

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH
CHAMBER CONCERTS

SEASON 1957—58

Eighth Concert

THE NEW
EDINBURGH QUARTET

ROBERT COOPER

CHRISTOPHER MARTIN

ANNE CROWDEN

JOAN DICKSON

Pianoforte :

KENNETH LEIGHTON

REID SCHOOL OF MUSIC

WEDNESDAY, 19th FEBRUARY, 1958

AT 7.30 P.M.

PROGRAMME ONE SHILLING

PROGRAMME

1. PIANOFORTE QUINTET, Op. 57

Shostakovitch
(b. 1906)

Prelude : Lento
Fugue : Adagio
Scherzo : Allegretto
Intermezzo : Lento
Finale : Allegretto

Shostakovitch remains the most enigmatic figure in Soviet music. Although brought up in the nationalist tradition he was much influenced by Hindemith, Berg and Mahler and other central European composers, whose works were performed in Russia during the early 1920's. This is clear in the remarkable first symphony, written at the age of nineteen, a work which by its amazing sureness of touch and stylistic maturity immediately placed Shostakovitch in the forefront of Russian composers. The influence of Mahler, and of the so-called 'neo-classical' movement, have remained side by side in his later development, and the latter aspect of his style has more than once offended the Soviet authorities, who frown on such "decadent" tendencies. Shostakovitch (like Prokofiev) is probably a composer who has found it difficult to fit into the Soviet system. Dance-hall tunes, Bachian preludes, Mahlerian romanticism, and Russian folk-tunes are only some of the features to be found in his work, and it was inevitable that such extreme eclecticism should not always yield entirely satisfactory results.

The piano Quintet, written in 1940, is one of the most successful of his works, and fortunately free from the grandiose heroic gestures which (in some of his works) the composer has perhaps been forced to adopt by political circumstances. He excels rather in expressing a mood of romantic melancholy, and also in a kind of sardonic humour—both of which are of course frequent characteristics of the Russian genius.

The first two movements are in the manner of a Prelude and Fugue. The Prelude, with its impressive, widely-arched figuration, immediately demonstrates the 'neo-classical' trend in Shostakovitch's work; while the lyrical middle-section in three-time provides contrast in a more romantic vein.

The slow fugue is an extended contrapuntal meditation on a beautiful modal tune, which reminds one of the shape and mood of Russian folk-song. Much use is made of close canon in two and three parts, and there is a moving climax in the middle of the movement. The opening motive of the Prelude returns on the Cello towards the end.

The Scherzo is a kind of music associated mainly with the period between the wars. Its unbending rhythm is clearly a product of the machine-age, and, as in several of the composer's movements, this kind of strict rhythmic drive is coupled with a very individual type of humour, which imparts an ironical twist to tunes of the utmost banality.

The Intermezzo is close to the slow fugue in feeling and has another extended modal melody, consciously or unconsciously reminiscent of the middle section of the first movement. A second subject, announced by the piano, uses the descending chromatic scale in two parts against a simple chordal accompaniment—a finger-print which occurs frequently in Shostakovitch.

The Finale seems to combine simple gaiety with a gentle irony. Two pleasantly captivating tunes are introduced by the piano and quartet respectively, and culminate in a march-like theme stated first in double-octaves on the piano. The rest of the movement (apart from one passionate interlude on the quartet) recapitulates this material in a mood of restraint and gentle humour, which the composer seems loath to leave.

One of the most remarkable features of the work (as also of the piano trio) is its texture. The piano no longer has the lion's share, as in nineteenth century quintets, but becomes an equal partner, his part consisting almost entirely of single lines, doubled at the distance of an octave, or of two or three octaves, a device which has been frequently used by other composers too (particularly French and Italian ones). The piano never doubles the string parts, and thus never obscures the pure string tone. The clarity of texture and the often arresting sonorities obtained in this way, are of the work's most appealing qualities.

K.L.

INTERVAL

2. PIANOFORTE QUINTET IN F MINOR Op. 34

Brahms
(1833-1897)

Allegro non Troppo
Andante, un poco Adagio
Scherzo : Allegro
Finale : Poco sostenuto—Allegro non Troppo

In this note I confine myself to a short historical introduction. This is one of the greatest works for this medium, although it may well be argued that it cannot claim to be a model pianoforte quintet. This is perhaps hardly surprising seeing that it was originally composed, in 1862, for a string quintet with a second violoncello, after the model of Schubert's quintet which it so closely follows in several

other respects. Joachim however soon demonstrated to Brahms that the demands made upon the strings, particularly as to mass and dynamic strength, exceeded the capabilities of such an ensemble. Accordingly it was rewritten during the winter of 1863-4 as a sonata for two pianofortes and was subsequently published in that form as Op. 34 bis. But although the gain was enormous (as we may conclude from the nature of the material) there remained several passages in which the work in its new form showed itself to be a translation, and just as Joachim the violinist had insisted on calling in the help of the pianoforte, so now it was Clara Schumann the pianist who deplored the sacrifice of the strings seeing that so many themes and passages in their very nature remain inherently a conception for string tone. So, in 1864, Brahms rewrote the work again in the form in which we now know it. Later he destroyed the original string quintet version, which had remained unpublished. Some fifteen years ago, however, the interesting experiment was made by Sebastian Brown of restoring the work to a conjectural original instrumentation. This has been published in separate instrumental parts, and was performed at one of this series of concerts some ten years ago. The restoration is indeed an interesting experiment, and much of it is convincing, but it does emphasise precisely what Joachim felt about the material outsizeing the capacity of a purely string ensemble. Furthermore it prompts one to question whether Brahms may not have elaborated a good deal of significant detail only at the stage when he first brought the pianoforte into association with the work (in the two-pianoforte sonata version), so that one may be at some points working upon internal evidence that is not strictly relevant to the original conception.

S.T.M.N.