

## Haydn String Quartet Opus 20 no 4 (composed 1772)

*Allegro di molto*

*Un poco adagio affetuoso*

*Menuetto: Allegretto alla zingarese*

*Presto scherzando*

Haydn's six opus 20 quartets were truly ground-breaking and set the pattern for every major composer afterwards; it is commonly asserted that composers use the form of the string quartet for their most profound music.

At this time Haydn was in the employment of Prince Nikolai Esterhazy, and had been devoting himself to writing over a hundred trios for the Prince's instrument, the baryton (a stringed instrument that has disappeared). Maybe composing for baryton trio had opened Haydn's eyes to the possibility of a small group of solo strings, and a quartet with two violins, viola and cello would have offered much more potential than the somewhat limited baryton.

Up until this point, writing for strings was commonly a solo part, usually the violin, with simple accompaniment from the other strings and often a keyboard continuo as well. Haydn made tentative steps away from this in his three opus 9 and opus 17 quartets, but the opus 20s are in another league; every instrument has an important line, and the cello in particular is often given the solo line. Each of the six quartets is unique – you feel that having come up with the notion, Haydn is trying out all sorts of different ideas. (Amazingly, in his whole output of around 80 quartets, Haydn is endlessly creative and no one is 'like' another).

The 4th quartet of the set, in D major, is particularly charming. It has the standard four movements, an opening brisk movement, a slow movement, a minuet and trio, and a presto finale.

The first movement starts mysteriously with the four instruments playing softly in unison with three repeated notes. This motif recurs throughout the movement, but is interrupted by bursts of triplets.

The slow movement is a set of variations, and each variation is in the minor key of the theme, something unique in Haydn's quartets and that doesn't occur in either Mozart's or Beethoven's either. The second variation is for the cello and is superbly written, demonstrating all the loveliest aspects of the instrument. Towards the end of the movement, a descending figure that has been a feature throughout is drawn out to something approaching anguish with extraordinarily prolonged clashes of harmony.

The minuet *alla Zingarese* is surely Haydn having some fun. The emphasised notes on all the wrong beats of the bar would have left any Viennese ballroom in chaos. The trio, however, is perfectly straightforward and again the opportunity for a jaunty cello solo.

The finale, marked *presto*, is perhaps more of a violin solo than the other movements and is full of life and fun.

## Beethoven String Quartet Opus 135 (composed 1827)

*Allegretto*

*Vivace*

*Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo*

*Grave, ma non troppo tratto — Allegro — Grave, ma non troppo tratto — Allegro*

In contrast to the Haydn quartet, written early in the composer's career and representing an early composition for string quartet, the opus 135 was Beethoven's last completed work and displays the culmination of his quartet writing. Just over fifty years elapsed between the two compositions and it is extraordinary how quartet music had evolved. Beethoven's early quartets written in the 1790s bear quite close resemblance to those of Haydn and Mozart at around the same time, but with each set of quartets he wrote, there is a step change in style. By the time we get to the five late quartets, written in the last years of his life, there are many changes. Gone is the standard, classical four movement pattern – fast, slow, minuet and trio, fast – that characterised most of Haydn's, Mozart's, Schubert's output, and also the earlier works by Beethoven. Minuet and trio movements, the last remnant from earlier divertimento-style music, are often replaced with *scherzi* – still relatively light-hearted movements, but not necessarily a dance.

Having said that, for this final quartet, Beethoven does return to the classical four movement pattern and we start with a fast-ish movement, followed by a scherzo-like movement, then a slow one and finally – after a slow introduction – another fast movement.

By the time Beethoven wrote this quartet his health was poor – he had had several severe stomach problems that had caused him to think, not unreasonably, that he hadn't long to live – and of course, he was almost completely deaf. However, this quartet has a remarkably clear, untroubled feel through most of the movements. The first starts with a strange little viola utterance replied to by a violin chirrup, and the movement continues quite simply as fragments of conversation, mostly genial.

The second movement in a fast  $\frac{3}{4}$  time, like the Haydn, is unstable rhythmically, but whereas, for the trio, Haydn had the simple cello solo with minimal accompaniment from the rest of the quartet, the trio section of Beethoven's scherzo is truly wild – the violin with pyrotechnics while the lower three instruments insistently repeat the same unison bar throughout – loudly!

The slow movement is wondrous. Again starting with a single note on the viola we feel we are safely back in the key of F major, but when the first violin and cello join the chord they introduce a D flat – and we are in a totally different key and instantly feel a sense of mystery. It's a glorious extended melody, and in fact, again like the Haydn, is a set of variations, though it's not so obviously so.

Various portentous meanings have been ascribed to the introduction to the final movement where Beethoven wrote over the music "*Muss es sein?*" (*Must it be?*) and then under the opening notes of the following fast music "*Es muss sein*" (*It must be*). Of course, since it's Beethoven's last quartet, and he perhaps thought that himself, it has been interpreted as Beethoven coming to terms with his impending death. But more recently there have been two other theories – one that it was to do with a debt to the baker, and Beethoven's obligation to pay it – another that a friend had asked for free copies of parts to opus 131 and Beethoven had responded that he must pay – a third that he was struggling to embark on the last movement but in the end just had to get on with it! After the very dramatic introduction, which does indeed seem to invite the more portentous

interpretation, the movement that follows is light and playful, with very little indication of preoccupation with mortality, so it's impossible to decide. The very last section is perhaps the most surprising part of all, and Beethoven signs off this final work very quickly and decisively.

Dvořák – String Quartet in G Opus 106 (composed 1895)

*Allegro moderato*

*Adagio ma non troppo*

*Molto vivace*

*Finale: Andante sostenuto; Allegro con fuoco*

This is one of Dvořák's last two quartets, written at the time when he had returned to his native Czechoslovakia having spent a few years in the United States.

At his birth, no-one would have predicted that Dvořák would become Bohemia's (now the Czech Republic's) arguably most famous composer, internationally renowned and still as popular over 100 years after his death. He was the first child of fourteen of a village shop-keeper (the son of peasants) who sold beer and meat he himself butchered and, as a hobby played the violin and the zither. Dvořák had little formal musical education, contributing to village musical life playing violin and keyboard in his spare time while helping his father in the shop, but money was somehow found to send him to the Prague Organ School where the education was mediocre, but where Dvořák did get to play in several orchestras – amateur, 'pops' and eventually the theatre orchestra with Smetana as conductor.

It is thought that Dvořák composed from a fairly young age, but that he destroyed works he considered inadequate. The first work we have is a string quintet from when he was 19 or so, and then there followed compositions in all genres except ballet. Having already composed quartets, symphonies, a cello concerto (not the one that is famous now), comic and grand operas, a cantata, it was not until Dvořák was 34 that he finally gained acclaim when his fifth symphony was awarded 400 florins in the Austrian State Prize competition, one of the judges being Brahms, who became a good friend.

It was at the recommendation of Brahms that the publishers Simrock took on Dvořák, and, having already made a good profit on Brahms' Hungarian Dances, persuaded Dvořák to compose a set of Slavonic Dances which proved equally popular and gained Dvořák and international reputation, and special appreciation from England. Dvořák made several trips to England where he was most enthusiastically received, the folk melodies in his music proving very popular.

However, he also had an enthusiastic following in the USA and was tempted to accept a post there as head of the National Conservatory of Music based in New York. Dvořák moved there with his family in September 1892 and during his relatively short tenure composed probably his most famous quartet, the twelfth "The American" and his final (9th) symphony "From the New World". Both were perceived to be influenced by folk music of the USA – in particular spirituals and plantation songs from the south and native American Indian music. Dvořák himself held there was no such intention, but he had done a great deal of research and immersed himself in American folk music as part of his role to establish an American style of art music, so, as a master of folksy melody, it was perhaps inevitable that something would appear in his compositions.

Tonight's quartet, his thirteenth, was written a few months after he returned to the Czech republic in 1895. One of Dvořák's passions, trains, had been amply catered for in the

USA where he had taken several memorable trips, but his other passion was pigeons and he was keen to return to his cottage on the estate of his wife's sister, Josephine, where he kept his pigeons. At the time of writing this quartet Dvořák's emotions were probably heightened – joy on his return home, but also sorrow as Josephine, who had been his first love, but had rejected him, had died just a month after his return.

The music of the quartet is unmistakably Dvořák, with characteristic haunting but sweet melodies, and a Bohemian feel throughout. The first movement opens with strong rhythmic elements and a *risoluto* theme that melts into a tender, sinuous melody in triplets that will reappear in the final movement. The *Adagio* has a dark, melancholy, Slavic theme, introduced by the violin. It is repeated throughout the movement in a variety of different moods and keys. Dvořák's good cheer returns in the *Scherzo*. In the first of its two trios the violin echoes a gentle theme from the viola. A brief *Andante* introduces the theme of the final *Allegro con fuoco*. The *Andante* returns to introduce the middle section, which is a meditation on the second subject of the first movement. Other elements from that movement also contribute including the tumbling triplets of the opening third bar. The movement's main *Allegro* theme returns and after some characteristic Dvořák sliding key-changes we romp to the finish.