Oxford Chamber Music Society

Bingham String Quartet

21st January 2018

Steve Bingham, Marina Gillam, violins
Brenda Stewart, viola
James Halsey, cello

Steve REICH 1938-
Different Trains (interviews), for string quartet and tape

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1. America – Before the War 2. Europe – During the War 3. After the War
The movements are played without a break.

It seems hardly necessary to retrace the origins of New York minimalism back to the 1960s, it has now so unrecognisably transformed itself. And in today's piece even the typifying chugging, shifting mechanical rhythms have become, in a genuinely old-fashioned sense, realistic. Like, say, Samuel Barber in *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, Reich in *Different Trains* created what American 'classical' composers desire most to do, but have seldom achieved – to create a work completely American, as American as the blues, which would touch audiences anywhere in the world. Moreover, in *Different Trains,* Reich brings the Old and New Worlds gently together in the tragedy of his own Jewish race. Even pitched against more overtly emotional European works Reich's integrity and simplicity will not go away, just as for me the most indelible Holocaust poem – setting aside those written by the children of Terezín – is also the shortest, Tadeusz Różewicz's *Pigtail*, written after a visit to the Auschwitz Museum.

… quartets, train whistles and sirens

The source of the piece were memories of infant train journeys made necessary by the divorce of Reich's parents, and between the ages of one and four he had to travel back and forth between his mother's new home in Los Angeles, and New York, where his father remained. As we shall hear, he was accompanied by his governess. He found these trips *romantic and exciting*, but years later he came to

brood on a very simple fact: *I now look back and think that if I had been in Europe during this period, as a Jew I would have had to ride very different trains.* The work came together in 1988 as the result of a commission by Betty Freeman, one of the most indefatigable and generous supporters of new music at that time. It was first performed in London by the Kronos Quartet and quickly recorded. Performance is fraught with problems, and success is as dependent on the sound technician as much as the musicians. Briefly, the quartet's instruments are amplified, and play against a pre-recorded track supplied by the publisher, and by this means are reinforced by multiple lines from (as it were) three other quartets, train whistles and sirens, as well as the crucial *interviews*, transformed and edited by means of a digital sampling keyboard. Reich emphasizes in the published score: *There should be no ambiguity as to what is pre-recorded and what is live. The live players have the main parts throughout the piece and should be clearly heard.* In the following paragraph I have slid as much as I can under the copyright door.

… we are at the destination

The music is developed from the speech rhythms of the interviewees (think of Janáček!), their 'melodies' introduced by the viola for the three women and by the cello for the two men; the notated words also set the accelerating and decelerating tempi. The first movement features the voices of the very governess who accompanied young Steve, then in her seventies and named as Virginia, and Lawrence Davies, a retired Pullman porter on the Los Angeles to New York line, in his eighties. We have fragments about *the crack train from New York* and *different trains every time,* and then a counting down of dates – *1939, 1940, 1941, 1941 I guess it must've been* – and then a sudden slowing of tempo and the wailing of sirens. Rachella tells us it is *1940 … on my birthday… the Germans walked in… walked into Holland.* She, along with Paul and Rachel were holocaust survivors then living in New York. Paul tells of a teacher who *pointed right at me. No more school*, says Rachel, *And you must go away.* The music intensifies as Rachella tells of the cattle trucks… *They were loaded with people.* And then a slowing-down: we are at the destination: *They shaved us… they tattooed a number on our arm… Flames going up to the sky – it was smoking…* The last movement opens as if dancing: Paul and Rachella tell us the war is over and Rachella talks of New York and Los Angeles. Mr Davies picks this up. Virginia is back too: *one of the fastest trains*, as if still talking to her little charge. Mr Davis says, *But today they're all gone* – trains of course, but in the work's context he could have meant those who travelled on the *different trains.* We hear Rachella telling of a girl with a beautiful voice which delighted her German guards. …*And when she stopped singing they said 'More, more' and they applauded…*

*I am thinking particularly of Luigi Nono's *Ricorda cosa ti hanno fatto in Auschwitz / Remember what they did to you in Auschwitz* (1965); Krzysztof Penderecki's *Te Deum* (1967); and Henryk Górecki's Symphony no 3 *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* (1976).

George CRUMB 1929-
Black Angels. Thirteen images from a Dark Land

Departure. *Threnody I: Night of the Electric Insects* (tutti) – *Sounds of Bones and Flutes* (trio) – *Lost Bells* (duo) – *Devil-music (*solo) – *Danse Macabre* (duo)
Absence. *Pavana Lachrymae* (trio) *Threnody ll: Black Angels!* (tutti) – *Sarabanda de la Muerte Oscura* (trio) – *Lost bells* (Echo) (duo)
Return. *God-music (solo) – Ancient Voices (duo) – Ancient voices (Echo) (trio) – Threnody lll: Night of the Electric Insects (tutti)*

George Crumb, initially a rather off-the-peg avant-garde composer, found his own voice through the visceral response he experienced on discovering, and then setting, the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca. It gave him something very old-fashioned, called *inspiration.* Along with today's work, his 1970 *Ancient Voices of Children* was particularly responsible for finding an audience enthralled by the newness of his sensual and provocative use of the human voice, extended instrumental techniques and electronics. The composition of *Black Angels*, he tells us, was *Finished on Friday the Thirteenth*, *March 1970 (in tempore belli).*

… a shaman, a conjuror

Superstition? Well, George Crumb is a shaman, a conjuror: welcome to his Magic Theatre. And we are talking about theatre, and the string quartet today has brought not a bag, but a van of tricks to hopefully excite you, and maybe even move you, for this is a work *in time of war*, the Vietnam War. But that this is unquestionably an anti-war piece can only be understood, not demonstrated. We are always told what a cheerful guy George is, a regular Democritus – but I think he's laughing at (amongst others!) hapless pedants such as your scribe endeavouring not to put an audience on a Sunday afternoon into a state of petrified boredom by describing what need not be described (i.e. the intricate ground plan he always needs). What you will actually hear *cannot* be described, and I am giving away nothing in advance what today's sorcerer's apprentices will get up to. So: just let me say that the piece is a kind of Manichean conflict between Good and Evil (the Black Angels), represented by the magic numbers seven and thirteen. These numbers define the structure you see above: there are thirteen movements, with the seventh (*Threnody ll: Black Angels!*) as the centrepiece; you will see that the number of players assigned to each movement is palindromic:

4, 3, 2, 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 2, 1, 2, 3, 4

The first, central and last movements are called *Threnody* (usually a lamentation for the dead).You will also see the symmetry of *God-music* and *Devil-music.* The *magical relationships* of the two numbers extend much further than this, but I'm already treading Grimpen Mire. They are crucially symbolic for the composer, but you won't hear them: the piece has a kind of secret life. You will hear, though, ritualistic number counting in various languages at certain points in the performance.

… as if it has moved to another universe

Here is a skeleton key to the work, with the hope that it will be helpful even though many of the bones are broken or missing. The thirteen *images* are very short – the whole work takes 21/22 minutes. As I said, I am not disclosing the 'how'; if you don't know the piece that is for you to watch for and wonder at. Crumb describes the work as a *parable of the voyage of the soul.* The first section, ***DEPARTURE***, concerns (I use his words) the *fall from grace.* ***Night of the Electric Insects*** and ***Sounds of Bones and Flutes*** each open up distinct sonic landscapes. The next three movements quote the *Dies irae*: ***Lost Bells*** is an eerie introduction to the ***Devil-music***, which incorporates an *intensely obscene* violin cadenza, with references not only to the *Dies irae* chant, but the *diabolus in musica*, the tritone, the medieval devil's own interval, all extended into the frenetic ***Danse macabre***, which is tailed by whispered counting up to seven in Hungarian. ***ABSENCE***: *spiritual annihilation.* After an interval of thirteen (yes, thirteen!) seconds the second section opens with the ***Pavana lachrymae***, the saddest and slowest of old courtly dances (John Dowland), but here a ghostly disembodied apparition of Schubert's *Death and the Maiden.* This is violently shortened by the outburst of ***Black Angels!*** – the Angels like massing and swarming insects, with the number thirteen shouted in Japanese, Russian, Swahili and – after more counting – in German. That you will hear a reference to Tartini's *Devil's Trill* Sonata should come as no surprise. This is the central point of the work, and is countered by another melancholy dance, ***Sarabanda de la Muerte Oscura.*** This can only be a reference to Crumb's beloved Garcia Lorca, and probably to *Gacela de la Muerte Oscura / Gazelle of the Dark Death*: *I long to sleep the sleep of apples / far from the commotion of cemeteries.* ***Lost Bells (Echo),*** referring back to the third image, quietly ends this part, but the music of the last two images has almost a disturbing bleached out quality. Thirteen seconds of silence and then ***RETURN***: *redemption.* We have had *Devil-music*: now it is ***God-music***, a cello solo coming from and returning to near silence. Indeed this is the deeply contemplative atmosphere, approaching the edge of audibility, which pervades ***Ancient Voices*** and its ***Echo***, which is little more than a thirteen second cello chord leading into second ***Night of the Electronic Insects.*** After an initial outburst this retreats into an ethereal realm, with distant tracings of the *Sarabanda* theme. Seven and thirteen are whispered in Japanese. The music (as if it has moved to another universe) has only finished when the instruments are silent, and yet even more silent.

Franz SCHUBERT 1797-1828
String Quartet no 13 in A minor, op 29 no 1, D804, *Rosamunde*

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1. Allegro ma non troppo 2. Andante 3. Menuetto 4. Allegro moderato

The thirteenth quartet? Whatever happened to the previous twelve? Well, the twelfth is the wonderful first movement only of an unaccountably abandoned C minor work, the *Quartettsatz*, from 1820; the previous pieces, plus a few more,

complete and incomplete, were composed as a schoolboy between 1810 and 1814 for playing with his family, almost as test specimens in a musical laboratory. Today's A minor work, composed in desperation at the failure of his last two operatic endeavours, is the first of the last great three quartets (I am tempted to say the last, the G major, is the greatest ever written). But Schubert had even deeper cause for such desperation during the time of its creation, February/March 1824.

… the only quartet to be published in his lifetime

Early in 1823 Schubert had been diagnosed with syphilis, although he might have had the disease (very common in Vienna where prostitution was rife) for some while. Everything about it was dreadful, but there were periods of remission – and one of these disastrously ended at the beginning of 1824. Moreover, it was a time when the close network of support he had from his friends was breaking up – no malice, no vindictiveness; their lives simply took them away from Vienna. But the corollary of this are letters which would not otherwise have been written. The most famous of these is dated 31st March, to Leopold Kupelweiser: *I feel myself the most unfortunate, the most miserable being in the world. Think of a man whose health will never be right again… whose splendid hopes have come to naught, to whom the happiness of love and friendship offer nothing but the most acute pain, whose enthusiasm for the Beautiful threatens to disappear…* Yet during this period he somehow composed, and composed masterpieces. Not only our A minor Quartet, but immediately afterwards the D minor, which we call *Death and the Maiden* after the variation movement on that song – and choose to regard the finale, with no prompting from its composer, as a dance of death; and just to make sure we don't conflate art and life, created alongside the A minor was the Octet, an F major celebration of 'good to be alive' if ever there was one. The fact that Ignaz Schuppanzigh, dedicatee of Beethoven's immortal *Lob auf den Dicken*, had raised quartet playing to a professional level was doubtless a major factor in Schubert's decision to return to the medium, and in fact he had the pleasure of witnessing a public performance of the A minor on 14th March at the Musikverein in Vienna: the ink could have been hardly dry; it was also the only quartet to be published in his lifetime, with a pointless opus number indicating unrealised hopes.

… its gloomy walk through the dark

Schubert embedded at least one self-quotation in this quartet, which I will deal with when it occurs. But a second (well, not a quote, rather a charged memory) has been suggested – and right at the beginning. After two bars of introduction the second violin's line to the main theme has an uncanny resemblance to the accompaniment of famous song *Gretchen am Spinnrade* – with words like *My heart is gone, my breast is heavy, I'll find it never, never again* it's tempting to believe it was intentional, but who knows? The pronounced shudder also in the accompaniment will play a large part in the development section, bringing the whole movement to its climax. The first movement's exposition is centred round two achingly beautiful themes, which as well as defying convention by being not at all contrasted in their melancholic mood (though the second, with its trill, is in plain C major), feed offshoots which are

quite lovely, as well as more strenuous development. And we may have the precious treat of hearing it all twice. There is a feeling of minor-key claustrophobia in the development, and the recapitulation might come as some relief. A false hope, of course, with those restless modulations – and the coda offers the most intense music in the work, with its gloomy walk through the dark to a peremptory but harsh conclusion.

… the despondent heart of this quartet

The second movement doesn't quite offer what it promises, but it's a respite nevertheless. It is an oddly constructed rondo, rescuing an enchanting pastoral theme from the incidental music he had written the previous December for *Rosamunde, Princess of Cyprus* – hence the work's nickname – a play by Helmine von Chézy (*a suave poetess but an unbearable woman,* according to Weber – for whom she concocted *Euryanth*e, one of the worst ever opera librettos). Well, the play was another stinker and disappeared after two performances. It must have gone on and on – Schubert supplied all of an hour's music (which was rediscovered, by the way, in a voluminous but dusty Viennese cupboard in 1867 by George Grove and Arthur Sullivan). He later used the music again (originally an Entr'acte in B flat – in the quartet it is in C) in the B flat piano Impromptu from D935. The *Rosamunde* theme has a companion in eclogue nostalgia, heard twice, and there is a coda which expansively develops both. The last two movements aren't in any way complex in structure, but are strikingly ambivalent in mood. Schubert must have had his tongue well into his cheek when he indicated simply *Menuetto* for the third. The disorienting cello introduction is a direct pointer to the accompanying motif to the words of Schiller, *Schöne Welt, wo bist du? / Lovely world, where art thou?* in the 1819 setting of *Die Götter Griechenland / The Gods of Greece.* Just as the emotional core of the C major Quintet is in the scherzo's trio, the despondent heart of this quartet is in the minuet, which in fact is the most cheerless of *Ländler*, the country waltz. When the cello drops the key into C sharp minor you might well involuntarily shudder. At the end of the minuet the cello sob is gently transformed to the major, ready for the trio – which, let us say, puts on a charming smile for the occasion. This resigned mood pervades the finale, despite its superficially cheerful material – something rather Hungarian, and then march-like (plus a delightful variant, with pizzicato). As the music threatens to fade away, Schubert closes this beautiful but unsettling work with two emphatic chords. After my angst-inclined twenty-first century mutterings you might like to know that Schubert's great friend Moritz von Schwind, then only twenty-three and to become a distinguished painter, found the work at its first performance *on the whole very gentle, but in the manner that one remembers the melody, as in songs, full of emotion and quite emphatic.* He tells us that it *received much applause, especially the minuet, which is extraordinarily delicate and natural.*

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