



Oxford Chamber Music Society

Endymion

24 February 2019

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Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART 1756-1791

Quintet for clarinet, two violins, viola and cello in A major, K581

1. *Allegro* 2. *Larghetto* 3. *Menuetto* 4. *Allegretto con variazioni*

On 12th July 1789 Mozart wrote to Michael Puchberg yet another begging letter, one of around twenty. Whatever the composer imagined, this Viennese mercantile Maecenas was little more than a nodding acquaintance, but – crucially – he was a ‘brother’ of the same masonic lodge. The tone is pitiable and desperate: *My God, I’m in a situation I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy, and if you, my dearest friend and brother, abandon me, I and my poor sick child will unfortunately be lost through no fault of mine... Please don’t take it amiss I’ve confided in you but bear in mind that without your support, the honour, peace of mind and perhaps even the life of your friend and brother will be destroyed ...* It is no exaggeration to say 1789 was indeed an *annus horribilis* for Mozart. In short, he had become unfashionable, and had lost sponsors and pupils; a concert tour to Dresden, Leipzig and Berlin had been a failure; as a composer he was reduced to humiliating hackwork. Furthermore, not only his child but his wife Constanze was sick and in the midst of a difficult pregnancy; her leg became ulcerated and in August she had to take expensive spa treatment. (The child, Anna Maria, the couple’s fifth, born on 16th November, was to survive only an hour). While she was away her husband passed highly convivial times with another freemason ‘brother’, one altogether more reckless than the altruistic Puchberg (who did respond positively). He was indeed a notorious and parasitic sponger, not least on Mozart, despite having an enviable income as a member of the court orchestra. His saving grace was he played the clarinet like an angel. Which is why Mozart wrote two masterpieces for him, today’s Quintet, completed late September 1789, and the

presciently valedictory Concerto, also in A major, completed in October 1791. This divine scrounger was Anton Stadler. He had already organised the premiere of the *Gran Partita* K361, and participated in the first performances of the Quintet for Piano and Winds K452 and, most recently, in August 1786, of the sublime Trio in E flat, known as the *Kegelstatt*. A contemporary wrote to Stadler of his playing: *I have never heard the like of what you contrive with your instrument. Never should I have thought that a clarinet could be so capable of imitating the human voice as deceptively as it was imitated by you.*

... dramatically dropping broken chords

The clarinet, very much an eighteenth-century invention, was still evolving, and for the next hundred years pioneering composers productively worked alongside innovative performers: Weber with Joseph Baermann, Spohr with Johann Hermstedt, and, as we shall soon hear, Brahms with Richard Mühlfeld. Stadler himself made technical adjustments. The most famous of these, accomplished in at least two stages, was to extend the lower compass of the instrument, the *chalumeau* register, by four semitones. The resulting variant was called the *basso clarinet*, not to be confused with the bass clarinet we know – soon invented by Adolphe Sax of saxophone fame. As it happened, the instrument was too awkward to play and disappeared (literally: no examples survive). But was Mozart's Quintet written for it? The Clarinet Concerto almost certainly was. We lack autographs, and when published after Mozart's death the parts of both works were transposed for the usual B flat instrument.

HC Robbins Landon, who knew a thing or two, writes thus in his *Mozart: The Golden Years*: *If there is one work that sums up this unhappy year, [the Quintet] must be it – parts of it seem to reflect a state of aching despair, but the whole is clothed not in some violent minor key, but in radiant A major. The music smiles through its tears ...* The strings initially have to coax the clarinet into displaying the range of its plumage – the wide-eyed salutation a fitting response to the solemn beauty of the first subject, with its companions then echoing and elaborating. There are two more themes in the exposition, the first launched by the violin, with pizzicato, the second shared by violin and clarinet. This exposition section ends with a little clarinet fanfare harking back to the opening, and is marked for repeat. In the short development the strings energetically elaborate that clarinet greeting, and one can easily imagine Stadler's pleasure as he dramatically dropped those broken chords, up and down his instrument's reach, to ripple the texture. The recapitulation is full but hardly literal, casting new lights and shadows on the music.

... a soaring clarinet mini-cadenza

The Larghetto has the simplest skeleton plan, but the music is some of the most beautiful Mozart composed. The cantilena lines invite us to hear something wordlessly operatic: aria – duet – aria – duet (plus a coda), with the clarinet singing

with muted strings, and then the solo violin. In the substantial third movement, the minuet itself has an almost symphonic character, and there are two trios – the first for the strings, very much inhabiting the minor key, the second a country dance, a *Ländler*, with the clarinet in charge. The last movement is topped and tailed by a jolly theme which could be a folksong, upon which Mozart builds five variations displaying a variety of moods, like thumbnails of operatic characters. The first features an exuberant clarinet with skips to the bottom notes, the second an impatient violin, the clarinet subdued. The third is a mournful viola song, with the clarinet still out of the limelight, gently supplying in its lowest register what would have been the viola part in the accompaniment; but in the fourth it's back with a vengeance, vying with the first violin for cock of the walk. A rather melancholy scene seems to be conjured in the last variation, replete with pauses, sighs and a soaring clarinet mini-cadenza. The theme returns to be celebrated in a coda.

A postscript. In that dreadful year, 1789, Mozart was granted at least one prestigious appearance, on the 22nd December at the Vienna Court Theatre, for the premier of the Quintet. But it was a widows and orphans charity concert, and he took away not one groschen.

Bohuslav MARTINŮ 1890-1959

Three Madrigals for violin and viola

1. *Poco allegro – Poco vivo*
2. *Poco andante – Andante moderato*
3. *Allegro – Moderato – Tempo 1 – Allegro*

Martinů took on the mantle of Janáček as the greatest Czech composer of the last century, and with it the deeply human, life-enhancing qualities which one finds constantly in Czech music, literature and film. This was due to his ability to forge a style which meshed his deep Bohemian roots with a vital and uninhibited internationalism, one of immense flexibility and communicative powers, often with the very simplest means. Although at the heart of his music is a deeply-mined sense of affirmation, he was capable of expressing human tragedy within our culture as only East Europeans can: the Fifth String Quartet and the Double Concerto for Strings, Piano and Timpani (both from the fateful year of 1938) spring immediately to mind; while for the eight minutes of the *Memorial to Lidice* (1943) most other twentieth century music seems irrelevant. Of course, I have to go through the routine of agreeing he notoriously wrote a lot of music, and one must sort the wheat from the chaff – but across the orchestral works, stage music, choral music, instrumental and chamber compositions – all genres – there is mostly wheat, and in ripe abundance. To just call him 'eclectic' or 'neo-classical' is indefensible critical laziness. I can think of no other twentieth century composer with such a capacity for renewal and surprise; today's piece surely gives a sense of this.

... both instruments achieving limit-stretching sonorities

Martinů's interest in the English and then the Italian madrigal (performance of such music was rare in the 1920s and 30s) came to fruition in a series of four instrumental 'Madrigal' works (the third an intriguing collaboration with Albert Einstein as amateur violinist!), composed over about ten years, and concluding with today's piece. What intrigued him particularly were the independent lives of the constituent vocal lines he found in these early vocal pieces. In 1940, having been resident in Paris, he fled to the States via Lisbon; let us say he survived, in some measure thanks to commissions for five symphonies, in which he perfected his distinctively luminous orchestration. A fall from a roof at Tanglewood in 1946 laid him low for well over a year, possibly saving him from his contemplated return to Czechoslovakia. Here the Communist seizure of power in 1948 would have undoubtedly stifled his free spirit and with it the rich late flowering of his music. Nevertheless, the regime, which he despised, hypocritically tried to claim him with performances and the issuing of still indispensable state-sponsored recordings (and, I think, even postage stamps).

Anyway, with the *Three Madrigals*, along with the more substantial but closely related Sixth Quartet, Martinů celebrated his restoration to health. The former came about through his acquaintance with the sibling violin and viola duo, Joseph and Lilian Fuchs, who wanted a companion piece to play with the two great Mozart Violin and Viola Duos. And thus it happened, for the first time in New York on 22 December 1947. The chatterbox, catch-as-catch-can repartee achieves a positively jubilant level of virtuosity in the outer movements, with both instruments achieving limit-stretching sonorities, playfully contrasting the luxuriantly imposing and spikily teasing. In the Poco andante the strings, muted, offer opening tremolos which leads us into a mysterious world, where at one point we seem to have a folk song played on a wide violin tremolo with strummed viola chords, followed by rivulets of demisemiquavers. In the movement's closing pages the music reaches out to its composer's native land, to which he was never to return. Martinů ended his days in Switzerland.

Johannes BRAHMS 1833-1897

Quintet for clarinet, two violins, viola and cello in B minor, Opus 115

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1. *Allegro*
 2. *Adagio*
 3. *Andantino – Presto non assai, ma con sentimento*
 4. *Con moto*

By the time of his fifty-eighth birthday, having just completed his G major String Quintet Op 111, Brahms made it quite clear he was retiring from composition: *I have worked enough; now let the young folks take over*. What's more he set about putting his affairs in order in such a business-like manner we can only surmise a rapid transit

to the Hereafter was expected. But as Robbie Burns didn't really say, *the best laid plans etc.*, and when he took a journey to Meiningen in March (we are talking about 1891), his renewed encounter with the clarinet playing of Richard Mühlfeld caused an abrupt halt to his composition-free fantasies. The Meiningen Court Orchestra, under the directorship of Brahms' friend Hans von Bülow, was then one of the finest in Germany, and thus boasted some of the finest musicians; the composer had probably first heard Mühlfeld when he had attended the premiere of the Fourth Symphony back in 1885. He was now so taken with the clarinetist's artistry he spent hours in his company, listening and learning. He wrote to Clara Schumann: *You have never heard a clarinet player like the one in this place. He is absolutely the best I know of.* Brahms called Mühlfeld *Fräulein Klarinette* (!) and the *Nightingale of the Orchestra*. We have no recordings, but Clara later observed that his tone was *at once delicate, warm and unaffected*. During that summer in the Upper Austrian spa town of Bad Ischl, a favourite Salzkammergut retreat, he composed not only this quintet, but the A minor Clarinet Trio – he seemed to take the latter more seriously, describing the quintet as *a far greater piece of foolishness*. Two Clarinet Sonatas (and their viola versions – there is also a viola version of the trio, but it is seldom played) followed in 1894; so, enchantment with Mühlfeld's musicianship not only kick-started Brahms into composing again, but gave the world four late masterpieces and a lifetime of nourishing challenge to all clarinetists. The first public performance of the quintet and trio together was in Berlin in December the same year, 1891, and was a true gathering of friends – the Joachim Quartet, Mühlfeld and Brahms himself on the piano.

... the loneliest arpeggio in music

The Clarinet Quintet is a work which moves towards not some kind of climactic resolution but quietly back to its beginning; and the opening theme is rich enough to fertilise material in every movement, as well as avoiding direct quotation. This has to do not only with structural unity but with maintaining a certain emotional climate in the work, one which has been repeatedly called 'autumnal', just as the Trio has been described as 'wintry'. Another and connected constant is the movement from major to minor tonality. At the very opening, with the strings and then the clarinet, we are not sure whether we are in the tonic B minor or, if we are to believe the clarinet's splash-of-light arpeggio, in the relative D major. The theme itself is of the type Brahms called *Unscheinbarket* ('unobtrusive'), lacking an imposing profile, seeping or insinuating itself into the music rather than imposing on it. The next landmark *is* imposing, a transitional building-block passage with arpeggios and roulades. The second subject proper, an offspring of the opening, is heard on the clarinet, but all leads to an increasingly subdued transition to a repeat of the exposition or the development. This part of the movement is remarkable! It begins a mood of profound contemplation, but is stirred into agitation; then the earlier transitional music is transformed into something like a chorale, very slow, as if daring something to disturb its fragile rapture. The major to minor clarinet and cello descent to the recapitulation must be the loneliest arpeggio in music. As usual Brahms does not just repeat the exposition – he offers further development, not only of the musical

substance but the ambiguity of mood. What seems like a traditional ending is hurriedly dampened down, like a collapse of the sun into autumn twilight.

... amidst swirls of throbbing musical mist

In the Adagio the strings are muted (as in the Mozart Quintet). We hear a sustained sometimes nigh on static song of winsome beauty, almost a gentle apotheosis of romantic nostalgia. The music darkens and slips a semitone to B minor, as the clarinet plays a mini-cadenza underpinning the constant shadowy presence of the opening theme of the whole work, and then launches a fantasy *à l'hongroise*, evoking the old gypsy cimbalom and fiddle music Brahms fell in love with in his youth, when he toured with the showman violinist Ede Reményi. It is one of the most incredible passages in the whole of his music, with the clarinetist seeming to improvise a different world of sound (of course no such levity is offered!) amidst swirls of throbbing musical mist. Yet, for all its passion, the pull of B minor gives this music, like the Adagio, which quietly returns to enfold it, a sense of farewell.

(Apparently Mühlfeld in this central section substituted his clarinet in A for the B flat). In the short third movement a little sunshine breaks through. It is a kind of vestigial scherzo, in two parts and a coda. The Andantino, in D major but with two B minor cadences, is a good-natured, flexible theme, which furnishes the material for the jolly (but B minor!) Presto. This, if you listen, is a perfect mini-sonata structure (second subject: clarinet and pizzicato), with animating splashes of colour, again in Hungarian style. The coda is only a smile at the old tripartite structure we surely expected. Brahms was a master of the variation form, and, again echoing Mozart's Quintet, returns to it for his finale. The theme itself, for all the chromaticism and tonal ambiguities, manages to retain the directness of a folk-song. There are five variations, each of thirty-two bars, the final sixteen repeating the first. The opening variation spotlights the cello; the second tautly presents the unconstrained drama the gypsy music of the second movement failed to realise, while the third divertingly fragments the always transforming melody. The fourth variation concludes, in restrained contrapuntal mode, the shift from B minor to – yes – D major. The sequence ends with a waltz: clarinet, viola pizzicato. The coda, still blurring major and minor, is a fragmented halting half-light journey explicitly recalling the work's opening, with the clarinet announcing the dying fall to B minor.

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