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# CONCERTS AT THE UNIVERSITY

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Spring - Summer 2016

Tuesday 9 February 2016

1.10pm

City of Edinburgh Methodist Church

The Edinburgh Quartet

Tristan Gurney · violin

Gordon Bragg · violin

Fiona Winning · viola

Mark Bailey · cello

Programme of works by **BEETHOVEN**,  
and **BARTÓK**.



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH  
*Edinburgh College of Art*

## Quartet in F minor Op. 95 'Quartett Serioso'

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Allegro con brio

Allegretto ma non troppo

Allegro assai vivace ma serioso

Larghetto espressivo – Allegro agitato – Allegro

Completed in 1810, the year following Op. 74, this work in F minor is the last of the middle period quartets of Beethoven. The shortness of time taken in performance is no guide to the intensity of a work which suggests new developments both for Beethoven and for the genre. The extended titles of the movements tell us something of the composer's wish to be as precise as possible about the way the music is written down, and this attention to detail is reflected in the character of the whole work. If the first quartet of Beethoven's middle period, the F Major Op.59 no.1, is remarkable for its luxuriously extended musical paragraphs and open textures, Op.95 is clearly identified by contrasting qualities of terseness and musical density.

The first movement begins with a brusquely stated motive, characterised by its rhythmic vitality, and is immediately repeated by the cello, transposed up a semitone – i.e. a Neapolitan relationship. Between these two statements Beethoven presents us with a leaping octave motive, using a repeated and sharply defined rhythm. These thematic fragments are the origin of the material of the subsequent work – with the possible exception of the introduction to the finale.

This is a work in which relatively conventional structures are 'signposted' by the well-defined, often forceful character of the musical gestures. The first movement is built from the same building blocks as a sonata structure. The second has elements of a rondo: but both episodes share the same material with increasing complexity, as a fugue is developed into a double fugue. The third movement takes the outward form of an extended ternary structure – with more than a hint of rondo. Only the finale, with its introduction and coda, cannot be related to conventional procedures.

However, tonally and harmonically, the whole work seems determined to break new ground. The Neapolitan side-slip of the opening exerts a powerful influence over many of the harmonic progressions; perhaps none more than the repetitions of the rising scale motive first used at bar 20 and prominently featured in the first movement.

This semitone relationship is what gives a richness of harmonic perspective to the start of the second movement. Here Beethoven explores a new complexity of harmonic grammar. Although the key appears to be D Major, its relationship to the key of the first movement is as a doubly flattened leading-note. That is, in the key of F minor, the leading note would usually be E natural, so if it was flattened it would be E flat, but doubly flattened is E double flat, or D. This is a highly interesting and complex relationship – a Neapolitan harmony which resolves to the sixth degree of the scale

(the submediant D flat, the key of the second subject in the first movement) which helps explain how Beethoven is able to slip into an important sequence beginning on A flat, at which point the cello recalls the opening motive. This relationship is also crucial to understanding how the third movement, returning to F minor, is able to sound absolutely correct, as the resolution of the semitonally displaced key of the second movement. It also helps explain why for the 'trio' section of this third movement, the use of D major (i.e. alias E double flat), sounds exactly right. However, all these tonal and harmonic procedures form the background structure of the work, held together loosely by formalised practice, while the explosion of dramatic material in the foreground gains precedence. Here we witness Beethoven creating a new dynamic in classical music in which the foreground (the motifs and rhythms on the surface of the music) and the middle ground (the harmonies and tonality) are interacting to create different layers of experience simultaneously. This is fundamentally extending our experience of listening.

For those familiar with the earlier quartets of Beethoven it is evident that here the composer is speaking to us with a new voice. The former ambiguities of harmony have now become transformed into either definite (though sometimes unexpected) directions, or into progressions in which anticipated tonal relationships are severely challenged, almost to breaking point. The second movement's innocent-sounding opening on the solo cello, followed by the beautifully lyrical, though short-lived melody on the violin, reveals Beethoven's debt to Mozart. In the two fugal developments, though we may detect something of Bach, there is more of pure Beethoven about both the shape of the subject and its subsequent development. The third movement is truly original and in the composer's description – 'ma serioso' – the associations of a Scherzo as something comic or light hearted are broken. The start of the finale – it is not at all accurate to call such a portentous and heart-rending opening an introduction – contains some of the most inwardly experienced music of the whole work. The concluding 40 bars of the finale, an Allegro in F major, is the last time that Beethoven will pay a tribute to his former teacher Haydn. The effect that this jolly section has on the whole work can be heard as a retrospective questioning of whether what we have really experienced over the previous twenty minutes is something profound, or was it an illusion? The ambiguity of intention is wonderfully well balanced, and challenges both listeners and players alike. Never again will Beethoven leave us with such a mixture of feelings – quite unlike any other quartet that had already been written. This is a work that looks forward to the later quartets, with their unique blend of external virtuosity and inner intensity, expressed through absolute mastery of the material and the medium.

(RBW Jan.2016)

## Quartet No.3

Béla Bartók(1881-1945)

Prima parte: Moderato; Seconda parte: Allegro;

Ricapitolazione della prima parte: Moderato – Coda; Allegro molto

Written in 1927, the third is the shortest of Bartók's set of six quartets. Over the ten years since the completion of the second quartet, the composer had developed an uncompromising musical vocabulary. Dissonant intervals of seconds, sevenths and augmented fourths assume greater importance, terse motives replace melodies, and close canonic writing becomes more prominent. All these developments contribute to a sound which is often harsh and a musical discussion which is concentrated and terse. In addition to this stylistic growth - as it were the nuts and bolts of what the music sounds like - Bartók's formal structures also move away from more conventional procedures as the composer becomes ever more interested in proportions generated by the golden section and the Fibonacci sequence.

The third quartet is made up of two main parts, or 'movements', the first slow and the second fast. The thematic origins of each are shared, and once stated, the ideas are immediately developed and subjected to thematic transformation.

The opening of the Quartet sets the scene with a chromatic cluster based on the cello - C sharp, D, E and D sharp. Against this, the first violin weaves a sinuous, chromatic line, with a very clear expressive shape. A second motive, beginning with a prominent rising perfect fourth, is closely imitated by the second violin. This becomes the material for the whole of the first movement, which reaches a climax when all four instruments play with triple stops - a particularly rich and characteristically Bartókian sound.

The *Seconda Parte*, or 'movement', begins with a trill on second violin, before the cello, in pizzicato triple stops, introduces a folk-like dance. This is however only introductory to the main motive which is soon heard on the first violin. Though simple in melodic outline (and based on the opening of the quartet), the lively rhythm is in a state of flux with bars of 5, 3, 6 and 8 quavers used in quick succession. This gives the music a tremendous impetus, further emphasised as the music quickens in speed. With closely imitative canonic writing, the work becomes extremely lively. As part of the development section of this sonata structure, Bartók introduces a fugue beginning on the second violin, and then working its way through all four players. Against this fugue subject the opening cello pizzicato is recalled, running in canon with the first violin, before further canonic writing heralds an extraordinary innovation. All four players play a chord which then glissandos to another note, but the highest parts cross to the lowest while the lowest go in the other direction - truly an original sound.

The return of the material of the first part, now less chromatically tortured, and then of the second part as the coda (marked to be played 'sul ponticello' i.e. on the bridge - a much thinner, 'glassy' sound) brings this highly concentrated work to a close. Somehow, although there is a double bar, and the ending is quite obvious, it seems almost as though the musical discussion is so rich that it is impossible to bring it to a close.

This is a quartet of high octane energy and fertile invention. Folk music may still be a driving force but Bartók has now completely assimilated its idiom into his individual sound world. From the hushed beginnings to the strongly scored, almost orchestral climaxes, Bartók shows supreme mastery not only of his own compositional technique but of the quartet as a medium. The astonishingly wide palette of inventive sounds contributes to making this one of those 'seminal' works that breaks the mould. Never would the world of the string quartet ever be quite the same again.

(RBW Sept.2015)