



Oxford Chamber Music Society

## Takács String Quartet

11 November 2019

Edward Dusinberre and Harumi Rhodes, violins  
Geraldine Walther, viola  
András Fejér, cello

### Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART 1756-1791 String Quartet no 14 in G major, K387

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1. *Allegro vivace assai* 2. *Menuetto: Allegro* 3. *Andante cantabile* 4. *Molto allegro*

This is the first – last month we had the last – of the six great quartets Mozart wrote in Vienna between autumn 1783 (our quartet is dated in the composer's own catalogue 1st December) and January 1785. Up to that point this new genre, nurtured from infancy by Joseph Haydn for all but three decades, had roused only modest interest on his part; but in 1782, hatched in the lonely palace at Eszterháza and demonstrating *a special and completely new manner*, the publication of Haydn's Opus 33 Quartets changed everything for both composers. By September 1785 Mozart had given six new masterpieces to an ungracious world, dedicated to the master who had inspired them: ... *Here then, great man and my dearest friend, are my six children ... the fruit of a long and difficult labour*. In turn, Haydn enthused two years later ... *of the inimitable art of Mozart, its depth, the greatness of its emotion, and its unique musical conception*. And he also famously wrote to Mozart's father, Leopold: *Before God and as an honest man, I tell you your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name ...* This mutual relationship, personal and creative, had incalculable significance for the history of the string quartet. It came to be understood – even by Tin-Ears von Goethe – not only as a jewel of Enlightenment idealism, representing the exchange of the sense and sensibility of civilised conversation, but also and until this day as a natural repository for deep and intimate thought and feeling, apparent not least in the two works which continue our concert.

### ***... this fantastic keep-us-guessing movement***

The opening theme is possessed by a chromatic restlessness, which roams and expands; the jaunty angularity of the second subject, emphasised in its forceful repeat, is much more grounded and makes for the strongest contrast. A delightful skip-along few bars extends the exposition (which you may hear again) through more chromaticism to the cheery wag of a curious staccato-and-trill tail, the maverick player in this fantastic keep-us-guessing movement. In the development we are confronted immediately by instability of the first subject, finding release in tense dramatic scales which dampen for a kind of fantasia on that staccato-and trill – which, yes, also has the last word. The Minuet here comes second, and it's substantial. Mozart (possibly thinking of Haydn's own twinkle-in-the-eye) makes the triple metre lurch and balloon when he isn't playing it straight – anyway, it's all certainly a good wig-shaking caper. But the minor-key trio is ambivalent: it opens on such a stern note we might be bewildered: isn't this meant to be comedy? Gentler music pleads, and this dialogue continues without resolution – it could go on for eternity! Is this intended as humour, or something darker?

### ***... soaring like a lark is a blithe tune***

Anticipating what quickly became, as I have said, an intrinsic possession of the string quartet, it might be felt that in the Andante cantabile (in C major, the sub-dominant key of G major), Mozart is in the process of revealing his innermost self. This is sometimes rapt music, a song of blessings as well as burdens, with an almost mystical stillness at its heart. With the first violin and cello generating most of the material this is a movement where harmony and texture create music of enriching and exquisite beauty, but with a restless chromatic undertow. This is followed by another miracle, a finale which in its contrapuntal mastery anticipates the equivalent movement of the *Jupiter* Symphony by six years. The second violin announces the rising four-note motif which is the first subject of what is a sonata movement, however unconventional. As we are in for a fugal time we also have a scurrying counter-subject. The counterpoint subsides for a lightning interlude, then the cello digs in with dotted syncopation and a double fugato structure is piled up with breath-taking aplomb. Then – with nothing of the fugue about it – soaring like a lark is a blithe tune (the second sonata subject!) which personifies just sheer delight. There is a marked repeat of what we have just heard. The development is very short, but gave its composer great difficulty: there were at least four discarded attempts. The recapitulation is significantly, exhilaratingly, changed, and there is a coda with memories of the opening four-note theme. Mozart is waving to Haydn at the surprise conclusion, and I feel Beethoven is waving back at both of them. Genius, and nothing but.

## Dmitri SHOSTAKOVICH 1906-1975

### String Quartet no 4 in D major, opus 83

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1. *Andante* 2. *Andantino* 3. *Allegretto* – 4. *Allegretto*

This work was composed between April and December 1949, at one of the darkest times in Shostakovich's life. Having been lauded as a great patriot for his *Leningrad* Symphony in 1942, those who needed to be were shocked by his uncompromisingly grim Eighth Symphony two years later. In 1945 there was even greater shock. Stalin wanted and expected glorification as the Great Victor, but in the Ninth Symphony there was no new 'Ode to Joy', as expected, but high cheek with a very rude bassoon. Revenge was served cold in 1948, when it was the composers turn (Prokofiev, Myaskovsky, Khachaturian... they were all there as well as Shostakovich) to be arraigned for their pro-western 'formalism' and music 'against the people'. These new purges were directed also at writers, film-makers, scientists, economists... anyone who could have a critical brain. The plan, to be fair to the Man of Steel, was mental humiliation and disgrace rather than physical execution (think of the Joseph McCarthy paranoia machine in the US, 1950-54). Shostakovich's music was partially banned, and he lost his professorships at the St Petersburg and Moscow Conservatoires; his scores were not pulped or recordings destroyed, as some requested. However, his political nous and instinct for survival immediately kicked in: there were musical ways to rehabilitation, as his limitless facility enabled him to write music with all the ingredients of tunefulness and optimism to fulfil the aesthetic of *narodnost*, for the people. So, for an epic tree-planting programme (The Great Stalinist Plan for Remaking Nature) he composed a suitably fulsome cantata, *The Song of the Forests*, which duly won him a Stalin Prize and a very necessary bag of roubles – he could feed his family again. As a musical propagandist nobody could dress up the favoured rhetoric better than Dmitri Dmitrievich (and Stalin knew it very well), and so he dutifully added two film scores to the already long list. Just as well this worked, for another strategy would have led to further trouble. Using folk idioms was fine, but he chose the wrong folk music...

**... it is almost laughter through tears**

Four years earlier Shostakovich had developed an interest in Jewish music through orchestrating the one-act Chekhov opera *Rothschild's Violin* by his pupil Veniamin Fleischmann, who had fallen in defence of Leningrad. *It is almost laughter through tears. This quality of Jewish music is close to my idea of what music should be. There should always be two layers in music. Jews were tormented for so long that they learned to hide their despair. They express despair in dance music.* The indelibly powerful finale of the Piano Trio of 1944 was the result. But from 1948 the wind changed, and increasingly anti-Semitism again reared its head in Russia, a traditional hotbed, finally – with orchestrated paranoia – becoming government policy. The Violin Concerto, composed July 1947 – August 1948, with its extraordinary klezmer-inspired Scherzo, today's quartet, and the moving but

bifurcated song-cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry* (autumn 1948) became works for the drawer, *the genre of silence*, as Isaac Babel (shot in 1940 on trumped-up charges) called it. *Not one of these works could be performed then. They were only heard after Stalin's death. I still can't get used to it.* The Fourth String Quartet saw the light publicly on 1 November 1953.

### **... *perverted magnificence and grotesque dissonance***

Compared with the Second and Third, the Fourth Quartet is modest in scale and intent, Haydn-length and elusive; it was dear to Soviet audiences: we might ask *Why?* It opens with the two violins weaving a kind of folksy bagpipe theme, innocently pastoral but tonally wandering – all against a sustained D pedal on viola and cello. But here's the fortissimo climax of the movement already, after only thirty bars, the full massed bagpipe chorale, perverted magnificence and grotesque dissonance all in one! What is going on here? What *is* certain is that the movement has now nowhere to go but a merciful ending. The pulse and the key changes to a 3/4 and dark B minor for a vestigial second theme, and – subdued and listless – the two violins revisit the opening music, but now in D minor and over an E drone. An unexpected hymn-like motif might have been an attempt to shift the music's course, but just gives way for the last few weary bars to the supertonic D, not sounding remotely *super*. After the ambiguities of the first movement the Andantino at first seems to presage stability, but soon is hovering on the brink of collapse from its own sorrow. It is in F minor, and says so again on the long-delayed entry of the cello. A cantilena is sung by the first violin, with a slow rocking (or ticking) accompaniment on the second fiddle and viola. When the cello enters it is with a strongly related darker melody, through which the first violin, as well-honed as an execution sword, slowly ascends vertiginously: those of you in-the-know will surely be thinking of the First Violin Concerto. The cantilena is gently played again, and there is a slip into a nostalgic coda, replete with that 'hymn' from the first movement, now in the depths of anguish – all muted.

### **... *whipped along with manic pizzicatos***

The movement which follows has all the appearance of a short scherzo, a *scherzetto*, but the outer sections - again with mutes – seem shadowlike and furtive. A fleet, agitated C minor staccato theme starting in the lower reaches of the cello is contrasted with a hushed legato 'folksong' played in three octaves. The lightning 'trio', though, is lit up by A major: here's a bounding fiddler showing off his ricochets and striking up a jolly tune, with klezmer oompahs and flattened harmonies whipped along by manic pizzicatos; a brief escape from shadowland. There is a recall of the three thematic strands, finally leading us into a coda dominated by a folksy lament on the viola punctuated by melancholic knees-bend pizzicatos. Then – the oompahs kick in, and the fourth movement proper begins; at around ten minutes it is substantially the longest in the work. There are two interconnected themes, again carrying the feeling of klezmer music. Following the path of a sonata movement they are developed, but to a horrifying climax of dance and tears. We might be

reminded of a passage in the aforementioned finale of the Piano Trio: the death camp dance. The recapitulation begins with a brutalised grinding of the linking viola theme, echoing the cynical bagpipe chorus in the first movement. This is resolutely countered by the cello playing the first dance subject – and I mean *resolutely!* The music should be now on a determined track for the home key, but despite the first violin's protest drifts into F sharp minor, and there is instead an ebbing away of all energy. We hear the 'hymn' from the first movement, and – marked with ticking pizzicatos – the long-absent D major is reached three bars from the end, and one would hardly know.

## **Felix MENDELSSOHN (- BARTHOLDY) 1809-1847**

### **String Quartet no 6 in F minor, opus 80**

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1. *Allegro vivace assai* 2. *Allegro assai* 3. *Adagio* 4. *Finale: Allegro molto*

By 1847 Mendelssohn was tired and ill; he had worn himself out as a performer and musical administrator, and now let it be known he wanted time for more composition. Perhaps he sensed what has been said through the decades (sometimes cruelly), and can still be heard: he had not fulfilled the early promise of the Octet or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture. But as a counter to the charge that his music was too comfortable in comfortable times we must turn to today's work, with the sense of discovery so startlingly fresh in those teenage masterpieces turned into absolute mature mastery. But the circumstances of the F minor Quartet's creation were all too tragic, almost Faustian. This OCMS season, on 27<sup>th</sup> January, will give an opportunity to hear his older sister Fanny's own string quartet, and I will say more about her then. Suffice they were very close, being both possessed of prodigious musical talent. On 14<sup>th</sup> May 1847 Fanny Hensel, as she became, collapsed during a rehearsal for one of her Berlin *Sonntagsmusiken*, and died that evening. Felix, when told of the news, screamed and fainted. He was inconsolable, even unable to attend the funeral. His wife Cécile, also close to Fanny, took him to Switzerland to recuperate. From this came the quartet, completed in Berlin in September. Back at home in Leipzig Mendelssohn, who by then existed in a mood he called *grey on grey*, died of a stroke on 4<sup>th</sup> November.

#### ***... strange chromatic palpitating harmonies***

The terse eight bar theme which opens the work trembles in its haste; it is forcefully continued by a variation of itself, gentler on its return. Whither now? The music nervously goes in pursuit of the second subject: listen for the gentler descending string patterns, and we are there. There are strange chromatic palpitating harmonies, like struggles for breath, which draw the exposition to a close on a note of (recollected?) tenderness. The beginning of the development has an almost

dislocating effect, and the opening theme shifts and shapes itself to overwhelm the oppressively compressed F minor space with Mendelssohn's anguish. We find ourselves in the recapitulation, with the start of the gentler variant of the opening theme. But *that* baleful music blows in again and throws everything into an angry concentrated coda ending with stern F minor chords – and that is also the key of the second movement. This – you have guessed – is not one of Mendelssohn's faerie scherzos. Rather something bitter and sardonic, with syncopation, dislocation, dissonance, and a trio with a 'kind of' passacaglia in octaves from viola and cello, forming the bass for a 'kind of' waltz for the two violins. The trio returns as a coda, like ghosts furtively slipping away.

**... *dissonant shrieks without precedent***

For the Adagio the key changes to A flat major. A sinking bass line and then something like a sigh begins a song which one feels must be built of memories of Fanny (including the 'sigh?'), with whom he composed many a *Song without words*. It is varied once, but in its third appearance darkens, and harsh dotted rhythms drive on fatefully to a despondent climax. There is music very much lost in its own thoughts before the song returns for a quiet ending. The finale is a tour de force of concentrated emotion trapped again in that F minor prison – Mendelssohn's greatest compositional achievement? The turbulent, syncopated first theme seems to be subject to the then familiar galvanic shocks, the second keening lamentation which telescopes regardless into the development. Here the 'shocks' become dissonant shrieks without precedent in chamber music; the second theme all but disintegrates. In the very free recapitulation the extraordinary first violin *concertante* writing screws the tension to breaking point.

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