

EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY CONCERTS

1978-79

THE EDINBURGH QUARTET

Miles Baster Peter Markham
Michael Beeston Christopher Gough

Reid Concert Hall, Thursday 25 January 1979

Edinburgh quartet

CONRAD WILSON

THOMAS WILSON'S new string quartet did not get its premiere from the Edinburgh Quartet last night. That event will happen on BBC television this evening as part of a tribute to the Glasgow composer, who reached his 50th birthday in 1977. Its place in this week's Edinburgh University concert was taken by Bartok's sixth quartet which, along with music by Mendelssohn and Mozart, showed the players in sterling form.

True, the burlesque moments of the Bartok carried less than their full quota of pungency, but pungency, in the long run, is not this work's primary ingredient. What was conveyed, without exaggeration, was the pervasive sadness of the score, after the colour and drama of Bartok's previous quartets. Its soft, clear lines were carefully sustained in an acoustic (that of the Reid Concert Hall), not generally beneficial to chamber music for strings.

Yet perhaps because the

players seem recently to have brought more body to their tone, one was less aware than usual of the hall's shortcomings. Mendelssohn's A minor quartet, Op 13, had warmth and vitality, as well as a delightful delicacy in the middle section of the slow movement. As for Mozart's G major quartet, K 387, it profited from its position at the end of the evening by moving with well-oiled fluency, and with vivacious pointing of its contrapuntal finale.

MENDELSSOHN 1809-1847

String Quartet in A, Op. 13

Adagio—Allegro vivace

Adagio non lento

Intermezzo: Allegretto con moto

Presto

The eighteen-year-old Mendelssohn was stimulated in his admiration of Beethoven by his father's friend A. B. Marx, known as a musical theorist. The Quartet in A, Op. 13, exhibits several features of Beethoven's late quartets, not least a love of the courageously unconventional; the first movement, really in A minor, has a slow introduction in A major which quotes Mendelssohn's own song, 'Ist es wahr?' The movement ends, perversely, after so much storm and stress, with a recitative cadence. Even the main subject, which is resolutely canonic throughout, reminds one strongly of Beethoven's A minor Quartet, Op. 132.

The slow movement, opening in sweet lyricism, has a long and abstruse fugal episode in the middle which pushes the pervading triple time out to quadruple and then gets its subject upside-down. The Intermezzo contrasts a somewhat *gemütlich* opening theme with a soft, tripping, rapid central episode in the major key that is the most original gesture in the work. The Finale begins with a melodramatic recitative; its development section has a fugato, the subject a variant of that in the slow movement. This subject recurs in its original form in the coda, and the Quartet ends by restating the major-key introduction of the first movement, the references to the song 'Ist es wahr?' now more extended.

R.M.

BARTOK 1881-1945

Quartet No. 6

Mesto—Vivace

Mesto—Marcia

Mesto—Burletta

Mesto

The Sixth Quartet is the last work which Bartók conceived and sketched out in Hungary before his enforced emigration to the United States in 1939. It thus belongs to a period of great personal trial and crisis and marks the beginning of the final tragic episode in the composer's career.

The stylistic unity of the work is made clear by a beautifully constructed motto-theme, which appears as an introduction to the first three movements and in the finale blossoms out into an extended design of chromatic counterpoint. This theme contains all the intervallic shapes which go to make up the material of the four movements—the combination of semitone and whole-tone, semitone and third (major or minor), and semitone and fourth (perfect or augmented).

After a simple statement of the motto-theme on solo viola, the whole quartet announce the main theme of the Vivace in declamatory style and the first subject proper takes the form of a short phrase given to the first violin, and immediately built up into an extended contrapuntal paragraph. The second subject (in rather slower tempo and of a more lyrical nature) is characterised by three descending and three ascending whole tones: while a third theme uses only the semitone, in an ascending shape. The declamatory statement of the first subject returns before the development, which is in turn separated from the recapitulation by a pause.

The obstinate dotted rhythm of the March almost reminds one of Hindemith, but the melodic shape again points the contrast between the whole-tone and the semitone and a sustained and passionate melody rises magnificently over the march rhythm. The middle section has a new cantabile theme high on the cello, accompanied by tremolos on the violins and punctuated by rapidly plucked chords on the viola.

The spirit of burlesque plays a considerable part in the late works of Bartók and nowhere is it more successfully expressed than in the third movement, with its bouncing rhythm and plunging melodic lines. Here the material of the motto-theme undergoes yet another unexpected transformation and the two violins are made to play out of tune with one another to enhance the humoristic effect. Equally unexpected is the brief middle section, which sings tenderly in a vein of child-like innocence.

The slow finale makes it clear that the total message of the work is one of high tragedy. The motto-theme, having explored so many diverse moods and modes of expression, seems to find its true self in this pathetic utterance, so characteristic of our time. It expands into an extended paragraph, interrupted only by a short wistful reference to the two main themes of the first movement.

There is no self-pity here but only a perfectly objectified expression of a deep spiritual experience. Like so many modern works, it ends with what might seem a disintegration of the

Edinburgh quartet

CONRAD WILSON

THOMAS WILSON'S new string quartet did not get its premiere from the Edinburgh Quartet last night. That event will happen on BBC television this evening as part of a tribute to the Glasgow composer, who reached his 50th birthday in 1977. Its place in this week's Edinburgh University concert was taken by Bartók's sixth quartet which, along with music by Mendelssohn and Mozart, showed the players in sterling form.

True, the burlesque moments of the Bartók carried less than their full quota of pungency, but pungency, in the long run, is not this work's primary ingredient. What was conveyed, without exaggeration, was the pervasive sadness of the score, after the colour and drama of Bartók's previous quartets. Its soft, clear lines were carefully sustained in an acoustic (that of the Reid Concert Hall), not generally beneficial to chamber music for strings.

Yet perhaps because the

players seem recently to have brought more body to their tone, one was less aware than usual of the hall's shortcomings. Mendelssohn's A minor quartet, Op. 13, had warmth and vitality, as well as a delightful delicacy in the middle section of the slow movement. As for Mozart's G major quartet, K 387, it profited from its position at the end of the evening by moving with well-oiled fluency, and with vivacious pointing of its contrapuntal finale.

musical material and finally with the opening notes of the motto played pizzicato on the cello, a progression unresolved and unanswered—perhaps the question mark which arises inevitably in the art of a composer of such burning sincerity and vision as Bartók. K.L.

INTERVAL

MOZART 1756-1791

String Quartet in G major K 387

Allegro vivace assai

Menuetto: Allegro

Andante cantabile

Molto allegro

In dedicating the six quartets with Köchel numbers between 387 and 465 to Haydn, Mozart said they were the fruit of 'long and arduous work'. According to the publisher's newspaper announcement, Haydn 'honoured them with all the approbation which one man of genius can bestow on another'. They appeared in 1785, four years after Haydn's 'Russian' Quartets, Op. 33, whose 'new and special manner' they were clearly meant to emulate. Indeed, they have the strong themes, the clarity of development, the contrapuntal equality of the instruments, the personal emotion which Haydn had instilled into the earlier set; in a sense, the medium of the string quartet was shifted to the centre of the music scene by these two collections. R.M.

Next concert: Thursday 1 February

STRING ENSEMBLE led by MILES BASTER

PETER WILLIAMS organ

HANDEL Organ Concerto in B flat, Op. VII No. 1

CORELLI Violin Sonata in F major, Op. V No. 10

J. S. BACH Organ Concerto in F minor, BWV 1056

HANDEL Concerto Grosso in D minor, Op. VI No. 10

HANDEL Organ Concerto in B flat, Op. VII No. 3

15 pence

Edinburgh quartet

CONRAD WILSON

THOMAS WILSON'S new string quartet did not get its premiere from the Edinburgh Quartet last night. That event will happen on BBC television this evening as part of a tribute to the Glasgow composer, who reached his 50th birthday in 1977. Its place in this week's Edinburgh University concert was taken by Bartók's sixth quartet which, along with music by Mendelssohn and Mozart, showed the players in sterling form.

True, the burlesque moments of the Bartók carried less than their full quota of pungency, but pungency, in the long run, is not this work's primary ingredient. What was conveyed, without exaggeration, was the pervasive sadness of the score, after the colour and drama of Bartók's previous quartets. Its soft, clear lines were carefully sustained in an acoustic (that of the Reid Concert Hall), not generally beneficial to chamber music for strings.

Yet perhaps because the

players seem recently to have brought more body to their tone, one was less aware than usual of the hall's shortcomings. Mendelssohn's A minor quartet, Op. 13, had warmth and vitality, as well as a delightful delicacy in the middle section of the slow movement. As for Mozart's G major quartet, K 387, it profited from its position at the end of the evening by moving with well-oiled fluency, and with vivacious pointing of its contrapuntal finale.