marked "with the most intimate feeling". The convalescent falls asleep with gentle sighs...

...only to woken by a disturbing March, with stresses on the wrong beats and a sinister fading of the motif in the second bar. This March is very soon interrupted by a recitative

from the first violin. It is similar in form to the cello/bass recitatives in the Ninth Symphony, but here the mood is anguished, terrified, culminating in what Joseph Kerman describes as a scream as the violin holds a high F and then cascades down to a desolate bar of the semitone E-F that leads into the final movement.

The E-F semitone forms the second violin's neurotic accompaniment (illustrated, under *x*), to the first violin's restless theme with its G#-A semitone (under *y*). A gentler theme with decorative trills brings some hope, but wild cross-rhythms augment the tension



culminating in an anguished outburst high on the cello as the tempo hits Presto. But the key then shifts to a radiant A major, and the quartet ends in a mood of joyful optimism.

Angus Watson's "Beethoven's Chamber Music in Context" was helpful in preparing these notes.

Programme notes by Helen Simpson (Haydn and Shostakovich) and Chris Darwin (Beethoven)