

THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH CONCERT SERIES AUTUMN · WINTER 2010

Concerts at The University

Tuesday 30 November 2010

1.10pm

Reid Concert Hall

The Edinburgh Quartet

Tristan Gurney · violin

Philip Burrin · violin

Michael Beeston · viola

Mark Bailey · cello

Programme of works by HAYDN and BRITTEN.



String Quartet in G, Op. 77 No. 1

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

- (i) Allegro moderato
- (ii) Adagio
- (iii) Menuetto - Presto
- (iv) Finale - Presto

In 1799 Haydn began the composition of six string quartets commissioned by Prince Lobkowitz, but failing strength and the demands made by writing 'The Seasons' meant that only two of the set were completed. Four years later another quartet, Opus 103 in D minor, was started but this time only the two middle movements were written. Thus the two quartets of Opus 77 were the last complete works in Haydn's vast output of 83 string quartets.

The Quartet in G opens with a jaunty theme whose dotted rhythm gives way to triplet figures before the first violin and cello begin a dialogue on the dotted rhythm. The second violin introduces a more lyrical subsidiary melody that is to play a part in the middle section, but to be omitted from the reprise. The middle section returns to the jaunty theme, the triplets and more dialogue between first violin and cello.

The slow movement is mono-thematic, opening with the four instruments stating the theme in unison octaves. The first movement's levity now gives way to deep solemnity. The broad theme is heard mainly in the first violin; the viola and cello clothed in deeply impressive dark colours and ever-shifting harmonies.

Although Haydn calls the third movement a minuet, its presto tempo and ferocity have more the character of a scherzo. There are wide leaps for the first violin from open strings to notes in the upper positions. The trio is cast in the slow movement's key of E flat and has excursions into the minor.

The final presto again opens with unison octaves. The first violin has a prominent role which does not, however, exclude interchange between the two violins and the lower voices, the latter however having significant passages of sustained notes played below the vitality and speed of the upper voices.

George C McVicar

String Quartet No.3, Op.94

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

- (i) Duets - with moderate movement
- (ii) Ostinato - very fast;
- (iii) Solo - very calm;
- (iv) Burlesque - Fast - con fuoco;
- (v) Recitative and Passacaglia (La Serenissima)

Completed in the autumn of 1975, the Third Quartet was one of Britten's last works. It was composed for the Amadeus Quartet - one of the finest ensembles of the time - and was first performed by them on December 19th, 1976 at The Maltings, Snape. The Quartet is dedicated to Hans Keller, the Austrian born critic and composer, who, in his regular broadcasts for the BBC, became a major influence in music in Britain in the 1960s and 70s, with his promotion of the second Viennese school and the Schenkerian method of analysis. The concept of displacement, or duality, which links Keller to the members of the Quartet, is an important element in this composition. Each of the five movements carries a double reference at its head, a title and an indication of musical form. This is entirely characteristic of Britten in its understatement, and gives no hint of the emotional temperature of either the movements or the work itself.

'Duets' begins and ends quietly and is primarily devoted to exploring different combinations of two instruments. The first interval heard is a major second, between the viola and the second violin. A secondary theme comprising a prominent trill, is introduced by the viola, before the opening dialogue is recalled on cello and first violin. A central more heavily scored and dramatic section, sparked off by the cello and viola, also beginning with the interval of a second, works up to a climax of much double and triple stopping - a remarkably resonant passage. The opening material is recalled as a recapitulation, with the pairings of instruments reworked. There is the briefest recall of the central climax before the music subsides. Though Keller recognised elements of a sonata structure in this movement, the more prominent concept is of a duality with constantly changing pairings of instruments.

The striking musical 'fan', with the first violin and the cello going in contrary motion, which opens the second movement, was anticipated in the first movement.. This initial bar recurs many times, rather like a highly concentrated ritornello. The presence of the ostinato, sometimes ascending and at other times descending, is a constant feature of this movement, lending it enormous range of register and dynamic.

The third movement exploits the registral differences between a high violin and a low cello - this latter part passing to the viola and then to the second violin. It is almost as though the principal violin had a magnetic force, drawing the other instruments to itself - a tribute to the personality of Norbert Brainin, the inspirational leader of the Amadeus Quartet. A central section of characteristic 'magic' music with the three lower instruments presenting a stable harmonic background against which the first violin plays a cadenza in four phrases, each of which begins with a trill and ends with convergent semiquavers. The opening returns, but rescored with the lower three parts playing in eerie harmonics.

The fourth movement, *Burlesque*, is heavily reminiscent of Shostakovich, but with some elements, particularly the rhythm, greatly exaggerated. Perhaps this movement was a tribute to Britten's great friend and musical colleague who had recently died.

The concluding movement opens with a recitative recalling material from earlier in the work. There are also other quotations from Britten's opera *Death in Venice*. The *Passacaglia* is one of Britten's finest movements, and in the highly skilled handling of this old baroque structure, the composer reveals his mastery in a movement which fully exploits the concept of variation. As with the best of this composer's output, the basic theme is simple, but the variations show a miraculous invention of great fecundity.

One of the most notable characteristics of Britten as a composer is clarity - of emotion and lyricism in the early compositions, of concept and psychological complexity of character in the operas, and of texture in the later works. The Third Quartet takes the concept of clarity to a new level with the music becoming almost aphoristic in its reference points. The *Passacaglia* theme of the finale is built out of the simplest possible material - an alternation of only two notes.

Britten has sometimes been criticised for being a miniaturist and many of his compositions take the form of a succession of relatively short sections. In works like the *Serenade* for Tenor, Horn and Strings, or the *Spring Symphony*, much of their effect lies in the way the separate movements are juxtaposed. The *War Requiem* of 1961 adopts a large-scale structure arising from the use of the Latin Requiem Mass, but, as in his operas, there is sometimes the feeling that a text was really what Britten needed in order to produce his best work. The Third Quartet gives the lie to these assertions with a composition that is clearly a working out of a basic musical idea. From the sounds of the opening Duets, to the final cello note, which merely dies away rather than ends, there is a clear sense of a musical discussion about the interval of a second. As with all of Britten's works however, this description of his craft is almost incidental. Beyond the technical descriptions, we have the musical impact. Michael Kennedy has described it as 'the apotheosis of his precious gift for imparting the deepest truths with the simplest, most innocent means.'

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THE EDINBURGH QUARTET

After its formation, the Edinburgh Quartet quickly became established as one of Britain's foremost chamber ensembles, appearing regularly at prestigious venues across the country including London's Wigmore Hall and The South Bank Centre. It achieved international recognition after winning the Contemporary Prize at the Evian-les-Bains String Quartet Competition and has since toured extensively across Europe, the Far East, North and South America and the Middle East. The Quartet has made numerous BBC TV and BBC Radio 3 broadcasts and can also be heard on Classic FM.

Now in its fiftieth year, the Quartet is one of the longest running chamber ensembles in the UK with a busier performing schedule than ever before. The Quartet is resident at Glasgow University and Napier University and also collaborates with Aberdeen and Edinburgh Universities.

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