



Tilford Bach Society

Beethoven & Mendelssohn



Dante String Quartet

Krysia Osostowicz – violin

Oscar Perks – violin

Yuko Inoue – viola

Richard Jenkinson – cello

8 October 2016

www.tilbach.org.uk

Programme

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet in A minor, Opus 132

Assai sostenuto – allegro

Allegro ma non tanto

Molto adagio/Andante

Alla Marcia, assai vivace – piu allegro – presto – poco adagio – Allegro appassionato – presto

In the last few years of his life, Beethoven devoted himself almost exclusively to writing string quartets, the medium in which he could write his most deeply personal music. Leaving behind the larger politics of the orchestral scene, the deaf Beethoven could be sure that these enigmatic and challenging late works would be devotedly rehearsed and performed - even though he wouldn't be able to hear them - by the best musicians of the day.

The A minor quartet, like two of the other late quartets, opens with a four-note motif which makes its presence felt throughout the first movement. This movement is particularly interesting for two reasons. Beethoven begins the movement, as he often does, with a slow introduction which leads into the main Allegro. Unusually though, the introduction continues to reappear throughout the movement and the two different sections begin to merge together and unite. By the end we are able to hear that the two can coexist simultaneously. Secondly, Beethoven's more usual sonata form consists of an exposition of material, followed by a development which then leads to a return of the original music. This means that we would normally hear the same long passage of music at the beginning and the end, separated by a less ordered middle section. This quartet however, uses three statements of the exposition section instead of two, meaning that Beethoven covers the same music three times. This perhaps adds a greater weight and sense of an epic span to the movement.

An enigmatic and conversational scherzo forms the main part of the second movement, whilst the trio is a lively Musette: a folk dance which imitates bagpipes and other more rustic instruments. This is followed by what is perhaps one of Beethoven's most profound utterances: the "Heiliger Dankgesang" or "Holy song of thanks from a Convalescent to the Almighty". Three statements of a hushed and contemplative chorale, written in a style reminiscent of the old church music of Palestrina, are separated by two vigorous sections marked "Neue Kraft Fühlend" (feeling new strength). Beethoven was nearing the end of his life at this point and had recently suffered from a very serious illness, so the movement is deeply personal and autobiographical.

The fourth movement is a short, jovial March that seems almost trivial after the profound sentiments of the preceding movement. However it is suddenly interrupted by a Recitative which leads into the sweeping, heroic finale.

Notes by Oscar Perks

Interval

(Drinks are free but donations to costs are much appreciated)

Felix Mendelssohn (1810 – 1848)

String Quartet in A minor, Opus 13

Adagio/Allegro vivace

Adagio non lento

Intermezzo – Allegretto con moto/Allegro di molto

Presto

Mendelssohn's two early string quartets, op. 12 and op. 13, show the very considerable influence of Beethoven on the eighteen-year-old composer. Mendelssohn famously said that "music was a language too precise for words" and the idea of a "*Lied ohne Worte*" (song without words) was particularly central to his compositions. This perhaps reflects a growing concept within the Romantic movement that music was the most pure, noble, truthful and directly emotional of all the arts, and it is certainly true that Mendelssohn's finest instrumental music often attains a very directly human quality of expression. Right from the very beginning of his A minor quartet, he alludes to a human voice by quoting one of his own songs: "*Ist es wahr?*" (Is it true?), which he had completed only a few months earlier. This textual reference draws an obvious comparison to Beethoven's last quartet, op. 135, whose last movement quotes the words "*Muss es sein?*" (Must it be?) followed by "*Es muss sein!*" (it must be).

In several moments, Mendelssohn also makes use of the dramatic recitative style, a type of music lifted from opera and transplanted into a string quartet (another trick which is practically a direct quote from Beethoven's A minor quartet, op. 132). This sort of music is recognisable by the short, declamatory, syllabic delivery from the singer accompanied by powerful interjections from the orchestra, and was employed to add dramatic weight to heightened passages of text. This is another instance of "song without words", once again suggesting a human voice within the sound of the instruments.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the work is its sweeping dramatic span. The brief song that forms the introduction to the piece, gives way suddenly to a fiery and driven Allegro.

The second movement begins with a slow Aria which exudes richness and warmth. The middle part of the movement is formed by a rather searching and uneasy fugue (possibly a homage to a similar fugue from Beethoven's op. 95 quartet), which eventually cedes to the return of the opening aria.

The third movement is a haunting Canzona, accompanied by plucked strings in the manner of perhaps a mandolin or guitar, and possibly revealing something of Mendelssohn's Jewish ancestry with some subtle yet delicious moments of Klezmer. The middle section, however, seems closer in spirit to his fairy music from "Midsummer Night's Dream".

The last movement is a wild and adventurous Presto which eventually finds its way back to the song from the beginning of the work. The poetic and touching return of this opening material during the closing moments of the piece, makes this quartet one of the earliest and most significant examples of cyclic form.

Notes by Oscar Perks

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet in F major, Opus 135

Allegretto

Vivace

Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo

Grave, ma non troppo tratto – allegro

Op 135 is the last complete work Beethoven wrote before his death in March 1827. After the monumental masterpieces of the previous four quartets, which together with this one make up the group called the late quartets, this is sometimes thought of as lightweight. It is however a very tightly argued work, almost a distillation of everything he had been experimenting with up to then.

The work opens with a four-note question in the viola, answered by the first violin. Right away the composer is signalling that here he will have nothing to do with the questions of existence or fate that might have inspired the four previous quartets. What follows is a genial Allegretto in 2/4 time reminiscent of Haydn, in which the four instruments share the melody or sometimes breaking it into fragments so that everybody gets a piece. Although the movement is in classical sonata form, with all the responsible sections of exposition, development and recapitulation, it feels more like an airy distillation of that form, with its spareness, its fragmentation, and its economy of means. This is followed by a muscular scherzo though one where rhythmic stability is constantly subverted by syncopation.

Beethoven had the ability to write transcendent slow movements and the Lento which follows is one of his most sublime. It has a hymn-like theme in the unrelated key of D flat which he develops in four variations. The last of which is the most extraordinary part of the movement. The first violin hints at the theme in gentle, gasping rhythms, while the other instruments describe simple upward arpeggios. It is a movement that overflows with forgiveness and love, but is also full of great sadness.

The finale bears the famous epigraph "*Der schwer gefasste Entschluss*", or "*The difficult resolution*." The slow introduction, which features a rising minor-key question in the lower instruments, is marked "*Muss es sein*" – "*Must it be?*" which is answered by the theme inverted in the Allegro in F major which follows marked "*Es muss sein!*" – "*It must be!*" Musicologists have argued long over what this means but the simplest answer is probably that given by Beethoven himself in a letter to his publisher:

"Here, my dear friend is my last quartet. It will be the last; and indeed it has given me much trouble. For I could not bring myself to compose the last movement. But as your letters were reminding me of it, in the end I decided to compose it. And that is the reason why I have written the motto: 'The difficult decision—Must it be?—It must be, it must be!'"

The main Allegro section is carefree and joyful before the anguished question recurs but this cloud is swiftly dissolved as a final coda resolves matters in burst of resolute vigour.

Notes by Trevor Gray

Dante String Quartet

Winner of the prestigious Royal Philharmonic Society Award for chamber music in 2007, the Dante Quartet is known for its imaginative programming and the emotional intensity of its performances. The group was founded in 1995 at the International Musicians Seminar at Prussia Cove, Cornwall, and chose the name of Dante to reflect the idea of a great and challenging journey.

The Dante Quartet has played at all the major concert halls and festivals in the UK and has also appeared in France, Holland, Germany, Spain, Finland and Poland. Later this year the quartet will make its first tour of Japan, and is about to undertake the extreme challenge of playing Beethoven's complete quartet cycle in one weekend (Artrix, the Beethoven Quartetfest).

In 2008 the Dante Quartet's Hyperion recording of Franck and Fauré's string quartets attracted unanimous praise and was honoured with a BBC Music Magazine Award in the UK and a Diapason d'Or in France. The quartet's Hyperion recording of Sibelius and Smetana's string quartets was chosen as Chamber Choice in the BBC Music Magazine in July 2011, and their CD of Kodály's string quartets, Chamber Choice in March 2014. The Dante Quartet has recently started recording Stanford's unknown string quartets for SOMM Records: the first of these CD's will be released in November.

From 2007-14 the quartet held a residency at King's College, Cambridge, where they gave master-classes, collaborated with the renowned King's College Choir and created unusual concert programmes interlacing music with readings from literature. The quartet enjoys working with students and runs its own chamber music courses in France and in Cornwall. The Dante Quartet also has its own thriving festival in Cornwall which attracts local audiences and visitors from all over the UK to listen to chamber music in ancient churches and rural barns (www.dantefestival.org).

Future Concerts

Saturday 29 October : 7-30pm; St Andrews Church, GU9 7PW
Emma Abbate (piano) & Tippett Quartet

Saturday 26 November : 7-30pm; Farnham URC, GU9 7QU
Eisenach Ensemble - Baroque Arias and Favourites

Friday 27 January: 7-30pm Farnham Methodist Church, GU9 7RN
Natalia Lomeiko (violin) and Yuri Zhislin (viola)

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