

Oxford Chamber Music Society

Castalian String Quartet

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Joseph HAYDN 1732-1809

String Quartet in D major, opus 20 no 4

1. *Allegro di molto* 2. *Un poco adagio e affettuoso* 3. *Menuet alla Zingarese*
4. *Presto e scherzando*

The illustrious Donald Francis Tovey wrote of Haydn's Opus 20 Quartets ...*there is perhaps no single or sextuple opus in the history of instrumental music which has achieved so much.* In his years at the palace of Esterháza, the 'Hungarian Versailles', as Kapellmeister to Prince Nikolaus Esterházy, Haydn often had a struggle to endure the remoteness of the place, built as it was on a fetid swamp. But his employer's bottomless wealth gave him a handpicked orchestra of some of Europe's best musicians, and – possessing the liveliest and most inventive of minds – he developed with their cooperation both the symphony and the string quartet, and the sonata structure which ordered them. In the Opus 20 set of quartets, composed in 1772, and published in 1774, all the innovations of his earlier work come together. In today's work the sonata form has become so flexible we hear Haydn freely rebelling against his own rules, indeed having outright fun with them – a sure sense of maturity and ease. It is true that the first violin has all the best tunes – doubtless due to the presence of the virtuoso Luigi Tomasini (Haydn called him *my brother*) as concertmaster – and the prominence of that instrument is still there in the Schubert we are hearing later: he had his eye on pleasing Ignaz Schuppanzigh. The extent to which Haydn took in the intellectual developments of his day, such as the *Sturm und Drang* movement (the development section of today's quartet, and generally the two minor key works of Opus 20?) and Rousseau's 'back to nature' sensibility (an influence on the minuets?) remains contentious. But that the symphony and the quartet (*the conversation of four rational people*, according to Goethe) remain among the most enduring achievements of the Enlightenment is beyond debate.

... both intensity and humour

The first movement of the D major work sets the extraordinarily innovative tone of this quartet. The shadowy opening four-note motif, which dominates the five six-bar phrases stealthily contributing the first subject, also germinates the explosive energy of the second, with all its disruptive showy-first-violin arpeggios for Tomasini. There is a calming codetta. In the development section, with those four notes turning the screw, Haydn manages both intensity and humour, as he teases us with delaying the recapitulation's return. Well, listen for the sudden five beats of silence, and you have your recapitulation, expiring with the codetta, preparing us for the next movement...

... glimpses over the horizon

This is a theme with three strongly characterised variations and a coda. The theme itself, played on the first violin, has something of the character of an old baroque dance, but in the minor key and with an air of fragility: I am reminded of the paintings of Watteau. In the first variation the second violin holds sway, sometimes in a duet with viola in a melodic and rhythmic transformation. In the second variation the cello and the viola swap places, with the former stretching to contain the melody, and the latter murmuring as the bass; in the third the first violin flamboyantly elaborates. All four instruments finally develop an extended restatement of the theme, with glimpses over the horizon into the next century. What might have seemed to start as an exercise in the *galante* style has ended as a transmutation.

... the energy of musical joke upon joke

In listening to the last two movements it is worth a reminder that Haydn was a country wheelwright's musical son, and someone with his ear to the ground for every kind of musical experience. The 'gypsy' minuet movement is short enough to be seen as a curtain-raiser to the finale: two supreme examples of Haydn genius concentrate. The minuet is almost a tooth-and-claw battle between metre and accent, the trio a running cello with a four-note and drone accompaniment. As short as Webern, but with rather more bounce! In the finale Haydn is in what I call his *Tristram Shandy* mood, droll and utterly unpredictable: you can gaze into his eyes – flashing with merriment, humane, life-affirming. Was ever a composer more preciously endowed with wit and wisdom? Let me solemnly say this is a sonata movement, with first and second subjects... but both in complete disarray. And then let you be swept up in the energy of musical joke upon joke, with probably the best at the end.

Maurice RAVEL 1875-1937

String Quartet in F major

1. *Allegro moderato, très doux* 2. *Assez vif et bien rythmé* 3. *Très lent*
4. *Vif et agité*

This is the first great string quartet of the twentieth century, and from the very opening we know we are in a new age. Also Ravel's first masterpiece, it was composed between December 1902 and April 1903, around ten years after the quartet by Claude Debussy, the major influence on its language. Although there are strong differences between the two works it is not surprising they are often still regarded as being in tandem. There are modal scales and exotic harmonies and sensual and seductive rhythms, and – often discussed as 'impressionist' music – colours and textures which exist in flux between dazzling animation and vibrant stillness. And there are those formal likenesses: the obvious use of *pizzicato* in both second movement 'scherzos', and the employment of cyclic form (but Ravel only nominally) – binding a work by sharing material through its length, made *de rigueur* by César Franck and his followers. Debussy, initially on good terms with his colleague, grew distant when the two pieces began to be widely played and discussed as musical twins. *It's probably better for us, after all, to be on frigid terms for illogical reasons*, was the younger man's rather hurt comment. The work was dedicated to Gabriel Fauré, Ravel's teacher at the Paris Conservatoire. Why he was still there after well over a decade and how the quartet was responsible for the director's dismissal is too convoluted a tale for now.

... a kind of apocalypse in a perfume bottle

This work is also dedicated to sonata form, which came to Ravel largely through his veneration of Mozart; he even once proposed it as an early example of neo-classicism. That said, the relaxed sensuality of the opening theme is no normal expectation, nor is its easy course. I am reminded of Marthe Bonnard in her bath, hoping you understand the reference. There is a related shimmering melody, but the theme returns to languidly stretch itself, cracking its bones, until the yearning second subject presents itself, the first violin and viola playing two octaves apart: a sound to turn knees to water. The opening steals into this rarefied, transfixing texture to open the development; this comes to an unexpected climax, a kind of apocalypse in a perfume bottle. Then there is a languid, dream-like recall, expiring in the most exquisite of codas with its gentle drops of *pizzicato*.

... a nocturnal in a magic land

In the 'scherzo' Ravel offers us a thrilling play of contrast between plucked and bowed strings and cross-rhythms. The cello takes us into another-world trio, music from the first part played in slow motion. There is an uneasy dialogue as the opening music returns, and then a miniature *pizzicato* army in full advance. Here we have a reminder of Ravel's very individual idea of music as interlocking parts (Stravinsky called him a 'Swiss clockmaker'): compare the *Pantoum* movement of the Piano Trio. Also, did he have the Javanese gamelan, a great Parisian fascination of the time, in his mind? The slow movement extends the elusive mood of the trio with a nocturnal in a magic land. Here Ravel shows himself as a musical conjuror beyond compare, looking forward to *Le Jardin féérique* in *Ma mère l'Oye*. In the outer sections the instruments are muted. In the central part the cello seems to unlock the door on a wondrous moonlit garden. Subtly woven through the delicacy of the instrumental writing in this movement, with one player passing a phrase to another, are fragments of the first (a nod to cyclic form). In the finale Ravel uses an awkward 5-beat motif as the lynchpin for a kind of breathless rondo structure into which he again works references to the first movement. The ending is a crescendo rush to an emphatic F major.

INTERVAL About 20 minutes

Franz SCHUBERT 1797-1828

String Quartet no 14 in D minor, *Der Tod und das Mädchen / Death and the Maiden*, D810

1. *Allegro* 2. *Andante con moto* 3. *Scherzo: Allegro molto – Trio* 4. *Presto*

It was his meeting with Ignaz Schuppanzigh and his quartet (an offshoot of the first professional string quartet, and great supporters of Beethoven) which fired Schubert to at last complete two string quartets in succession after a decade. This was in March 1824, and I am talking about the A minor Quartet (known as the *Rosamunde*), and today's D minor, soon likewise given a sobriquet, *Death and the Maiden*, because, famously, the second movement consists of variations on a theme derived from the song of that name composed back in February 1817. The A minor (to be played for us next January) actually received a public performance by Schuppanzigh and his colleagues; its companion was given a private shambolic run-through in January 1826 by the composer (like Mozart, a violist) and friends.

Schuppanzigh attended, and promptly told Schubert to stick to writing songs – which is probably why we have to wait until June 1826 for another (and last) quartet, the G major.

... Schubert's confrontation with his own fate

Schubert's state of health at the time of the D minor's composition – he had probably contracted tertiary syphilis – compounded with his poverty and lack of success (the failure of his opera *Fierrabras* was another recent heavy blow) – caused him, very understandably, to mix his inherent cheerfulness with nigh on suicidal thoughts: *I feel myself to be the most unfortunate, the most miserable being in the world... Each night when I go to sleep, I hope never to wake again, and each morning only serves to recall the misery of the previous day.* This, and the Romantic death-obsessed temper of those times, has led to debates about whether the whole work – not just the variation movement – is about Schubert's confrontation with his own fate. Walter Wilson Cobbett, still one of the best writers on chamber music, subscribed to such notions. *The struggle with Death is the subject of the first movement, and the andante accordingly dwells on Death's words* ['I am a friend... take courage now, and very soon within my arms you shall softly rest']. The scherzo is *the dance of the demon fiddler*, and in the finale's *dance of death, ghastly visions whirl past in the inexorable rhythm of the tarantella.* And I would add that here is a quartet (the only one?) with all movements in a minor key. Of course, whether Schubert had this over-arching view we do not know, and I would prefer to put it in storage for my brief listening guide, if I can.

... racking up something approaching sheer terror

The first subject group is complex. The first part, of fourteen bars, establishes two major characteristics of the quartet: the clashes of dynamic and mood, and the use of triplets as the driving agent of much of the music. Thus what we hear first – and it could hardly be more striking – is a *fortissimo* D and a descending triplet figure, played twice, answered directly by the triplets now ascending to introduce a chorale-like figure, *pianissimo*. The agitated triplets make a point of asserting themselves yet again, introducing an extended theme (at last!) grown from the 'chorale' and harried by their offspring with an increasing sense of menace. The opening music returns, even more implacably. The stark introductory motif ringing in our ears is then carved with lilted benevolence into what you might think is the second subject; but there is a pause, and the real thing arrives in F major. Schubert is now more expansive; maybe there is even time for hope. But, as you will hear, he puts this guileless theme through its paces, finally contorting it in tortuous modulations. The short development, as it happens, is likewise mainly

concerned with this hapless second subject, with Schubert racking up something approaching sheer terror amidst a few bars of (let us say) redemption. The recapitulation is much truncated except in its extended treatment, again, of the second subject. The coda is remarkable. It begins with a hushed passage which is perhaps the most chilling in the whole work – but then there is an invigorated appearance of the very opening music – is this leading to a triumphant conclusion? No: – to the triplet motif breaking apart as if in utter despair.

... an obsessive triumphant malevolence

In the variation movement the theme itself is Schubert's own cut-and-paste of the piano prelude to the song, in G minor, and the accompaniment to Death's consolatory words to the terrified girl (see above), shifting to B flat and finally to G major. The austere, inexorable harmonic movement of this funeral march, locked into rhythmic patterns of classically elegiac dactyls (long-short-short), infuses the character of each of the five tightly constructed variations which follow, which are nevertheless very distinctive. In the first the theme is broken into – yes, triplets, played by the first violin; the cello energises with *pizzicato*. It is the cello which takes command in the second variation, the texture of the accompaniment enlivened by the still hyperactive first fiddle. In the next we are safe in assuming that the accelerated transformation of the dactylic rhythm into an obsessive triumphant malevolence versus (but swiftly overcoming) woeful pleading has everything to do with the song's fateful celebration; it is ready for our own choreography as a miniature dance scene. There follows a melancholy tenderness as the first violin hovers bird-like as the others offer gentle variants of the theme; at least here there is a sense of peace – and this is the only major key variation, in G major. In the final variation the drop in temperature makes one shiver as the avian violin now sings above an austere outline of the theme's opening, but reaching with impatient finality to a grim climax, for which there is no answer but the anguished resignation and finally peaceful rest of the coda.

... a lurching, ceaseless protagonist

In the Scherzo we return to the relentless mood of the first movement, which is carried through into the finale. But in the little country dance trio the music actually smiles! The final presto – a tarantella, the notoriously breakneck 6/8 dance from Taranto in southern Italy, associated with curing madness or a tarantula bite. Schubert gives us a rondo with the whirlwind play of three themes, a D minor nocturnal ride, a kind of Gothic cyclorama, with a lurching, unceasing protagonist and a quotation from another deathly song, *Der Erlkönig*, to help things along (the broader second theme). The third theme has

a disconcerting swagger, Death taking the fiddle. At one point we are led over what seems a river of lost souls. After the final return of the rondo theme, there is a *prestissimo* coda which, in its final twist from D major to minor, leaves us in forked cleft between triumph and the abyss.

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