



Oxford Chamber Music Society

12 ensemble

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Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART 1756-1791

Quintet for two violins, two violas and cello in G minor, K516

Alessandro Ruisi, Eloisa-Fleur Thom, Elitsa Bogdanova, Asher Zaccardelli, Max Ruisi

1. *Allegro* 2. *Minuetto: Allegretto* 3. *Adagio ma non troppo* 4. *Adagio – Allegro*

Let me start by saying that Mozart's two so-called *Viola Quintets* in C (K515) and today's G minor jointly offer something incalculably wonderful and unique in chamber music, not least in the extremes of contrast they embody. The works were intended as a pair, their composition driven by their composer's interminable need to feed his family and, at this particularly desperate juncture, raised entrepreneurial hopes of successful self-promotion: Emperor Joseph II's economic reforms had created a world with a middle class hungry for such musical commodities. He must have calculated on the novelty of a celebration of order and consonance in one work, and their ultimate victory over the rule of darkness and disharmony in the other: a perfect bourgeois conceit. And – what was more – all so *beautifully and correctly written*, as the puff proudly announced. In the event – knowing his luck, no surprise – enterprising subscribers were thin on the ground. I am talking about April and May 1787, in the weeks just before the quills were sharpened for *Don Giovanni*. He at least managed to sell the two pieces to the publisher Artaria the following year but they made little initial impact. As with the two comparably great Piano Quartets from a year or two earlier Mozart simply expected too much from a conservative and fickle public already forthright in its hostility to his dreadfully 'modern' minor key works. But yes, the music was difficult, lengthy (the C major's first movement has the longest exposition before Beethoven's Ninth Symphony; the G minor as played today with the big first movement repeat will last around forty minutes), and the genre odd, although previously (and subsequently) visited by Mozart. Luigi Boccherini had achieved some success by adding another cello to the string quartet, but not in Vienna (although setting a precedent for Schubert's later masterpiece). The 'market', in the short term, left this particular promotion for dead. With a

change of sensibility the 'G minor' became one of the composer's most played chamber works: therein, it was felt, could be found his tragic heart. The enrichment of time has only made us feel even more acutely that here we are as close to Mozart as we are ever going to be.

... *we might feel we are in a tonal prison*

During the course of the composition of these two quintets Mozart knew that his father, Leopold, was gravely ill in Salzburg. He died on 28th May 1787 (the work was entered in the composer's own catalogue on 16th May). On 4th April Mozart wrote to him: *...When looked at closely, death is the true goal of our lives, and so for a number of years I've familiarised myself with this true friend of man to such an extent that his image is not only no longer a source of terror to me but is comforting and consoling!* Maybe such thoughts were present as he composed the 'G minor', although such conjecture demands the utmost circumspection with those times prior to our own self-obsessed era. But what is it that haunts the chromatic, palpitating first subject, announced on the two upper strings and then darkened by the lower three? This is part of the rhetoric of suffering, as are the downward pulls of musical gravity, and the distinct sighs and sobs associated with the second subject. You can hear this in the *Sturm und Drang* music of Haydn and CPE Bach, but this seems altogether more intimate and immediate. Mozart deemed the key of G minor appropriate for the voicing of such emotions: think no further than the Piano Quartet K478, the Symphony K550 and Pamina's fateful aria *Ach, ich fühl's* from *Die Zauberflöte*. And when all remains stubbornly in G minor for the second subject we might well feel we are in a tonal prison, especially when the stumbling phrases occupy such a compressed (oppressed?) dynamic compass. If I read the basic scaffolding aright (you will hear in effect two recapitulations!) the development section must be one of the longest composed by Mozart: a false beginning of dark hints of the first subject, brushed aside by the modulating convulsions of the second, crumbling into a chromatic crawl to what is a false recapitulation. This leads to an extended tour of the world of eighteenth century musical melancholy and introspection, the familiarity of the true recapitulation coming as some relief. But the coda is weary and despondent.

... *this angular, chromatic, foot-fooling dance*

The positioning of the minuet here is unusual, but this is how Artaria printed it, and in the C major work: some editions move these movements to their traditional third positions. Whatever, the amusing diversion of wigs-a-leaping Haydn-style is not on the way: cutting such capers will just not do. Any warmth we might find in this angular, chromatic, foot-fooling dance (and there is, poignantly, a little) is overpowered by those angry third-beat chords; was ever a minuet more – to use HC Robbins Landon's word – *alarming*? And **still** we are in G minor. But – like a new dawn – G **major** enters for the trio, which picks up the minuet's last phrase. Pointing to the finale, this comes as balm to the wounded soul, and in its context defiantly

touching. Of course, the rules of the game cannot be altered, and the bleak dance inexorably returns.

... Mozart's most beautiful music?

If you see tears well up in the eyes of a Mozart lover at the mention of the G minor Quintet it will be because of the Adagio. Robbins Landon, who really knew what he was talking about, heard in it *possibly the most personal and intimate music Mozart ever wrote*. The movement's construction echoes that of its C major partner: simplicity itself – three distinct sections which are repeated. In the first the main theme, in E flat **major**, and although haunted by the sighs of the first movement, possesses a consoling serenity, albeit fragile. Like the whole movement it is played with strings muted. The second is back in the minor, and causing disquiet with an intruding descending scale on the violin with its second viola four note 'tail'. We thankfully return to the major for the more animated third section, bringing tranquillity with a lovely violin and viola duet. Is this Mozart's most beautiful music? Maybe – but certainly it is music in which one might sense his human presence as much as in the letter I have quoted.

... the profligacy of material (tunes!)

But yet again – G minor: **another** Adagio, and one dredging the Slough of Despond. The violin haltingly sings, brushing dissonance, atop a five note pizzicato cello motif and ticking quavers, echoing the start of the whole work. The climax is as desolate as you will find in eighteenth century music. Yet this is another of Mozart's great operatic arias without words, but here one of inconsolable tragedy. The music stops... listens... hesitates – and we are launched into a rich **G major** sonata Allegro rondo, the main theme a wave to his friend Haydn; but Haydn didn't work on this scale in his finales. I have said *rich*: indeed the profligacy of material (tunes!) rivals the finales of the Piano Quartets, and the music spreads way beyond the simple cheeriness of the refrain. You will even hear hints of the first movement. Listening to this, with the Mendelssohn Octet to come, could music be ever more potent against dark times? Two years before Mozart composed this masterpiece, Immanuel Kant, the moral compass of the Enlightenment, had written: *Happiness is not an ideal of reason, but of imagination*. Discuss.

Dobrinka TABAKOVA 1980-
***Insight*, for violin, viola and cello**

Eloisa-Fleur Thom, Elitsa Bogdanova, Max Ruisi

Born in Plovdiv in Bulgaria, but London trained and based, Dobrinka Tabakova is one of the most versatile and thoughtful composers of her generation and – with no ivory tower in sight – very much an integral part of British musical life. At the Guildhall School of Music and Drama she met fellow-students Roman Mints, Max

Rysanov and Kristina Blaumane, and composed *Insight* in 2002 with these musicians in mind; they recorded the work for ECM in 2011. The composer herself has explained the title: ... *aiming to visualise sound, she writes, is one of the most satisfying experiences our imagination can give us through music.* But in fact her main interest here is in creating sonorities which conjure other sonorities. The string trio, working against tradition, for her becomes an accordion and a brass choir, and other possibilities are left to us. There are three linked sections in this nine minute work: *reflective* (often in unison – derived from the Orthodox chant of Tabakova's native land?) – *lively* (Bulgarian folk music?) – *stretto* [the close entry of themes in a fugue] *of the main musical ideas*, marking an increase in complexity. The string writing pushes the players to extremis, especially in the use of harmonics.

Felix MENDELSSOHN 1809-1847

Octet in E flat major for 4 violins, 2 violas and 2 cellos, Op 20

1. *Allegro moderato ma con fuoco* 2. *Andante* 3. *Scherzo: Allegro leggierissimo* 4. *Presto*

When the miracle of this piece by the sixteen-year-old Mendelssohn is discussed (although we almost invariably hear the very modest 'leave well alone' tidying up of 1832), our amazement at its assured brilliance actually undersells the sheer originality on display. The string octet was a new genre, *his* genre, born fully-formed like Athene; and such free and dynamic writing in eight parts, effectively exploiting the known possibility of each instrument with seeming inexhaustible debonair know-how, was quite unprecedented.

... a background one could hardly invent

Mind you, young Felix had a background which one could hardly invent. He was from a rich, cultured Jewish-becoming-Protestant family (an accepted phenomenon of the time) which even ran to hiring its own orchestra on Sunday mornings. The Mendelssohn children were thoroughly – one might say ruthlessly – educated in the sum of human knowledge. Indeed, Felix became something of a multi-talented Renaissance man and his sister Fanny an excellent pianist who also composed – how well you can find out in the OCMS offering on 27th January next year. The family home at the Leipziger-Strasse was a focus for Berlin's intellectuals. The fully anointed 'Renaissance man', Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, no less, was a frequent visitor, captivated by the boy's conversational powers. It was his composer friend Carl Friedrich Zelter, a crabbed arch-conservative (Germany's greatest lyric poet had notoriously tin ears), who taught the boy composition. On the other hand Felix's violin teacher was Eduard Rietz, only seven years his senior, a different character

altogether, who was to assist in the great venture of reviving Bach's *Matthew Passion* in 1829. It was as his twenty-third birthday present the Octet was written in the summer/autumn of 1825, and first performed in October on the Leipziger-Strasse, with 'birthday boy' leading and Felix himself on second viola; and publicly as late as 1836 at the Leipzig Gewandhaus – by which time Rietz had been dead for three years. At least five years of compositional labour and achievement stand behind this work, but I don't want to go beyond this short introduction, even if I could. I will simply mention the twelve string symphonies from around 1823 and the First Symphony in C minor from 1824, which gave the fifteen-year-old the knowledge of the orchestra which bore fruit not only in today's work (which ...*must be played by all instruments in symphonic orchestral style*) but in the even more jaw-dropping overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* composed a year later, at the age of seventeen.

... building to one of the great climaxes of chamber music

The rise of the first subject on solo violin, *concertante* style, a florid soaring arpeggio against a living musical carpet for *lanky old Rietz*, is a truly exhilarating moment which could have your heart in your mouth. The next landmark is an antiphonal passage, a dialogue of 'questions' and 'answers' linked together to shape a theme. Some development of the opening music finally yields to the quietly constrained second subject itself, presented on the fourth violin and first viola. These two anchor melodies already seem to embody the conflicting forces which were always pulling at Mendelssohn, not always to his advantage: an exuberant Romantic impulsiveness countered by a fundamentally Classical restraint (– it is interesting that Fanny could be a more harmonically adventurous composer than her brother). But here he is riding high. A degree of fantasy enters along with the lightest touch of pizzicato, heralding an increasingly excited mini-development and an exultant (there is no other word!) conclusion to the exposition, which must be repeated – and will be today. There is no sense of exhaustion as Felix now throws himself into a dizzyingly propulsive launch of the development, building to one of the great climaxes of chamber music, with a semiquaver blizzard and lightning dissonance. But then – magic: a violin, like a solitary light in a mist, hovers over shadowy shifting harmonies from the lower strings; just as striking is the round dance of scurrying octaves leading to the recapitulation. Mendelssohn obeys the rule of recall, but of course we remain on the edge of our seats right through to the coda and the final triumphant E flat.

... half-inclined to snatch up a broomstick

The two inner movements complement each other beautifully. The Andante has the feeling of a sonata structure improvised in a spirit of dreamy melancholy. Add to this the subtle interweaving of the lighter and darker sides of Mendelssohn's musical palette and the modal hint of the archaic, and I see one of those contemporary moody landscapes of romantic ruins painted by Caspar David Friedrich. The ending leaves the door open for the extraordinary Scherzo. No less a source than Fanny

unlocked the secret of this movement for us, *spilt the beans*, as it were: it was inspired by an episode of his friend Goethe's *Faust Part 1: Walpurgis Night's Dream, or the Golden wedding of Oberon and Titania*. This features (within the play) a comic-grotesque orchestral performance presided over by Ariel and Puck; at the end the Orchestra speaks *pianissimo*: *Cloud trails and mist lighten from above. A breeze in the trees and wind in the reeds and – all is scattered*. Fanny tells us: *The whole piece is meant to be played staccato and pianissimo* [her brother's own direction *legierissimo* means *as light as possible*]. She continues *...one feels so near the world of the spirits, carried away in the air, half inclined to snatch up a broomstick and follow the aerial procession. At the end the first violin takes a flight with a feather-like lightness, and – all has vanished*. The great Donald Francis Tovey said of this movement that it is *...as far beyond praise as any classic can be. Eight string players might easily practice it for a lifetime without coming to the end of their delight in producing its marvels of tone-colouring*. 'Scherzo Lands' of fairies and sprites became a kind of Mendelssohn speciality, but he never surpassed this one. He made a shortened orchestral version in 1829 as an alternative third movement for the First Symphony.

... gathering and sweeping everything before it

In the Finale Mendelssohn pulls just about every trick out of his bag. It is a *moto perpetuo*, breathless and breathtaking, in liberated sonata form with a touch of rondo. To set this whirling wheel in motion the second cello launches a precipitous whirlwind which spirals up to the first violin and the first theme (which always threatens to turn into *And He shall reign* from *Messiah* – probably intentional: – read on), followed immediately by the second, brusquely delivered in unison octaves. Everything moves onwards... the musical recalls the buoyancy of the Scherzo, complemented by a delightfully skittish third theme. Like children scampering along a freshly discovered trail we are led into the spirited development (rules about repeats and recapitulations scattered to the winds), where we encounter a learned fugue with attitude, all around *And He shall reign* – the nod at Handel and Bach, two heroes, is explicit. And now, if I may plunder another context: *you ain't seen nuttin' yet*. Hints we have heard of the Scherzo theme become the Scherzo theme, but gathering and sweeping everything before it – fugue, double octaves – in a seemingly effortless display of contrapuntal wizardry bringing this tireless movement to a climax. After which young Felix searches for and seizes the energy for the final dash.

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