

Castalian Quartet 19 January 2025

**Franz Schubert (1797-1828) String Quartet D.804 in A minor (Rosamunde)  
(1824)**

*Allegro ma non troppo*

*Andante*

*Menuetto – Allegretto – Trio*

*Allegro moderato*

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, today's A minor "Rosamunde" quartet and the D minor "Death and the Maiden", in 1826 the G major quartet; in 1827 his two piano trios, and in 1828, his last year, the incomparable C major two-cello quintet.

The Rosamunde quartet takes its name from the *Andante's* theme, which had appeared in the incidental music Schubert wrote in 1822 for an unsuccessful play of that name. The play was lost, but the incidental music was rescued from the oblivion of family chests by Sir George Grove and Arthur Sullivan on a trip to Vienna in 1867.

The quartet was written a little while after Schubert had been diagnosed with syphilis; his declining health led to depression ("the most unhappy and wretched creature in the world") but also to a burst of creativity. The quartet's mood is lyrical and wistful, its poignant pathos only occasionally interrupted by outbursts that presage the impending torments of "Death and the Maiden" and the terrors of the C-major quartet.

The opening two bars have the second violin simply setting the A-minor key but with the viola and cello providing an underlying threatening tremble. The first violin provides the theme

(*illustrated*) which recalls one of

Schubert's songs 'Gretchen at the

Spinning Wheel': "My peace is gone, My heart is sore, I shall find it never and nevermore".



The *Andante* soaks us in the beautiful Rosamunde theme (*illustrated*) which eventually migrates into the minor and an agitated *fortissimo* outburst before peace is restored.



The *Menuet* maintains the mood of wistful melancholy in A-minor, whilst the *Trio* optimistically moves into A major though recalling an earlier Schubert song 'The Gods of Greece' whose mood is not one of optimism: "Beautiful world, where are you? ... no god reveals himself to me".

The last movement is a free-wheeling Rondo based on gypsy idioms. As Stephen Hefling writes: "...drone harmonies, accented second beats, a variety of dotted rhythms and quasi-improvised ritardandos. Such style hongrois is apparently Schubert's symbolic identification with the gypsies, those passionate, melancholy bohemians rejected by bourgeoisie and aristocrats alike, whose wretched circumstances probably seemed similar to his own."

## György Kurtág (b.1926) 6 Moments Musicaux Op 44 (2005)

- I. Invocatio (un fragment). *Con moto, passionato*
- II. Footfalls (...mintha valaki jönne...- as if someone were coming). *Molto sostenuto*
- III. Capriccio. *Ben ritmato*
- IV. In memoriam György Sebők. *Mesto, pesante*
- V. Rappel des oiseaux (étude pour les harmoniques). Léger, tendre, volatil à Tabea Zimmerman
- VI. Les Adieux (in Janáček's Manier [*sic*]). *Parlando. rubato*

Born into a Hungarian Jewish family in northern Romania, Kurtág moved to Budapest in 1946 when he was twenty. The year after the 1956 uprising he spent in Paris ostensibly to study with Messiaen and Milhaud, but in fact undergoing treatment for severe depression and a creative block from art psychologist Marianne Stein. She was hugely important in releasing and guiding his creativity. Kurtág 'self-purified' himself by eating only rice and performing angular gymnastics. He also copied out Webern scores, read Samuel Beckett and Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, made stick figures out of matches, dust-balls and cigarette butts and felt as a 'cockroach striving to change into a human being, seeking light and purity'. He returned to Budapest, discarded his previous compositions and produced his 'Opus 1' a string quartet dedicated to Stein.

Writing for quartet suits Kurtág's style: transparent, condensed and diverse in its sound world. Although his style is distinctively his own, many of his compositions allude eclectically to others, for example: *Hommage à Nancy Sinatra*, *Homage to Tchaikovsky*, *In Memory of a Just Person*, *Omaggio a Luigi Nono*. Today's 6 pieces, each about 2 minutes long, are his fourth work for string quartet and refer to: (II.) a poem by Endre Ady and Beckett's play *Footfalls* whose central character paces metronomically across the stage; (III.) Kurtág's friend and pianist György Sebők; (V.) viola player Tabea Zimmerman; and (VI.) the composer Janáček. The pieces use material from Kurtág's *Játékok*, or *Games* - an open-ended series of pedagogical piano pieces similar to Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*.

The following poem by Endre Ady accompanies the second piece which mirrors its bereft desolation:

### No One Comes

Kipp-kopp, as if a woman were coming  
On a dark stairway, trembling, running  
My heart stops, I await something wonderful  
In the autumn dusk, confident.

Kipp-kopp, my heart starts up once again  
I hear it once again, to my deep and great pleasure

In a soft tempo, in a secret rhythm  
As if someone were coming, were coming

Kipp-kopp, now a funeral twilight  
A misty, hollow melody sounds  
The autumn evening. Today no one comes to me  
Today no one will come to me, no one.

## Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) String Quartet Op 59 No 3 in C (1805)

*Introduzione: Andante con moto. Allegro vivace*

*Andante con moto quasi Allegretto*

*Menuetto. Grazioso*

*Allegro molto*

The Op 59 Razumovsky quartets were a revolution in quartet writing. In Joseph Kerman's words "*It is probably not too much to say that Op 59 doomed the amateur string quartet.*" The conversation between equal players of Haydn, Mozart and even Beethoven in his earlier Op 18 quartets here gives way to 'the heroic discourse of the symphony' - and no ordinary symphony at that. The Op 59 quartets were written in 1805-6, a full four years after the Op 18 set but only shortly after the third, *Eroica* Symphony (Op 55). The commission was from Count Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador to Vienna and a very able second violinist in his own quartet. Its first fiddle was Ignaz Schuppanzigh a friend, inspiration and perhaps also violin teacher to Beethoven. As well as playing with the Count, Schuppanzigh had formed his own professional quartet in 1804 in order to give public quartet concerts - a radical new departure. This accomplished quartet may have encouraged Beethoven to stretch the technical demands on the players to match his more ambitious musical conceptions.

The slow introduction of the third of the Op 59 quartets is extraordinary, not only to listen to but also to play. Rebecca Clarke: "*One hardly dares breathe, and can almost see the internal counting of one's companions floating like some astral shape above them. It is such a trying thing to play – wonderful as it is – that the entry into the Allegro vivace feels exactly like a sigh of relief at gaining solid ground again.*" Its significance is intriguing. Lewis Lockwood points out its harmonic relation to the introduction to Florestan's dungeon scene in *Fidelio*, written a short time earlier.

Two motifs shape the ensuing *Allegro*: it opens with a simple cadence (*illustrated under 1*), which after about 40 bars of tentative exploration leads to a joyful main theme as we finally get to the home key of C major (*illustrated under 2*). Only Beethoven could make such a movement out of these snippets.



Angus Watson feels the *Andante* evokes the stillness of stories retold on long Russian winter evenings - the ticking of the cello's persistent pizzicato interspersed with encouragements to tell it all again.

The charmingly graceful *Menuet* (*illustrated*) contrasts with its assertive *Trio* in which the viola and second violin (written with Razumovsky in mind?), egged on by the others, lift the semiquaver runs of the *Menuet* and show just how far they can take them.



The opening phrase of the *Menuet* is inverted to give the start of the last movement's fugue (*illustrated*). The viola, fresh from its triumph in the *Trio*, kicks off at speed for ten bars. Nobody is to be outdone, especially the first violin, who initiates a string-climbing competition, cheered on by the others. Finally, the second violin transforms the underlying slow accompanying figure into a lyrical vote of thanks and the party ends in a triumphant last fling.

