Luigi Boccherini (1743-1805) String Quartet in G minor Op.32 No.5 (1780)

Allegro comodo
Andantino
Menuetto con moto
Allegro giusto

It's a rare treat to find a string quartet concert that starts with a work by Boccherini. It's a rarity that would have astonished his contemporaries, who nicknamed him "the wife of Haydn" because they considered the two on a par (even if Haydn was rated higher). They both composed in the *Style Galant*, and while Haydn brought greater depth and complexity to his work, Boccherini, himself a cellist, gave the cello part greater independence earlier than Haydn did.
Neither can be called "the father of the string quartet". Both played a part in its development as it evolved slowly from the Renaissance Consort of Viols. It is in the middle of the 18th century that the cello is gradually freed from providing a basso continuo and becomes a true member of the quartet. And that was not the work of any one person, even one of the genius of Haydn.

Even those who think they know no works by Boccherini will be surprised to find they do. His Minuet in A major has been transcribed for almost every possible instrument. And the duet in the film *Master and Commander: the Far Side of the World* is from Boccherini's Quintet Opus 30.

Boccherini started well, being sent to Rome to study cello age 13 and by the age of 16 he was in Vienna playing in the orchestra of the Imperial Theatre. He gave his first public concert there, performing his own string trios at the age of 17. His first published string quartet was written in 1761 (Haydn's Opus 1 was written between 1762-4) and he went on to write 99 (as against Haydn's 68). And while Haydn settled at the Esterházy court, Boccherini went to the court of Charles III at Madrid. He fell out with Charles, who was rash enough to say he didn't like one section of a piece Boccherini had composed. Instead of removing it Boccherini doubled it, which earned his dismissal by Charles but endeared him to Charles' younger brother, the Infante Don Luis. It was under his patronage that Boccherini composed much of his huge output, including today's Opus 32.

The opening *Allegro* introduces a simple, lively theme which extends interestingly. There's some lovely interplay of all four instruments and the cello even gets a little solo. The movement is in sonata form (exposition – development – recapitulation) which maintains our interest and Boccherini throws in triplet passages and interesting modulations. There's a lot of repetition but each time he has something new to say. The mood is sedate, deeply content, *comodo* in fact.

The slow movement is labelled *Andantino*, as though to signal that it shouldn't be played too slowly. It's another gentle movement, beautifully done; a conversation between friends as they hand the theme from one instrument to another.

Strangely, it is the *Minuetto*, usually a light-weight dance movement, which breaks the easy-going mood. It is fiery, emphasising the minor key with repeated leaps to the minor sixth. The trio becomes positively spiky, with triplets, then double speed triplets. This is Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* territory.

Finally, the *Allegro giusto* is fast, rhythmically exciting, almost helter skelter in its mood. And it gives the first violin two tremendous cadenzas which end the piece. This is not just a chance for the leader to show off. This is a composer, himself a virtuoso player, with his gloves off.

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) String Quartet No.6 in D minor

Mesto -Vivace
Mesto - Marcia
Mesto - Burletta
Mesto

Bartók wrote this, his last quartet, in the autumn of 1939. It was the most difficult of times. His mother was dying. In the build-up to the Second World War Hungary, to Bartók's disgust, sided with Germany. In 1938 came the *Anschluss,* and Bartók found himself asked by his Viennese publisher to state his race: Germanic or non-Aryan. Bartók refused to reply thereby losing his main source of income. In a letter to a friend Bartók noted with amusement that the correct answer for him was non-Aryan. As a Magyar (through his father) he was Finno-Ugric.
Bartók sent the manuscript of the 6th quartet to Boosey and Hawkes in London, and it was first performed by the Kolisch Quartet in New York in 1941. Appropriately, the Kolisch were themselves refugees from Europe, most of them being Jewish.

The structure of the quartet is straight forward once you realise that each movement starts with the same folksong-based theme that underpins the whole work. In the first movement it is only 13 bars. By the final movement it is the whole movement. And the mood of the piece becomes clear once you know that *mesto* means 'sad', although 'sad' is too mild a word in this case. 'Grief' comes nearer to the depth of feeling involved.

The first movement opens with one of the great viola solos in the repertoire. It shows no respect for key signature or bar lines; just 13 bars of haunting melody. Then the other players join in, some heavy *pesante* chords first, then *vivace*. It's a skittish, chaotic *vivace*. Occasionally we catch glimpses of the opening *mesto* theme but most of the time the writing seems all over the place. As if that is not enough Bartók ups the tempo to *vivacissimus agitato*, followed by *ancora più vivo*. Then the *pesante* chords return and the cycle is repeated. The end is suddenly tranquil with the final four bars marked *lento*.

The *mesto* theme in the second movement is played by first violin and cello, with the middle strings upping the tension with a disconcerting *tremolo*. Then the March starts with a jerky rhythm impossible to march to. This is a Charlie Chaplin sort of march, but with a nightmarish quality about it.

The *mesto* that starts the third movement involves all the players except the viola. The three voices interweave in their plaintive way, only to give way to the Burletta, or burlesque. If the Marcia was unpleasant this is worse. From the start Bartók asks the players to play at the heel of the bow to give the harshest possible sound. Repeated down bows sound like devils shouting ha!ha!ha!ha! If the second movement ridicules Hitler's militarism, the third sees nothing ahead but harsh discord. Then suddenly an *andantino* allows all four players to share some glorious moments of melody. But it doesn't last; soon the music is bouncing about in fury again. At one point the second violin is asked to play a quarter tone flat. At another, players are asked to snap their *pizzicatos* so the strings slap against the fingerboards. At the end the devils are still laughing.

The fourth movement, pure *mesto*, starts with all four players loving caressing the now familiar theme. At first Bartók asks that it be played quietly but with expression. Soon, however, he marks it *senza colore* and the mood is resigned rather than fraught. Tension is introduced by some *tremulo* played scratchily with the bow near the bridge, but soon it ends with the solo viola recapturing a bit of its opening theme, followed by cello *pizzicato* chords. It seems intentionally ambiguous in mood.

Is it despair? Is it calm? Bartók was to leave for the USA in November 1940. As a Hungarian patriot he can’t have felt optimistic about the future.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) String Quartet No 3 in B flat, Op 67 (1875)
Vivace
Andante
Agitato (Allegretto non troppo)
Poco Allegretto con Variazioni

Compared with his first two quartets, Brahms' third quartet is more genial and relaxed, bucolic even. It was written in the summer of 1875, two years after the first two. Perhaps Brahms' successful publication of these first two quartets had stopped the ghost of Beethoven from looking over his shoulder quite so often, or at least had diverted its attention to Brahms' struggles with his first symphony (which finally appeared the following year as Op 68). Brahms was staying just outside Heidelberg in Ziegelhausen on the river Neckar - 'a very pretty place'. 'I stay sitting here, and write from time to time highly useless pieces in order not to have to look into the stern face of a symphony.' Doubtless, Brahms did not seriously include his third quartet among these 'highly useless pieces'; he preferred it to his first two, and his violinist friend Joseph Joachim thought it among his most beautiful chamber music. After Joachim told Brahms that he had been fingering some passages, Brahms wrote that he wanted Joachim to change the part so that no fingering was necessary: 'The necessity for fingering is proof of bad writing'. Sadly, not all composers are as thoughtful to their performers!

The work is dedicated to a an amateur cellist friend Theodore Engelmann who was professor of physiology at Utrecht. Perversely the work has no cello solo, but unusually favours the viola. Brahms suggested to Engelmann that he might like to change instruments in order to enjoy the viola part in the third movement.

That the viola is going to receive special treatment is evident from the opening bars of the cheerfully playful first movement: the viola in thirds with the second violin plays an off-beat accented flourish (*illustrated*) very reminiscent of the two-viola opening of Mozart's last string quintet (K. 614). Being Brahms, we soon get a competing phrase which divides the bar's 6 quavers into three groups of two rather than two groups of three. The play between twos and threes continues as the time-signature changes from 6/8 to 2/4 so that 4 quavers now occupy the same time as 6 previously did. But these rhythmic games just serve to enhance the fun.

The second movement has one of those glorious Brahms melodies (*illustrated*) that you want to just go on: this one gives the first violin 24 bars of bliss <u>and</u> a reprise towards the end.

The viola is the star of the third movement. Unhandicapped by the muting of its colleagues, it leads with an agitated theme related to the opening flourish of the first movement. It even gets a mini-cadenza towards the end of the first Minuet-style section.

The last movement is a set of variations on a graceful theme that Brahms might have had in mind when he wrote to Engelmann that 'this quartet resembles your wife somewhat – it is dainty and original!'

Programme notes by Andrew Polmear (Boccherini, Bartok) and by Chris Darwin (Brahms).

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