

Josef Haydn (1732-1809) String Quartet in G Op 77 no 1 Hbk. III:81 (1799)

Allegro moderato

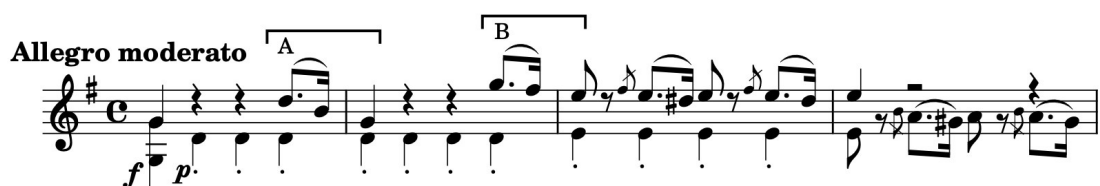
Adagio

Menuet & Trio: Presto

Finale: Presto

Prince Razumowsky's sister-in-law Lulu had this to say of Josef, the 7th Prince Lobkowitz: *"This Prince was as kindhearted as a child and the most foolish music enthusiast. He played music from dusk to dawn and spent a fortune on musicians. Innumerable musicians gathered in his house, whom he treated regally."* Pity we don't get many like that these days. We have Lobkowitz to thank for commissioning six string quartets from Haydn. However, the ageing composer, pre-occupied with writing *The Seasons*, completed only two of the six. These two Op 77 quartets are a worthy climax to Haydn's quartet writing. The first, which we hear tonight, is triumphantly in the tradition of 'first violin' quartets, whereas the second has in Rosemary Hughes' words: 'that pure, linear string-quartet writing in which each instrument brings its strand of melody, clear and distinct, to the texture of the whole'.

The first movement inspires the informal, and perhaps not PC, nickname '*The Policeman*' with its plod-ish opening accompaniment, and the simple "Evening all" dotted remark from the first violin, dutifully echoed by the second (*illustrated*). The first two descending



dotted phrases in the first violin (A & B) provide melodic material in the subsequent movements. Contrasting with the plods and the dots are a flamboyant triplet figure initially exchanged between the two violins and a soaring melody for the first before it shows off with the triplets supported by the second. This varied material is magnificently developed by Haydn giving everyone bites at the numerous cherries.

The following *Adagio* is to my (admittedly first violin) ear one of Haydn's most memorable. Its key is unusual: Eb from the first movement's G. It takes many of its melodic and rhythmic elements from the first movement, as in the descending figures A & B in the opening phrase (*illustrated*), but it gives them altogether more seriousness and intensity.



Don't try to dance a *Minuet* to the next movement – it is very fast. The first violin scampers up to top D before plunging *forte assai* (very loud) into a possibly even faster Trio, with the lower strings keeping up using a faster version of their opening accompanying plods. Not to be outdone the *Finale* is again *Presto* with the first violin showing what it is capable of with dazzling semiquaver passages and the others encouraging with more modest means.

Bela Bartók (1881-1945) String Quartet No. 3, Sz. 85 (1927)

Prima parte – Moderato (4min)

Seconda parte – Allegro (6min)

Ricapulazione della prima parte – Moderato (3min)

Coda – Allegro molto (2min)

Bartók's third and fourth quartets were written within a year of each other, fully ten years after his second quartet. In July 1927 Bartók heard Alban Berg's Lyric Suite for string quartet at a concert in Germany. According to Stephen Walsh in his *BBC guide to Bartók's Chamber Music*, this was the likely stimulus for Bartók returning to quartet writing. Berg had incorporated Schoenberg's atonality into a wide range of techniques, producing extreme contrasts of mood, texture and tempo, whilst still aiming for the traditional virtue of beauty of sound. Bartók married Berg's eclectic approach to his own enthusiasm for Hungarian folk-music, with its powerful rhythms and harsh, dissonant sounds. He did this within that most refined and intellectual of musical forms – the string quartet. Not surprisingly, Berg is said to have found the harsh energy of Bartók's fourth quartet 'too cacophonous'. Bartók's third and fourth quartets are a richly complex, exciting and sometimes bewildering marriage of the composer's passionate appreciation of Hungarian folk-music with the intellectual rigour of classical musical forms and of recent atonal innovations.

The third quartet has four sections which are played continuously for its 15 or so minutes duration. They alternate slow and fast ABAB with the shorter second two sections referring back to the longer initial two. A & B differ not only in speed: the mood of the slow is 'static and introverted, the other highly mobile and demonstrative' (Stephen Walsh). Throughout the quartet the style of writing is based on brief, almost cramped, melodic material which Bartók extends by, for example, repetition and variation across the different instruments. The music however has immense contrasts. For instance, after the subdued opening builds to three sustained fortissimo chords, the ensuing silence is followed by a sinister scurrying played *sul ponticello* (on the bridge) by the two violins over *pianissimo* alternating fourths and seconds (important intervals in the piece) on the viola and cello. This passage provides some of the thematic material for the fast second section.

The second section starts with a long held muted D on the second violin; rapid 4-note upward interjections lead to the dance tune (*illustrated*) which is elaborated with powerful and complex rhythms and cross-rhythms which carry the music forward.



This tune also links to a subsequent ingenious fugue (*illustrated*) that Stephen Walsh considers the best piece of fugal writing for string quartet since Beethoven's



Op.131. The pace quickens and eventually things fall apart with a series of sliding *glissandi* across all four instruments. This heralds the transition, over a long held cello note, into the third section.

The brief recapitulation regains the calmer more introspective mood of the first section. Its material appears in altered form, as if refracted through the turbulence of the intervening music. The final Coda section starts with fast *sul ponticello* semiquavers; the cello plays a rising-falling motif similar to the fugue subject above and the other instruments follow

rapidly a few semiquavers behind. The dance theme reappears and things get wild, breaking apart again with huge glissandi and a sudden and rhythmically unexpected end.

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) String Quartet in D minor, D.810 (Death and the Maiden) (1824)

Allegro

Andante con moto

Scherzo: Allegro molto

Presto

At the age of eight, Schubert started to learn the violin from his father; six years later he was composing for the family string quartet: brothers Ignaz and Ferdinand on violin, Franz on viola and his father on cello. However, the eleven or so quartets that Schubert wrote between the ages of 14 and 20 are now, like Mozart's early quartets, rarely played. The exuberant "Trout" piano quintet of 1819 and the surviving first movement of a C minor quartet ("Quartettsatz") written in 1820 set the scene for the great chamber works of his later years: in 1824 the Octet, the A minor "Rosamunde" quartet and today's D minor "Death and the Maiden"; in 1826 the G major quartet; in 1827 his two piano trios; and in his last year, 1828, the incomparable C major two-cello quintet.

The opening four bars of the D minor quartet (*illustrated*) set it in a different world from the understated charms of the "Rosamunde" quartet.

The hammered out fortissimo triplet figure demands our serious attention, but is immediately transformed into an almost apologetically tender *pianissimo* phrase (*illustrated*). After a pause, the tension mounts, driven by the triplets, to a

reinforced version of the opening. This emotional roller-coaster continues throughout the movement. The triplets sometimes give way to the

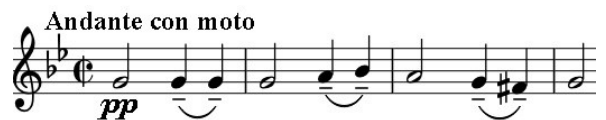
dotted rhythm of a yearning tune that Jack Westrup attributes to Schubert's admiration for Rossini; this theme in turn gets transformed into more serious matter against running semiquavers.

The emotional intensity and tightness of construction of the movement recall the later Beethoven but it was written the year before the first of Beethoven's late quartets. The repeated notes of the opening bars and their rhythm are echoed in the themes of the other three movements.

The theme for the variations of the G minor *Andante* comes from Death's contribution to a short Schubert song of 1817, inviting a terrified young girl to sleep safely in his arms. The quartet version is altogether lighter: a fourth higher, more transparently scored and *con moto*. Resignation

has replaced the sinister threat of the song. The calm of the first two variations is shattered by the brutal dactyls (–vv) of the third, a more rapid version of the rhythm of the theme; calm returns only to be broken again by the long crescendo of the repeat of the fifth variation to yet more terrifying dactyls. The terror subsides to a serene end and a Schubert hallmark switch from minor to major.

The fiercely syncopated energy of the *Scherzo* and its tranquil *Trio*, lead to the tarantella-form finale. The tarantella folk-dance hails from Taranto in southern Italy: a courting couple dance encircled by others as the music gets faster and faster. Taranto independently gave its name to the tarantula spider, the effects of whose allegedly serious



bite could, it was thought, be ameliorated by wild dancing. Pepys records tales of itinerant fiddlers cashing in on this belief especially during the harvest when bites were more frequent. It is quite possible that Schubert intends the allusion to cheating death, but either way this energetic dance with its *prestissimo* ending provides a rousing climax to the quartet.