

Oxford Chamber Music Society

## Allegri String Quartet

7<sup>th</sup> October 2018

Martyn Jackson, Rafael Todes, violins

Dorothea Vogel, viola

Vanessa Lucas-Smith, cello

### Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART 1756-1791 String Quartet in C major, K465 *Dissonance*

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1. Adagio – Allegro 2. Andante cantabile 3. Menuetto: Allegro 4. Allegro

***Dissonance? – Mozart? What's this all about?*** In 1783, about two years prior to composing this afternoon's quartet, Mozart had added an Adagio introduction to the symphony he composed for Linz (K425) so as to clearly set off the festive C major splendour of the main Allegro. Here, also in a C major work, we have another preliminary Adagio, but now so harmonically labyrinthine in its contrapuntal weaving that we have 'dissonance' – and what consternation it caused! But then cracks were always turning to chasms between Mozart and the conservative tyranny of the controlling amateur market. The publisher of the C major Quartet and its five companions (see below) was accused of selling 'uncorrected' parts, and one Prince Grassalkovich *tore the music up, there and then*. (I looked up this Habsburg clan: *extinct*). Around 1830, after much vitriol aimed particularly at today's heresies by the composer Andrea Sarti (talk about bees in bonnets), the work was finally cleansed of such impurity by the Belgian polymath pedant François-Joseph Fétis, to the great acclaim of the musical Establishment. An early (1843) biographer of Mozart, Alexander Ulibishev, chortled *I shall always play the Introduction as thus corrected: it is henceforth sublime throughout, thanks to M. Fétis's happy emendation*. It has to be said even Haydn had felt a little perplexed at first, but concluded sagely: *Well, if Mozart wrote it, he must have meant it*. And we must wonder if he didn't have this passage in mind when he wrote *The Representation of Chaos* which opens *The Creation*. Of course, Mozart paid the greatest homage to *his most celebrated and dear friend* with the dedication of no less than six string quartets, composed between December 1782 and July 1783 and November 1784 to January 1785. The C major Quartet was the last to be completed, dating it 14<sup>th</sup> January, four days after the A major K464. The classical string quartet, one of the great achievements of the Enlightenment, was thus richly and wondrously consolidated. And we can hear the first of the six, the G major K387, on 11<sup>th</sup> November.

### ***... a white-knuckle ride of modulations***

Although underpinned by a pulsating C on the cello, as I have hinted the whole emphasis of the introduction must have been to chromatically blur tonality and to introduce a feeling of questioning, even anxiety, to be dispelled by the bright simplicity of C major and the joyful focus of the Allegro theme – which derives from the rising motif heard on the first violin in the introduction's third bar. *I have learned from Haydn how to write string quartets*, wrote Mozart, and he follows his master in harmonic and rhythmic variety throughout the whole series: all the fuss about the first 22 bars in this quartet must not distract from the wealth of inventiveness present at every turn. Although there are two distinctive secondary motifs in the Allegro, it is – like so much of Haydn – essentially monothematic, the first subject entirely dominating the development in a white-knuckle ride of modulations, the recapitulation all but hijacked to extract yet more of this abundance. Note also how Mozart uses the lower strings to constantly darken the music, often with explosive accents. In early quartets there is much dancing to the first fiddle's tune. Not here: already the sound, the form, is shifting, on the move. The Beethoven in the second half of today's concert is a recipient of Mozart's, and Haydn's, genius.

### ***... a huge smile at Haydn***

Any sense of C major finality is snuffed out at the end of the Allegro so as better to set the stage for the F major Andante, one of Mozart's most beautiful slow movements. It opens with an expansive theme with a little 'tail', which is taken up by cello and violin in a beguiling duet journey in which we encounter two more strong motifs. You can't miss them: one has grace, the other transfixes. From the return of the opening theme there is a shift of mood, light to dark, propelled by the now obsessive 'tail'. As the music dies away the first violin gently envelops it in a conciliatory counter-motif. Back to a cheery C major for a minuet which has to be a huge smile at Haydn. It crackles with dynamic contrasts and is a mixture of elegant wit and rough humour – Ludwig van isn't that far off. Nor is he in the C minor trio – you will hear what I mean. My feeble words are hardly needed for the Finale. Again and again we sense the unsurpassed opera composer in this round dance of moods and voices – a rondo which has a sonata-style development introducing even a fugal burst of anger. In the coda Mozart seems to say, *Listen! I could go on for eternity*. But he gives us the final blaze of C major we have been waiting for.

**Karol SZYMANOWSKI 1882-1937**

**String Quartet no 2, opus 56**

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1. *Moderato, dolce e tranquillo* 2. *Vivace scherzando* 3. *Lento*

Unless we count Chopin's Cello Sonata, Szymanowski's two string quartets were the earliest Polish chamber works to gain a foothold in the standard repertory, although I raise

my hand for Juliusz Zarębski's G minor Piano Quintet (1885) – a real fruit-and-walnut piece, and if that's to your taste don't deny indulgence. It is not too great a simplification to say that Szymanowski's music flowed porously into and from two major works: his opera *King Roger* (1918-24) and the ballet-pantomime *Harnasie* (1923-31). I emphasize *porous*: the substantial melodic material framing the first movement of our 1927 Quartet could belong equally to the First (1917), its exquisite luminous reverie so French that we immediately think of Debussy and Ravel. But two other determinants were crucial in creating the *King Roger* Szymanowski: Scriabin's psychedelic mysticism, and the effect of a series of extensive Mediterranean wanderings, crucially to North Africa. It was the impact of Arab music, and all the liberation it unleashed, which ignited – more than anything Europe could furnish – the heady sensuality at the heart of *King Roger*, surely the most exotically (I can also safely say *ecstatically*) charged and richly upholstered opera in existence. However, by the end of the Great War a much impoverished Szymanowski, the family property destroyed, had finally settled in Warsaw. He slowly rebuilt his career, and from 1922 began to share his time in Poland between a small Warsaw flat and Zakopane in the Tatra Mountains. In short, he began to research the folk music of the highland Góral people, becoming increasingly obsessed with creating a truly national style which also possessed an international modernity. *Harnasie*, celebrating the ritual of a mountain bandit wedding, was his fulfilment. Bartók in Hungary and Janáček in Moravia were working in parallel, and the music tells us this. I was going to add *and in isolation*, but I don't think there's any doubt Szymanowski thumbed the score of Bartók's Second Quartet before starting work on his own piece.\* The discovery of such a bounty of indigenous ethnic music certainly brought a harder edge to his work, the voluptuous textures elementally coarsened. He became fascinated by the complexity of the rhythms he heard from the village musicians, and tried to mesh them with a suitably primordial counterpoint. Stravinsky's music played a part here: I would say particularly the euphoric primitivism of *The Wedding*, premiered in 1923, and which might well have given him the idea for *Harnasie*. Yes, in today's quartet there is music in the first movement which recalls the refined world of *King Roger*, but for the rest medieval Sicily has been exchanged for some mountain valley in southern Poland, where life is harsh and the old gods may still linger. But, then, maybe it is all about Szymanowski's own inner nightmares...

### **... a long backlit theme of languorous melancholy**

A rocking whispering tremolo, the highest reaches of violin and cello two octaves apart weave a long backlit theme of languorous melancholy, and we have what must be one of the most ethereal (in the true sense of the word) openings of any quartet. The music is allowed to inhabit a few moments of weightless stillness, and then a kind of keening disruption threatens – the nearest we have to a second subject: weight to counter lightness, action to counter passivity. This is indeed a sonata movement, but one very much the creation of its creator, the contrasts breaking and disconnecting rather than providing cohesion. After a serene extension of the opening theme, the profoundly restive development commences with jarring instructions to scratch away, *sul ponticello* [the bow near the bridge], into a grim reiteration of the 'keening'. Pizzicato, *sul tasto* [the bow near the fingerboard] and *punta d'arco* [at the point of the bow] are likewise duly harnessed to

add to a sense of dissolution; listen for a passage where a simultaneous rise and fall of the music (vestigial first and second subjects) causes something like tonal vertigo. Fragments of the opening theme become increasingly desperate, at one point no more than a dissolving ghostly tremolo. The recapitulation offers only the surprise of transformation (as I hear it) into a revisit of deep nostalgia, with a long coda fading into autumnal mists. Long? This astonishing movement lasts only around eight minutes.

### ... *this piece of diabolical musical stitchery*

But if anything the next four minutes are even more remarkable: a crazy apotheosis of folk music, Góral style. This is a movement best heard as a rondo with variations, with a catchy anchor theme blown in with tipsy pizzicato from the Tatra highlands: do your best to penetrate its gallery of distorting mirrors. Well, it sounds jolly, but be warned by the uncouth greeting not to trust this piece of diabolical musical stitchery, whatever the ingratiating touches of charm and tenderness. You will be assailed with the musical anti-matter of open fifths squeezed with hand-rubbing obscenity from Hieronymus Bosch bellows, and shards of music engulfed in the guttural ferocity of fractured rhythms and chopped ostinatos; and all on an implacable pilgrimage to a sneer and a bubble-burst. A Dance of Death, or some sardonic comic turn, *scherzando*, (*jokingly, playfully*)? This spirit of negation might have had just cause: Szymanowski had money troubles, reactionary political forces were hindering his attempts at reform as director of the Warsaw Conservatory, and as a gay man in a conservative Catholic society he had to lead a somewhat perilous double life; and the tuberculosis which would slowly kill him had just been diagnosed. All this notwithstanding, in the five/six minute finale there is a traditional move from darkness to light, but – unsurprisingly – tracing no traditional path. Szymanowski directly utilises a theme from the Tatras in which is embedded the four-note motif known as the *Sabala*. This takes over to such an extent you must be asleep to miss it; the movement can be defined as another set of bizarrely juxtaposed variations. At first the whole theme is developed as a fugue, louring as it congeals, then building to a powerful and anguished climax, followed by disintegration into most desolate passage in the work. The music builds itself again, and then starts to dance, the *Sabala* being finally triumphantly stated by the Zakopane town band.

\*A perusal of the composition and first performance years of relevant east European quartets might be instructive: Bartók 2 – 1914-17, 1918; Szymanowski 1 – 1917, 1924; Janaček 1 – 1923, 1924; Bartók 3 – 1927, 1928; Szymanowski 2 – 1927, 1929; Janáček 2 – both 1928.

*Interval (approx. 15 minutes)*

# Ludwig van BEETHOVEN 1770-1827

## String Quartet no 12 in E flat major, opus 127

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1. *Maestoso – Allegro*
2. *Adagio ma non troppo e molto cantabile*
3. *Scherzando vivace*
4. *Finale [no tempo indication]*

In 1824, when this quartet was composed, Beethoven's life was very bleak. Not only was he stone deaf, and with declining eyesight, but his already wretched general health was being made chronic by alcohol and murderously incompetent doctors. Moreover, a running source of anxiety and draining of energy, mental and physical, was his brother's severely damaged son Karl, unwisely adopted in 1820 after exhausting legal attrition with his widowed mother – to be brought to a catastrophe by Karl's attempted suicide in 1826. Yet, throughout this time Beethoven somehow managed to produce some of his most visionary music, not least five string quartets. In November 1822 a Russian nobleman and amateur cellist, Prince Nicolai Galitzin, had written from St Petersburg asking him to compose *one, two or three quartets*, and to set a price. But such musical problems as finishing the *Missa Solemnis* (Galitzin actually organised the first Russian performance of this work in April 1824) and the Ninth Symphony intervened. Although there are earlier sketches, the hard work on 'Opus 127' was done from summer 1824 in Baden, just south of Vienna, until February 1825. The other two 'Galitzin' quartets, the A minor Op 132 and the B flat op 130 were completed in July and November 1825 respectively. The daunting difficulties and sheer musical originality of these works and their successors, the C-sharp minor op 131 (completed August 1826) and the F major op 135 (October 1826), gave them a rough ride for performance and recognition for all but a century, but now they are seen as the greatest of all quartets for their qualities of humanity and spiritual loftiness.

### **... a four octave sunburst of C major**

The pattern of the imposing *forte* six-bar 'majestic' opening to this work, strategically placed *sforzando* (strongly accented) offbeat chords, will be heard twice more in the first movement; here it effectively shifts the music from E flat to a C major trill, and thus to the main subject on the first violin. This is good-natured, and is welcomed by the other instruments in a captivating contrapuntal flow. Rather different counterpoint is heard when a lively secondary motif, back in E flat, is briefly developed. Unexpectedly the second subject proper arrives in a rather tense G minor, leading to chopped aggressive and pleading phrases – and the return of the *Maestoso*, still *forte*, but now in G major, and in a three octave span as the opposed to the initial two. This clearly marks the end of the exposition and the beginning of the development. The shape-shifting first subject now embarks on some unusual exchanges with a derivative of itself, until a tense arpeggio-driven B flat minor climax gives us the first *fortissimo* in the work, immediately crowned by a second: for the last time the *Maestoso* appears, in a four octave sunburst of mighty C major. The tide turned, Beethoven now begins to shift the music back to the tonic for the recapitulation, which enters with no portentous announcement – the flow is ever onwards.

Furthermore, although the recapitulation pattern is there, all is now rewritten in such a dense and allusively textured language we might have difficulty with it even now. The music does pause – and there is a beautiful wistful coda.

### **... a simplification which is also a transfiguration**

As if reaching out across empty space the cello, *pianissimo*, echoes the final E flat of the Allegro, and then builds from it a diminished seventh chord to bring us to the slow movement's home key of A flat. From this mere whisper emerges the sublime 12/8 theme of the Adagio, or rather the first part of it, sung by the first violin. There is a continuation, now with the cello, which effectively gives Beethoven two-themes-in-one, and a codetta, as the basis of five (or six) variations and a coda; these are not numbered in the score. The first variation, immediately darker in feeling, is especially rich in expressive polyphony woven from fragments of the theme; the second has a change of pace – a march-like Andante con moto with florid duet exchanges between the two violins. The third variation, Adagio molto espressivo, abruptly shifts the key to E major. Here we have simplification which is also a transfiguration. Enough said. Without a break, we are back to 12/8 and A flat for arpeggios and trills. The mysterious sparsely textured passage in C sharp minor which follows has been seen as an interlude, or a variation in its own right, one emphasising the sustained notes of the theme. The final variation, back in A flat, has the first violin leading semiquaver runs and arabesques around the theme; there is something like it in the slow movement of the Ninth Symphony. The coda returns very gently to the bedrock of this unforgettable movement.

### **... it's a smiling E flat**

Launched by four snappy pizzicatos, then cello and viola, the rude energy of what comes next is as far distant from the depths of the Adagio as one could imagine. The Scherzando music bustles along in 3/4, with interjections in 2/4, what Beethoven calls *Ritmo di tre battute* (*three bar rhythm*), and some shady business with viola and cello. The Trio, in E flat minor, is off as if out of a trap, and with its two very different tunes makes mercurial visits to other keys. The *da capo* was written out, with some variants. At the end Ludwig van has had enough and stamps his foot. If that makes you smile, then you will keep on smiling in the finale. Beethoven left out a tempo marking, but it's clearly an Allegro. What's this in the opening four bars? C minor? No, blink, and it's a smiling E flat, with a delightful tune introduced by all the instruments playing on their lowest string. This is followed by something even jollier and brighter. The second subject, when it arrives, brings flash and dash, replete with the swagger of double stopping. Next it sounds like we are being prepared for an exposition repeat – but no. It's the short development section, segueing into the recapitulation, with the first subject an octave higher and, surprisingly, the 'jolly' music fully elaborated. There is a trill in thirds... and then Beethoven finally gives us music as quintessentially his and as necessary as the great Adagio: C major, 6/8 time, the tempo slows; and what follows I'll leave you to enjoy. But all ends up in E flat, if that matters.