



Oxford Chamber Music Society

Škampa String Quartet

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Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART 1756-1791 String Quartet in C major, K465 Dissonance

1. Adagio – Allegro 2. Andante cantabile 3. Menuetto: Allegro 4. Allegro

Dissonance? – Mozart? What's this all about? About two years prior to composing this afternoon's quartet, in 1783, Mozart had added an Adagio introduction to the symphony he had written for Linz (K425) to set off the festive C major splendour of the main Allegro. Here, in another C major work, he perhaps wanted to delay and thus emphasise the brightness and simplicity of that key with something altogether darker and more complex, and, as befits only four instruments, more subtly intimate; so he wrote another slow introduction, the first (I think) in the two or three decades history of the string quartet. And what consternation it caused! Indeed, GN von Nissen, the early (1829, posthumously) biographer of Mozart (who also married Constanze, the composer's widow), reports wide discontent with the harmonic daring throughout the series of six companion works; they were returned to the publisher because of the 'printing errors', and Prince Grassalkovich *tore the music up, there and then*. [I looked up this Hapsburg clan: *extinct*]. Around 1830, after much vitriol aimed particularly at today's 'dissonance' by the composer Andrea Sarti (talk about bees and bonnets), the work was cleansed of impurities by the Belgian polymath pedant François-Joseph Fétis, to the great acclaim of the musical Establishment. Another early biographer of Mozart, Alexander Ulibishev (1843), chortled *I shall always play the Introduction as thus corrected: it is henceforth sublime throughout, thanks to M. Fétis's happy emendation*. Even Haydn had felt a little perplexed at first, but

concluded sagely: *Well, if Mozart wrote it, he must have meant it.* And we must wonder if he didn't have this passage in mind when he wrote *The Representation of Chaos* which opens *The Creation*. Of course, Mozart paid the greatest homage to *his most celebrated and dear friend* with the dedication of no less than six string quartets, composed between December 1782 and July 1783 and November 1784 to January 1785. The C major Quartet was the last to be completed, dating it 14th January, four days after the A major K464. The classical string quartet, one of the great achievements of the Enlightenment, was thus richly and wondrously consolidated.

... a white-knuckle ride of modulations

Despite the pulsating C on the cello, as I have hinted the whole emphasis of the introduction must have been to chromatically blur tonality and to introduce a feeling of questioning, even anxiety, to be dispelled by the sharp and joyful focus of the Allegro theme – which derives from the rising motif heard on the first violin in the introduction's third bar. *I have learned from Haydn how to write string quartets*, wrote Mozart, and he follows his master in harmonic and rhythmic variety throughout this whole series: all the fuss about the first 22 bars in this quartet must not distract from the wealth of inventiveness present at every turn. Although there are two distinctive secondary motifs in the Allegro, it is – like so much of Haydn – essentially monothematic, the first subject entirely dominating the development in a white-knuckle ride of modulations, the recapitulation all but hijacked to extract yet more of this abundance. Note also how Mozart uses the lower strings to constantly darken the music, often with explosive accents. In early quartets there is much dancing to the first fiddle's tune. Not here: already the sound, the form, is shifting, on the move.

... a huge smile at Haydn

Any sense of C major finality is snuffed out at the end of the Allegro so as better to set the stage for the F major Andante, one of Mozart's most beautiful slow movements. It opens with an expansive theme with a little 'tail', which is taken up by cello and violin in a beguiling duet journey in which we encounter two more strong motifs: you can't miss them: one has grace, the other transfixes. From the return of the opening theme the music shifts the mood, now from light to dark, propelled by the now obsessive 'tail'. As the music dies away the first violin gently wraps a conciliatory counter-motif around it. Back to a cheery C major for a minuet which has to be a huge smile at Haydn. It crackles with dynamic contrasts and is a mixture of elegant wit and rough humour – Ludwig van isn't that far off. Nor is he in the C minor trio

– you will hear what I mean. You hardly require feeble words for the Finale: I would be accused of hyperbole if I said these are eight minutes which justify western civilisation, but I'll wear that. Again and again in such richly human music we sense the unsurpassed opera composer. We hear a round dance of moods and voices– a rondo which has a sonata-style development which introduces even a fugal burst of anger. In the coda Mozart seems to say, *Listen! I could go on for eternity*. But he gives us the final blaze of C major we have been waiting for.

Leoš JANÁČEK 1854-1924

String Quartet no 1 *Z podnětnu Tolstého Kreutzer sonáty*/After Tolstoy's 'Kreutzer Sonata'

1. *Adagio – Con Moto* 2. *Con Moto* 3. *Con moto – Vivo – Andante*
4. *Con moto – Adagio – Maestoso*

So: Tolstoy, not Beethoven. But in the 1889 novella it is Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata* which is a catalyst for sin, and the violinist who plays it has a name, Trukhachevsky, with its connotations of *trukha*, *rubbish*. The author of *Anna Karenina* was by this time working out his own brand of Christian fundamentalism, and one of many targets was the moral corruption of music (and, be it said, literature [including his own], and art...). On a long train journey the novella's anti-hero Pozdnyshev feverishly relates his story to the faceless, unnamed narrator. He has fatally stabbed his also unnamed (and undescribed) wife, thinking her guilty of fornication (the *mot juste* here) with the foppish Trukhashevsky, who has awakened her repressed talent as a pianist. It must be clear that Tolstoy, for all his misogyny, offers no evidence for adultery, but with the protagonist's insight into the *filth* of the male mind acquired through his own bachelor *debauchery*, we have a scalpel cutting and slashing into a marriage based on mutual hatred, with the wife defenceless. *Sexual passion*, he pronounces, *whatever its circumstances is an evil, a terrible evil, which must be fought...* Tolstoy – the creative genius rather than the proselytiser taking control – manages to almost subsume his own tendentiously puritanical (and hypocritical) views in Pozdnyeshev's overwrought narrative; indeed the tensions of the last part of the story are related with terrifying mastery. At the end he recognises his wife's humanity, but she does not recognise *his*. Or that is what *he* sees, for we only ever see through his eyes: the wife is not heard. Even at the trial she is not heard, for he is acquitted. Man innocent, Woman guilty.

... a study-without-words of psychological warfare

This is the one-sidedness is what Janáček sought to redress. *What I had in mind*, he wrote, *was the suffering of a woman, beaten and tortured to death.* The composer's own singularly passionate musical syntax, derived partly from Moravian dialect patterns as well as natural sounds (birds, insects) is brought into full focus in a piece written in just a few days (30th October – 7th November 1923) as a commission from the famous Czech Quartet (Bohemian Quartet as was), which had the composer Josef Suk as second fiddle. I need the ever-astute Czech writer Milan Kundera to give an idea of Janáček's unique language: ... *it is an enormously rich musical range, a dizzyingly tight, transitionless, juxtaposition of tenderness and brutality, fury and peace.* The emotional force of his music had been almost alchemically enhanced by his relationship, unconsummated in fact if not in his head, with a married woman and mother, Kamila Stösslová, thirty-eight years his junior, mainly conducted through his letters (over 700 of them – her replies are lost) – and bringing much suffering (irony, irony) to his own wife, Zdenka, who wrote a heart-rending book about it. Kamila is the gypsy seducer in *The Diary of One Who Disappeared*, she is the operatic Kátya Kabanová, the Vixen, and Elena Makropoulos. In effect, Janáček tells the story from the wife's viewpoint, except that he doesn't 'tell the story' like a Richard Strauss; he leaves us with just the score, the words I have quoted, and the injunction to look to the Tolstoy, his own copy of which was heavily annotated. We can only deduce, and not everyone will deduce the same. I seek below to simply provide some hopefully helpful ideas on listening to what is essentially a study-without-words of psychological warfare. Janáček's only concession to tradition is the retention of four movements, with 'scherzo' and slow movement, which are full of compressed violent contrasts, like cinematic jump-cuts, generating their own inner tensile structures.

... baleful tumbling pizzicatos bring outright terror

The first movement is the nearest we come to *her* portrait with any graspable dimension. The opening two bar motif is of crucial importance, achieving full cry at the moment of final catastrophe: it seems to link longing with fate and destruction. In the first movement dreaminess is interrupted immediately by a rhythmic dancing pattern – three times, and then the motif is burdened with emotion. There is a pizzicato punctuation mark, after which there is a real hint of joy, stolen, as it is destroyed by violence (the husband). The rest of the movement is of her hope and fear. In the second movement the tensions grow: the wife's yearning for happiness can be heard in two themes. Perhaps Trukhashevsky is already on the scene, because the recurring tremolos

(*ponticello* – played close to the bridge) surely represent the husband's insidious jealousy, which builds to something like outright violence, presaging the catastrophe. The fiddler is certainly present in the next movement, for the canon which we hear hints of the Beethoven sonata – the second subject of the first movement. But the rasping *ponticelli* want to scrub it out. Pozdnyshev's mania reaches a new pitch: baleful tumbling pizzicatos bring outright terror. I read the last part of this movement as portraying the wife's state of mind, including attempting some restoration of peace (consistent with the novella), but his jealousy corrodes any tenderness.

... with the surging energy of water through a holed dam

She is again to the fore in the desolate recitative which opens the last movement, the yearning/fate motif presiding. The rhythmic motif we heard after the work's opening reappears, announcing the imminence of calamity. This now fearful music is intensified by the tumbling pizzicatos from the previous movement, shifting to the strings. The cries of the viola and Fate (I now capitalise) are the unmistakable signs of the stabbing of the *poor, exhausted, beaten, sorrow-worn woman*. Here the composer finds the extraordinary equivalent of the energy, violence and artistic control to match Tolstoy's prose. Without a pause, with the surging energy of water through a holed dam (a *coup-de-grâce* to our emotions), Janáček launches a kind of crunched recapitulation which – at the very end – may reach for some catharsis. He went on to deliver his own thoughts on the power of sensual attraction in his next quartet and last completed work, *Intimate Letters* – his letters to Kamila. Immediately after completing the quartet we have just heard he started writing an opera about a strong and passionate woman who possesses the elixir of life, *The Makropoulos Affair*.

Bedřich SMETANA 1824-1884

String Quartet no 1 in E minor Z mého života/From My Life

1. *Allegro vivo appassionato* 2. *Allegro moderato a la Polka* 3. *Largo sostenuto*
4. *Vivace*

Smetana came from a rich Bohemian musical tradition, which in a form deemed civilised was greedily consumed by Germany and Austria. The trick was he managed to evade the routes to Berlin or Vienna for his training, and thus was open to the music he heard all around him in the Bohemian towns

and villages. Using the Czech language, and not the official German of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he bequeathed an operatic legacy of eight works (*The Bartered Bride* is the most famous, but *The Kiss* is my own favourite), and displaying orchestral mastery as well as nationalist fervour, the cycle of symphonic poems, *My Country*, which became an enduring symbol of the Czech nation. In 1874 appeared the first signs of the syphilis which brought in their wake both deafness and ultimately insanity. This quartet was composed, at a time of great suffering, between October and the end of December 1876. After several private performances, with another son of Bohemia named Antonín Dvořák playing the viola, it was first publicly played in Prague in March 1879. This might well be the first string quartet with a 'programme'; Smetana was a friend of Liszt, and had no problems with the alliance of music with narrative or description. He wrote, very casually, several explicatory summaries of what was *deliberately written for four instruments conversing among themselves about the things that have so momentarily affected me*, and I am drawing on these as I see fit.

... gently inebriated violin chords

The quartet could hardly have a more arresting opening. There is a call to attention, and over a gently throbbing accompaniment the viola twice plays a powerful theme dominated by descending intervals, and then the violin takes it up, modulating to C minor. Smetana identified this theme as a *Call of fate to life's struggle*. The second subject enters in C major – folk-like, which at the same time has something of Schubert about it: *...my youthful leaning towards art... the inescapable yearning for something I can neither express nor define... partiality for the romantic, not only in music but love and life... awakening of feelings for beauty and the touching in music...* The development concerns itself with the opening, strongly and aggressively. The recapitulation doubles as a development of the second theme, but it is fatalism which opens up the bleak coda... *a warning of my future misfortune...* This dying down to gentle pizzicato has been compared to the slow disappearance of Smetana's own hearing. How different is the second movement... *a quasi-polka recalls the days of my youth when I composed dance tunes and was widely known as passionate about dancing...* This is a scherzo and trio, boldly starting out in F, but the whole movement enjoying itself with harmonic twists and turns. The scherzo itself has a central section to be played *quasi Tromba – like a trumpet* – by the viola, the viola again up an octave, and then the violin taking off an octave higher. The trio has gently inebriated violin chords syncopating over a rhythmic pattern. Smetana does a tongue-in-cheek cut and paste job on the scherzo's second return, even delighting us with a snatch of that suspiciously swaying trio, just avoiding a ditch.

... dying away in quiet rapture

The slow movement is the most extended of the three, and its emotional centre: music of exquisite tenderness is countered by implacable harshness. A six bar cello solo establishes a mood of introspective lyricism, before a new beautiful A flat melody takes over – love music both tender and ardent... *the happiness of my first love, for the girl who later became my wife...* This is extended and varied, but is invaded by threatening dissonant chords... *[my] struggle with harsh fate, [and] final achievement of my goal.* The music comes to a halt, and we hear again the solo cello theme, and then the love music, dying away in quiet rapture. A little biographical information may be useful here. Kateřina Kolářová was Smetana's childhood friend, three years his junior, with whom he became reacquainted in 1842, and finally married in 1849. She was a good pianist – he wrote music for her – and by every account an ideal and loving partner, as portrayed in this music. And the dissonant chords? The couple had three daughters in quick succession, Bedřiska, Gabriela and Žofie, but in 1854 Gabriela died, followed by Bedřiska (Fritzi) a year later. It was the death of this gifted four-year-old which led to the composition of the fine G minor Piano Trio in 1855, the only chamber work preceding *From My Life*. Kateřina herself died of tuberculosis in April 1859 (... *without our knowing anything until the quiet drew my attention to her...*).

...the first violin sounds an E

The finale erupts with rude vigour. Two contrasting dances are developed... *the discovery that I could treat truly national elements in music, and my joy in following this path...* The second dance abandons itself with frenzied excitement, and then breaks off. Over an ominous tremolo the first violin sounds an E from the top of its register ... *until it was checked by the onset of my deafness ... the long insistent note in the Finale owes its origin to this [deafness]. It is the fateful ringing in my ears of the high-pitched tones which announced the beginning...* We hear the *Call of fate motif* which opened the whole work, then the consolation of the succeeding theme. A hardly discernible echo of the last movement's dance almost vanishes into silence ... *the outlook into a sad future, the tiny rays of hope of recovery; but remembering all the promise of my early career, nonetheless a feeling of painful regret...* There are three concluding pizzicatos, if you listen carefully. Smetana, against all odds, went on composing: we have the opera *The Devil's Wall* and the D major Quartet, in some ways even more remarkable than its predecessor. Violinists will know *From my Homeland*. His surviving daughter from Kateřina, Žofie, looked after him.