



Oxford Chamber Music Society

Consone Quartet

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Agata Daraskaite, Magdalena Loth-Hill, violins
Elitsa Bogdanova, viola
George Ross, cello

Joseph HAYDN 1732-1809 String Quartet in D minor, Opus 103 (unfinished)

1. *Andante grazioso* 2. *Menuet, ma non troppo presto*

In 1798, a year after completing the great set of Opus 76 Quartets, Haydn received a commission from the young Prince Franz Joseph Lobkowitz, whose physical disability led him to live for music, zealously putting his money where his mouth was. At the same time he requested six quartets from Beethoven, finally published as Opus 18 (see below). Lobkowitz had played a leading role in sponsoring Haydn's oratorios *The Creation* and *The Seasons*, and ironically it was the composition of the latter masterpiece in 1799-1801 which drained the composer's energies to the point of allowing him to complete only two (but magnificent!) quartets, duly published by Artaria in 1802 as Opus 77. In 1803, in his seventy-first year – using sketches from 1799, or starting afresh – he started composing another quartet, but only managed what we must presume are the inner movements. Haydn permitted publication of these fragments in 1806 by Breitkopf & Härtel, with a dedication, not to Lobkowitz, but another Haydn (and Beethoven) enthusiast, Count Moritz von Fries, a banker who had underwritten the cost of the first performances of *The Creation* in 1798. It was Haydn's first biographer GA Griesinger, realising it was his friend's *swan song* (his words), who arranged for the composer's extraordinary visiting card to be published after the Minuet: *HIN IST ALLE MEINE KRAFT, ALT UND SWACH BIN ICH / Gone is all my strength, old and weak am I*, set as a canon.

But there is nothing *old and weak* in the music. The walking-gait theme of the Andante, in B flat, has both simplicity and gravitas, but the progress of the two violins is given an unstable edge by the sorrowful chromatic descents and darkening harmonies from viola and cello. The central section, beginning rather startlingly in G flat with a chill few bars we hear twice again, circles its way vigorously through to G minor and thus back to B flat. There is coda of startling – one might say valedictory – poignancy as if the frail Haydn himself was glimpsed, just for a moment; but the very notion of such sentiment receives a dismissive swat. What's this now? Wig music – in 1803? But this is no ordinary minuet. There is still a basic 3/4, but the agitated D minor seems to be tearing at the old framework with an angular desperation veering between passion and anguish. The chromatic trio tries to reassure in D major, but the irregular phrases and hesitations seem a threat. The Minuet returns. One of the great figures of western music then laid down his pen.

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN 1770-1827

String Quartet no 1 in F major, Opus 18 no 1

1. *Allegro con brio*
2. *Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato*
3. *Scherzo: Allegro molto*
4. *Allegro*

After his arrival in Vienna from Bonn in 1792, Beethoven was very diplomatic in his determination to gain musical ascendancy in the city. Despite thick Rhenish accent, pockmarked demeanour, arrogance and Republican politics, he even leant to woo the rich (mainly aristocratic) musical makers and shakers of Vienna, the tumbrel companions of Paris. As a pianist he knew he had no real rivals and stormed merrily on, but as a composer he was careful in his trios and sonatas not to invite comparison with the central interests of Mozart (who had died in 1791) or Haydn, his nominal and somewhat perplexed teacher. So, in those first years: no string quartets, no symphonies, definitely no operas. Even in 1795 when Count Anton Apponyi asked him for six quartets, he refused. However, when Prince Lobkowitz commissioned him in 1798 he felt good and ready, especially after the recent success of his Opus 9 string trios; the fact that Haydn had also been asked for six quartets seemed not to worry him in the least. He worked on them from autumn 1798 (the D major, published as no 3, was the first to be composed) to summer 1800. Premiers would have been in the palaces of Beethoven's aristocratic patrons, by a quartet led by Ignaz Schuppanzigh, a major pioneer of professional chamber music performance. They were published in two instalments in June and October 1801, by the interestingly-named Tranquillo Mollo, who was also a dealer in globes and maps. The F major work was placed first at the suggestion of Schuppanzigh.

Beethoven thought he had completed our 'F major' by the summer of 1799, as he sent a copy to a friend, the theologian Karl Amenda – but, wait! Two years on: *Be sure not to hand on to anybody your quartet, in which I have made some drastic alterations. For now I have learnt how to write quartets; and this you will notice, I fancy, when you receive them.* Indeed, as comparisons show, he had learnt a great deal. He revised all the quartets, battling hard to forge something new for the new century. When we listen to Opus 18 we hear Haydn, we hear Mozart, but also much which simply could not have been written by either of them. The first movement here is a case in point, which is surely why Schuppanzigh chose it as any purchasing connoisseur's first point of contact. Beethoven used sketchbooks for the first time for these works, and we know the opening 'scruff of the neck' motif caused him inordinate trouble; there are nine attempts to get it right. But this six-note turn is like the controlling muscle of what remains, somehow, a classical sonata movement, expanding and contracting, tightening and relaxing. It is so dominant we listen with all the more care when it is absent, such as in the fiery peak of the minor key development – it returns in full C major for the recapitulation. Listen also for the dynamic contrasts in this movement, and the breaks and pauses. The coda glowers, smiles, then clenches. The aforementioned Amenda offers us an opening into the second movement: after hearing it, he told the composer that it made him think of the departure of two lovers. *Good! he replied. I thought of the scene in the burial vault in Romeo and Juliet.* It is a remarkable achievement. Comparing it with the *Largo e mesto* of the D major piano sonata Opus 10/3, the composer Robert Simpson notes, *Both express a tragedy beyond the ken of any of Beethoven's predecessors except Gluck.* The mention of Gluck is interesting, because in many ways this is operatic, reminding us that around this time Beethoven was studying vocal music under Anton Salieri, the Court Opera composer (who did *not* poison Mozart; that was from the excitable imagination of Pushkin). An intense first violin laments in D minor over throbbing triplets, breaking down with a sigh; the cello continues, expanding and developing. This is another sonata movement, and we hear a gentle, less intense second subject. In the development the music rises to a pitch of harsh drama, all the more effective because the dynamic levels have been kept hitherto low. Even more intense are the terrifying chords and silences towards the end of the movement.

The clever Scherzo forges a perfect link from the Adagio to the final Allegro. The scherzo proper tricks us with its asymmetrical phrasing and abrupt jocular modulations, and in the trio with jiggling from the first fiddle and communal swirling, too fast, too short, to take in. The Allegro is a sonata rondo, with a theme of rapid triplets, instantly memorable, jolly, energised and capable of fruitful development, much of it highly contrapuntal – it's a kind of 'I, Ludwig van, can do anything' kind of movement. The theme is indeed put through its paces before we arrive at the first episode, much of it in canon, the two strings finding themselves pursuing each other against a flowing accompaniment. The final episode is one rapid dramatic contrast and sinewy polyphony, brought to an end only when the brilliantly managed coda has exploded. On gut strings this should be something else!

INTERVAL around 15 mins

Joseph HAYDN 1732-1809 String Quartet in D minor, Opus 42

1. *Andante e innocentemente* 2. *Menuet* 3. *Adagio e cantabile* 4. *Finale: Presto*

Leaving the last three aside, Haydn supplied his string quartets to his publishers in batches of six. So why was this example, composed in 1785 and published by the Viennese FA Hoffmeister the following year, a solitary offering? And why was the work so short? With repeats it is no more than 15 minutes. There has naturally been earnest conjecture. Around the same time, Haydn did inform another publisher, Matthias Artaria, FAH's great rival, how he was working on a Spanish commission of six short quartets with *three* movements, of which there is otherwise no record; or it may have been a notion by Hoffmeister to float a series 'for beginners' – which went nowhere. But what we have is no simple watering-down but pure Haydn-concentrate. The outer movements relate to the dark *Sturm und Drang* style of which he was a master; the Andante is the working-out of two themes (but note the 'innocently' marking), and the finale a mini-sonata replete with fugato development. The Minuet takes concision to a new level; the serenely lovely Adagio is a series of slow moving variants of the main theme. Yes, listen to this work, play this work; something of an anomaly it might be, but one worthy of its composer.

Fanny MENDELSSOHN-HENSEL 1805-1847 String Quartet in E flat major

1. *Adagio ma non troppo* 2. *Allegretto* 3. *Romanze* 4. *Allegro molto vivace*

Fanny was the eldest of the four children of two almost ridiculously cultured and well-heeled parents, Abraham, the son of Moses Mendelssohn, the 'Jewish Socrates', idealised by Lessing in *Nathan the Wise*, and Lea (Lilla) Salomon, who was well connected with many of the German intellectuals of the day. Abraham was a banker in Hamburg, where Fanny and her younger brother Felix were born, in 1805 and 1809 respectively. The family uprooted itself to Berlin because of the French occupation, and their luxurious final mansion on Leipzigerstrasse 3 became a nucleus of the most elevated intellectual and artistic Prussian activity, not least music: Abraham could even afford to hire his own orchestra for Sunday matinées, the *Sonntagsmusiken*. Fanny's obvious musical talent was given every encouragement, and we know she could play from memory the Preludes from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* at the age of thirteen; she also composed songs and

piano pieces, often inspired by family occasions. Little Felix was no slouch in asserting his talents either, and when Papa returned from a trip to Paris in 1819 he brought symbolic gifts for both of them: a necklace for his daughter (aged fourteen) and writing implements for his son (aged ten) so he could start his first opera. She, no doubt admiring her necklace, was then put in her place: *Only that which is feminine befits a woman*. She was informed by letter (!) that music for her *can and must only be an ornament, never the root of your being*. As for her brother, *Music will become perhaps his profession*. Gender, of course was at the root of this; but to be fair to the patriarch, he was doubtless concerned about exposing her to public anti-Semitism, which was rife at that time (if you know your German history you will recall the Hep Hep Riots in Bavaria – and, well, the rest is history, not least with the Mendelssohn name). Already in 1816 the four children had been clandestinely baptised, taking the Protestant surname Bartholdy; there was nothing unusual in this, and Jews who were ‘good Prussians’ were officially encouraged to do so. At least Fanny was parentally assured that *Christianity contains nothing that can lead you away from what is good, and much that guides you to love, obedience, toleration and resignation...* Her father’s parameters, however, did not bar her from continuing with her musical activities privately – as a hobby, so to speak. She continued with piano lessons, and with her brother studied composition with the hard-baked pedagogue, Carl Friedrich Zelter, a close friend and correspondent (to the tune of nearly nine hundred letters) of Goethe. For the children, that was seven long years of counterpoint with *a bristly hairbrush*, as a contemporary described him. The relationship between Fanny and Felix became increasingly close, and although it had its tensions, remained so – to the point of interesting modern psychologists. Anyhow, I’m now abandoning Felix until the end of this note, as this is another Mendelssohn’s debut at the OCMS, certainly not his!

In 1821 Wilhelm Hensel, an artist nine years her senior, entered Fanny’s life. But, according to her mother, she was *Very young and Heaven be praised, hitherto has no concerns, no passions ...* and when things turned serious within a couple of years, Hensel was packed off to Rome on five year probation which included not writing to her. Ah, those Prussians! But he sent sketches, and she composed songs about the separation or loss of lovers. He returned in 1828, as much in love as ever, and on Christmas Day pointedly presented her with a heart-shaped album in which she could transcribe her compositions. They were married, but had to set up home in the (large!) garden house at Leipzigerstrasse 3 – so no escape for either of them. Punctuated by motherhood (her son Sebastian), a miscarriage, domesticity and frequent depression, from 1831 until her death she directed the Sunday concerts in her parents’ home. The Hensels were mutually supportive, and a highlight of their marriage was a family trip to Italy in 1839-40, staying in Rome at the Villa Medici, mitigating her sense of isolation and bringing her recognition. The young Charles Gounod was entranced. Back in Berlin there was a new self-confidence, although she still insisted her music was for domestic consumption only. Her 1841 Christmas present to her husband was her masterpiece, recollections for piano of their year in Italy: *Die Jahr*, which should be in every self-respecting pianist’s repertoire. In 1846

she at last began to publish, writing defiantly to her brother: *If it succeeds – that is, if the pieces are well liked and I receive additional offers – I know it will be a great stimulus to me, something I've always needed in order to create.* Felix, no doubt prodded by his own wife, gracefully caved in. Her songs and piano works were successful; she wrote her Piano Trio: *I feel as if newly born.* But that was just about her last work; depression followed, not helped by distressing street riots in Berlin. On 14 May 1847 she collapsed rehearsing the Sunday concert, and died a few hours later. When he heard, Felix screamed and fell to the floor. The great Opus 80 F minor quartet (surely *his* masterpiece!), played by the Takács Quartet for OCMS last November, was an *in memoriam* for Fanny Hensel. He died in November, grieving, worn out.

Hensel's own string quartet was composed in 1834, at a time when, without stimulus, she felt nothing but stagnation. *Do set me something to compose!* was her cry to her brother. Replying to Mendelssohn's comments about the work she is very revealing: *I have thought about how I have adopted a tender-minded way of writing. I believe that it results from the fact that we were young precisely at the end of Beethoven's time, and willingly and deeply absorbed his way of doing things. It is altogether too moving and affecting. You have lived through it and progressed beyond it... I lack the strength to sustain my ideas properly and give them the necessary consistency. For this reason, I have my greatest success with songs, for which only a pretty inspiration without much tenacity is needed.*

I will make two comments about this piece: it is a fact that it is a work of four sonata-free miniatures; and, subjectively, that it is deeply personal. The first movement is built from the first two phrases we hear, the second sounding the tone of resignation: it is a closely woven fantasy, with the tonic E flat only asserting at the conclusion. The C minor scherzo's theme is based on Paganini's *Bell Rondo* from the Second Violin Concerto – the virtuosic trio, in the major, gusts semiquavers. The G minor *Romanze* is deeply agitated, despite its title; tensions are finally released in the almost *moto perpetuo* finale – but, I think, what tensions there were.

A postscript. If you want to read about the domestic life of 'those Prussians', go to the novels of Theodor Fontane: many are translated. And I can't resist the mistake perpetrated in Jiří Weil's *Mendelssohn on the Roof* when, asked to remove the statue of Mendelssohn from the Prague Academy of Music roof, a hapless SS officer chooses the composer with the biggest nose – Wagner! Art's ability to provide the cloud and the silver lining at the same time!

[Go back to concert details >>](#)