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THE SCOTTISH PIANO QUARTET

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BRAHMS 1833-97

Pianoforte Quartet in C minor, opus 60

Allegro non troppo

Allegro

Andante

Allegro comodo

Partly originating from 1855, this quartet was published in 1875. Such an interval in time must pose very special problems for the composer who, having left a work unfinished and gone on to complete several others, comes back to his earlier opus. The emotional stimuli are almost certain to be different, yet some remarkable joins have been effected over a distance. Mendelssohn's overture to his *Midsummer Night's Dream* music, and the second and third movements of Schumann's piano concerto are cases in point. This quartet was at first the outcome of the period in Brahms' life when Schumann's mental illness weighed so heavily upon him. How difficult it must have been for the composer to achieve unity of aim in returning to the inspiration of those dark days one can only guess. There are even signs that Brahms might have returned to it yet again, for while a first movement in C minor and a slow movement in E major make a striking but hardly novel pairing of keys, the fact of placing the slow movement third makes for a difficult moment of tonality between the serene *Andante* and the start of the *Finale*. If Brahms had completed the work in 1855 this problem would not have arisen, for he originally cast it in C sharp minor, and the composition of the first movement is the subject of some interesting correspondence with Joachim concerning details.

Variation plays a notable role in the first movement of this quartet, bringing with it a good deal of symmetry in lengths of phrases, particularly when the second subject makes its appearance. But it is not so perverse as it might seem, to comment upon a movement from the middle outwards, for it is during these repetitions of the second subject that a rhythmic figure springs up in the upper strings which sustains the movement. Rhythmic life is the counter-balance to Brahms' resources of tragic or noble melody; in fact one might note the advance in this movement upon its near contemporary, the first movement of the F minor piano sonata, opus 5, where the absence of such an idea allows the movement to become clogged with melody and highly-charged dramatic strokes. The middle section of the quartet's first *Allegro* also contains a vital twenty-three bars which lead us back to the opening music, and in this passage the rhythmic idea is varied as a pedal-point for the

lowest register of the piano. Its final recurrence in the *Recapitulation* is no automatic repetition; from it springs a powerful further development of the first subject extending the scope of the movement before its ending.

How differently the composers of various times have used the idea of sustained quick notes in an extended movement. Mozart sometimes writes it into the texture of his more brilliant finales, for example the A major violin sonata K.526 and the last of the Prussian quartets. Dvorák, as we shall hear later, conjures up some astonishing combinations of rhythms to provide a perpetually moving background. But Brahms has an altogether more serious purpose behind his essays in an unflagging 6/8. Breaking it only for a brief and nervous second subject, the composer maintains this *Scherzo* in name only right through the part of the movement where we should expect a Trio. A third subject does duty for it, admittedly marked *poco tranquillo*, but the quaver movement still pervades the uneasy truce until the slower tempo is thrown off for a long return, of great climactic power, to the opening music.

The signs of future mastery were apparent to Marxsen, the teacher of Brahms' earliest years, in Hamburg. But he could never have suspected the young composer of twenty-two capable of a slow movement displaying such finesse and control. No doubt the mature composer revised it for publication, but the falling thirds of the melody have the hallmark of the early years about them; this theme resembles, yet completely transcends, that of the slow movement of the opus 5 piano sonata. The work closes with a less subtle movement, but its chorale second subject, mercifully curtailed at its third appearance, gives place to a serene and harmonically rewarding final paragraph.

C.K.

FRANK SPEDDING b.1929

Piano Quartet (in one movement)

Frank Spedding's Piano Quartet, the first of his works which he acknowledges, was written in 1951 when he was a student at the Royal College of Music, London, where it won the Cobbett Chamber Music Prize in that year. At that time, it was a condition of entry to the competition that any work submitted must include the word *phantasy* in its title. The composer complied with this demand by originally calling the piece *Phantasy-Quartet*, though there was no conscious pursuit of *fantasy* (or indeed *phantasy*) in the writing of the work, either in the conventional sense of the word or in any allusion

to its use in early English instrumental music: and so the present title is perhaps more appropriate. The design of the quartet is that of a sort of extended sonata-form movement split up into three clearly identifiable sections (fast-slow-fast) flanked on each side by a slow, *maestoso*, introduction and a corresponding *maestoso* coda. Its idiom is emphatically romantic and the composer admits that Walton and Rawsthorne were potent influences at the time.

F.S.

INTERVAL

DVORAK 1841-1904

Piano Quartet in E flat, opus 87

Allegro con fuoco

Lento

Allegro moderato, grazioso

Allegro ma non troppo

If we recognise nationalism in the works of any particular composer there is usually a pattern of underlying reasons. He will belong to a country which has emerged late upon the musical scene; he will be a passionate patriot; and he will almost inevitably have been schooled in German compositional techniques relating to the instrumental sonata. This last factor offers a challenge; the opportunity to enrich the musical language with his own country's native music must be met primarily through these means. But the successful artist is the one who, under these conditions in the nineteenth century, has been able to project what is local into the sphere of what is universal (provided that one allows Europe to stand for the universe as far as music was concerned, and in 1889 when this quartet was composed, most Europeans were content to assume that it was so).

When Dvorák allows the accent to be thrown upon inventiveness, then the local idioms are not far to seek. When he mixes this profusion of melody with a subtlety of organisation such as is present in the first movement, such formal strength creates a nineteenth-century proposition: after a strenuously argued first movement, a generously melodic slow movement is now required. Dvorák would be the last to disappoint us here, and it is followed by a characteristic *scherzo* and *trio*, where the sounds of his country's musical life come so clearly through the classical design.

The strength of the first movement lies in the pair of ideas

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which open the movement, strings and piano answering each other until increasing momentum fuses the two in a proudly ringing statement of the primary idea, originally heard from the strings alone. There is a lyrical second subject, permitted to be just that and nothing more, which ends by giving way to a clarion call of four imperious notes, by now all that is necessary to remind the listener of the main business of the movement. As if this were not enough, we are further treated to a grand preparation for another statement of the first theme before the middle section of the movement gets under way. Taking a fairly obvious chromatic turning, a powerful development section leads us finally to the most personal section of a sonata-form movement. Here the composer reverses the usual order of events, in order to emphasise the home key of E flat. This he does by dissolving the familiar character of the First Subject into unfamiliar harmonies, then introducing his lyrical Second Subject, shyly at first in B major, then with a warmth of recognition for E flat major. With complete sureness of touch Dvorák turns his home key into a platform for the triumph of the structural theme from the opening. He subdues the grandeur of this return to strike a further vein of harmonic colour before his final flourish.

If the first movement could be said to spring from four notes, the *Finale* springs from a figure of five notes; but here no analysis is necessary. In a movement which moves along at an energetic pace from first to last, lyrical moments have their quick accompaniments; it is almost a *moto perpetuo*, in the sense that quick movement in some part of the texture is to be heard in literally almost every bar. Recognition was turning to fame for Dvorák by the late 1880's and the modesty which we know to have been characteristic of him is the quality which preserves this work in its original freshness. C.K.

Next concert : Thursday 19 October

THE EDINBURGH QUARTET
with

RONALD MORRISON baritone
COLIN KINGSLEY piano

IVES Quartet No. 2

LEON COATES Three Night Songs

BRITTEN Songs and Proverbs of William Blake

BARBER Dover Beach

WALTON Quartet