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THE EDINBURGH QUARTET

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MOZART 1756-91

Quartet in D major, K. 575

Allegretto
Andante
Menuetto: allegretto
Allegretto

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The intensity of the six quartets dedicated to Haydn has disappeared from these late works. Their very melos suggests an idiom less rhetorical, nearer to the musical common property of the age; both the first movement and the finale have themes derived from what Karl H Wörner calls an 'archetype', consisting of a rising triad and falling scale, and typified by the nursery rhyme 'Hopp, hopp, hopp, Pferdchen lauf Galopp', which lies behind many classical tunes, notably the last movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Somewhat less expected is the anticipation of Brahms' First Symphony in the slow movement.

The first movement of this quartet recalls Mozart's operatic activities of these years. The first violin sings an aria phrase; but already, at bar 7, the comic opera orchestra is interpolating decorative fragments before the cantilena is taken up by the viola. Such is the order of the day; lyrical phrases follow each other regularly, divided by ornamental interruptions or prolonged cadences while the singer gets her breath. Even the development section has a new lyrical tune.

The tender slow movement is in a simple song form. The minuet contains in its second section the effect of cross-rhythm which derived from the steps of the dance. Its trio was the King's big moment.

The finale is a sonata rondo, monothematic in that its first episode is a variant of its opening subject. The second episode is a true development; here, and again in the coda, the subject is played in canon, once by inversion. This is the only glance over the shoulder at the sterner world of the 'Haydn' quartets. R.M.

SEIBER 1905-60

String Quartet No. 3 (*Quartetto Lirico*)

Andante amabile
Allegretto scherzando e leggero
Lento espressivo

Seiber was one of the most distinguished of the group of expatriate Central European musicians who eventually settled in Britain (although he died in South Africa after a car accident). Hungarian-born, he was a pupil of Kodály and Hindemith, from whose example he was assisted in the development of his fluent technique, but whose aversion to serialism he could not have shared.

Indeed, despite the frequently Bartokian lay-out of string textures, this quartet, composed between 1948 and 1951 is, like his second quartet, based on dodecaphonic principles, although the use of recurring tonal centres and of traditional patterns both of rhythm and of phrasing cause the overall sound to be somewhat less radical than might otherwise be expected.

Geminal to all three movements is the opening melodic idea with its descending three-note scale followed in turn by a descending diminished fifth, a rising fourth and a descending tone (motif A). The other main motif of the first movement is a melodic sequence of rising thirds (initially on first violin and viola with close imitation on second violin and cello)—motif B. Features of the central section of this movement are a four part stretto at the unison in a rhythmically transformed version of motif A, a tranquil, simply accompanied version of the same idea in augmentation, and a cadenza for the first violin. Towards the end of this movement both main ideas recur in reverse order.

Another rhythmic transformation of motif A provides the initial idea of the effervescent scherzo, and the rising thirds of B can soon be heard also. The more pungent trio section has a Bartokian flavour. A *Prestissimo* coda uses a *fugato* of rapid semiquavers based on motif A *sul ponticello*.

The quiet lyrical beauty of the finale conceals the subtlety of the craftsmanship. The movement is based on further transformations of motif A with increasingly complex contrapuntal treatment culminating in a double canon based on motif A and its inversion. At the end of the movement the cello ruminates on the main idea, slowly savouring its various elements, finally indulging in numerous repeats of the falling tone as the music dies away.

L.C.

INTERVAL

SMETANA 1824-84

String Quartet No. 1 in E minor 'From my Life'

Allegro vivo appassionato
Allegro molto a la Polka
Largo sostenuto
Vivace

Smetana was a German speaking Czech, whose nationalism took so long to reach fruition, that he postponed learning his native tongue until he was well over thirty and instinctively gave German or French titles to all his earlier music. This quartet, however, is a late work, and was consequently given the title *Z mého života* (From my Life). Since it is a product of the composer's strongly nationalistic period, at a time when his cycle of symphonic poems *Ma vlast* (My Fatherland) remained incomplete, there is no justification for continuing to use the German translation of the title in Britain, and to do so betrays either ignorance or perversity.

Besides being that rare phenomenon, a programmatic chamber music composition, it is without question the first autobiographical string quartet. Smetana composed it at the end of 1876, when he had been totally deaf for two years, and he provided this detailed programme:

I. Love of art in my youth, my *romantic mood*, the unspoken longing for something which I could not name or imagine clearly, and also a warning as it were of my future misery and of the long note sounding in the finale arising from that beginning. It is the fatal high-pitched whistling in my ear which announced my deafness. Since it was so *fatal* to me this little freak made me suffer. (The first theme, a long viola solo, symbolized 'Fate's summons to take part in Life's combat', and the falling fifth with which it commences is the 'warning'. The second theme in G major represented 'affection for romance in music and love'.)

II. *Quasi Polka*, bringing reminders of the happy times of my youth when as a composer I strewed the young world with *dance pieces*, and was known everywhere as an enthusiastic dancer. In the Trio (*Meno vivo*, D flat major) I depicted in sound reminders of the aristocratic circles in which I lived for a long time. (The viola theme in the Polka reminded Smetana of a posthorn.)

III. Recalling the happiness of my first love for the girl who later became my faithful wife.

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IV. Knowledge of how to make use of the element of *national music*; joy at the outcome of following this path, until the ominous interruption and catastrophe, the *beginning of deafness*. A glance towards the sad future, followed by a brief sign of improvement; but a reminder from the very beginning of my love [of art] results finally in a sensation of *pain*.

From the above it will be seen that this work, based on classical lines, is also cyclic. The first movement's two themes are recalled in the coda of the finale, just after the onset of deafness has been suggested by the first violin's high harmonic E.

When the quartet was given its first run-through, the viola player was Dvorák, to whom it gave some ideas. The Bennewitz Quartet tried it out later, but complained of 'insuperable difficulties'. The first performance on 29 March 1879, at an *Umelecka beseda* (Artistic Circle) concert in Prague, was led by Ferdinand Heller, and watched through opera glasses from a half-concealed position by the composer. J.C.

Next concert: Thursday 17 January

CLIFFORD HUGHES *tenor*
MARGARET EVANS *piano*

PURCELL Four songs
BERNSTEIN Songs (including settings of three poems by Rilke)
BARBER
ARTHUR OLDHAM Five Chinese Lyrics
JOHN MCLEOD Wonders of the World (First performance)
