

EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY CONCERTS

1978-79

THE EDINBURGH QUARTET
Miles Baster Peter Markham
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Reid Concert Hall, Thursday 1 March 1979

Thomas Wilson's new quartet

By CONRAD WILSON

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HAYDN 1732-1809
Quartet in G major, Op. 33, No. 5

Vivace assai
Largo cantabile
Scherzo (Allegro): Trio
Finale (Allegretto-Presto)

The G major quartet of Op. 33, 'Gli scherzi', is one of the least often played of the set but this should warn us against undervaluing it rather than condoning too ready an acceptance of its lowly place in the repertory—a place shared with about forty other quartets by Haydn all of which deserve to be much better known. The first movement opens almost apologetically with a *pianissimo* cadence. But it is no mere formality and Haydn seizes on its top line as an important ingredient of his main theme. Unlike so many Haydn first movements this one has a new and distinct theme to begin the second group though Haydn cannot resist a canonic allusion to the main theme before twenty bars have elapsed. The development follows the course of the exposition fairly clearly but the recapitulation ingeniously expands it by half its length again throwing in some bold tonal digressions on the way.

The melody of the Largo bears such a strong resemblance to 'Che puro ciel' that it is almost impossible to believe that Haydn did not have Gluck's *Orfeo* in mind. Its accompaniment murmurs gently as Gluck's does, but the air is melancholy and minor and the Furies, straying into this Elysium to judge by the angry unisons from the lower strings, once interrupt the violins anguished rhapsody and finally banish it altogether.

If the Largo looks back to Gluck, the Scherzo is pure Haydn with its syncopations and its cadence whimsically delayed by a hiccupping silent bar. Perhaps, as Einstein remarked, the finale was in Mozart's mind when he wrote the last movement of his D minor quartet, K.421. Both are sets of variations on siciliano-like themes and end with quicker codas. But there the similarity ends: Haydn provides the *Lachen* to Mozart's *Weinen* and it is Haydn, not Mozart, who gives us a racy *opera buffa* presto ending with a sly reference back to the first movement. M.T.

THOMAS WILSON b. 1927
String Quartet No. 4

This piece was commissioned by the Edinburgh Quartet with the aid of the Scottish Arts Council and various private donors. It is

dedicated to the Edinburgh Quartet and was first performed by them on BBC TV in January of this year. The work is played continuously, but falls into five clearly defined parts. The first of these, mostly slow, introduces in compressed form the various ideas which are later to be developed. It ends with a calm chorale-like passage, a particular feature of which is a reiterated monotone. This idea is used to punctuate the work like a refrain.

The second section is a fast rhythmically erratic scherzo which combines overall delicacy with moments of fiery vehemence. The slow third section is a loosely-articulated aria for solo violin, though this also features a more impassioned and vigorous central statement. This is short-lived, and the original mood is restored by the chorale-refrain. This time, however, the *arioso* character is less sustained and more episodic, finally converging on a repeated monotone.

The fourth section is the most weighty part of the work. Here the vehemence hinted at earlier in the music is given freer rein. Moments of delicacy and lyricism are still present, but they are increasingly swept aside as the piece gathers momentum. After the point of climax has been reached, tension is quickly dissipated. The chorale refrain introduces the last section, a Coda. This acts as a counterpart to the opening, providing a brief, condensed recapitulation of some of the work's principal ideas. Finally, all that remains is the slowly reiterated monotone. But even this apparent stability is qualified at the last moment. T.W.

INTERVAL

BEETHOVEN 1770-1827
Quartet in A minor, Op. 132

Assai sostenuto: Allegro
Allegro ma non tanto
Molto adagio—Andante
Alla marcia, assai vivace:
(Quasi recitativo):
Allegro appassionato

The A minor quartet, the second of three commissioned by Prince Galitzin, was written between March 1824 and August 1825. The work as a whole is melancholy in tone but full of a restless energy. The first movement, as Philip Radcliffe has remarked, embodies 'a tragic intensity which is tempered by a streak of peculiarly appealing lyricism'. The Allegro is character-

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istic of Beethoven's late handling of sonata form in which the recapitulation often becomes a second development section. The slow introduction, moreover, forms an integral part of the movement, its main motif being used as a counterpoint to the principal theme of the Allegro. The scherzo has a drooping rather than an aggressive quality and shares with corresponding movements in the other late quartets an intense pre-occupation with tiny motifs (here there are two, heard together in the fifth and sixth bars) which provide all their material. The trio itself is in ternary form, the outer sections of which are a kind of sublimated musette.

In the spring of 1825 Beethoven recovered from an illness which had brought him very close to death and the experience is reflected in the slow movement. It consists, like that of the ninth symphony, of alternating variations on two themes, the first, *Molto adagio*, marked 'A song of thanksgiving to the Deity on recovery from an illness', and the second, *Andante*, marked 'vitality regained'. Beethoven had been studying some of Palestrina's church music at the time and perhaps as a result cast the chorale-like *Adagio* in the *lydian mode*.

After such inward and withdrawn music the short march provides a necessary and welcome contrast. It leads without a break through a curious passage of recitative to the rondo finale whose main theme had originally been intended to form the basis of an instrumental finale to the ninth symphony. There is a fine urgency about this movement which nevertheless gives place to that mood of compelling optimism of which Beethoven was the supreme exponent.

Next Concert: Thursday 8 March

THE COMPOSERS STRING QUARTET

ELLIOTT CARTER Quartet No. 2
ELLIOTT CARTER Quartet No. 3
ELLIOTT CARTER Quartet No. 1

(Edinburgh University acknowledges the financial support of the Scottish Arts Council)

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