



Ensemble of St. Lukes

by Denis Joe □ May 2011

at Royal Liverpool Philharmonic

Alexander Marks *violin*

Kate Marsden *violin*

Robert Shepley *viola*

Gethyn Jones *cello*

Haydn: *String Quartet No.4 in D Major, Op.20*

Beethoven: *String Quartet No.4 in C minor, Op.18*

One of the best indicators of a music society's success is the amount of offshoots that arise from it. The Liverpool Philharmonic Society has had quite a few, but it's not the quantity but the quality of the offspring that matters.

The Ensemble of St. Luke's was formed in 1992 when a group of friends from the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra got together informally, to raise money for St Luke's Church in Crosby. Since then they have found themselves in demand throughout the North West with a

wide-ranging repertoire. For this concert the group chose to focus on the two giants of classical music (in the truest sense); Haydn and Beethoven, with two early, but very important, works.

It is no exaggeration to say that the six string quartets that make up Haydn's Op 20 were a precursor to a revolutionary (though reactionary) change in the arts - particularly literature and music – that became known as Romanticism, a reaction against the rationalism of Enlightenment. The philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau expounded the idea of human freedom and a return to nature. The great German poets Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller went further in their reaction against the Enlightenment, espousing the new *Sturm und Drang* movement that "exalted nature, feeling, and human individualism and sought to overthrow the Enlightenment cult of Rationalism." What should be noted here is that this reaction against Enlightenment values, in the arts, was seen as a reaction against a simplification in the art of music.

A new style of classical music, fashionable from the 1720s to the 1770s, was called *Galante* music. Its contrapuntal texture intensified composing techniques that realized a pattern on the page and substituted a clear leading voice with a transparent accompaniment. Its audience was found in the growing cities of the time amongst the rising bourgeoisie. One of the main ironies of the movement was that it further illustrated man's estrangement from the natural world as it highlighted the more sophisticated nature of humans; after all what animal had the consciousness to love, hate or even the prescience to compose such music? So whilst the movement was, indeed, against progress they were not, unlike the anti-Enlightenment fanatics that seem so prevalent today, totally misanthropic.

A further irony is that these quartets of Haydn became known as 'The Sun' (a symbol that suggests enlightenment) quartets as a result of an illustration on the cover of the first manuscripts.

The fourth string quartet is the most popular of the group. It is also the clearest statement of the composer's views. Starting quietly there is a burst of arpeggio in the first violin, before we are taken back to the calm. The movement continues to move between calm and a contained violence through to another theme before we barely notice that we have been brought back to the first theme. The movement, however, ends on a pianissimo chord. This was not the sort of entertainment usually heard in courtly music. Here we see Haydn giving free reign to emotion.

The second movement, an *adagio*, starts off with a variation that could be have been lifted from J S Bach. It is in this movement that the four instruments are given equal voice and in this first variation we find the second violin and the viola, dominate until the cello (the instrument closest to the pitch of the human voice) takes up the theme as a classical design. The movement then moves into unfettered territory with the first violin taking up the third variation.

In the third movement, *Allegretto alla zingarese*, Haydn fully exploits the freedom of 'Gypsy' music. The term 'alla zingarese' allows for a greater change of pace and intensity. The music in this movement has a very modern feel to it; compared to the more 'charming' Hungarian inspired pieces of the later composers Brahms and Liszt, which sound far more sober than the music of this movement. The fourth movement continues the 'gypsy' sound at a more energetic (*presto*) pace allowing for some showy moments by Alexander Marks on first violin.

This is the first time I have experienced the playing of the Ensemble of St. Luke's. Hearing Haydn's' Quartet live, for the first time, I was delighted that such an expert group were presenting the piece. Hearing it on CD can make it sound like a piece from its time (1772), but experiencing this gem of a piece live brought out the freshness of it and made it sound almost contemporary. It also made me aware that this music sowed the seeds of a movement that would give the World Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* and Mahler's Symphonies, before Schönberg announced that it was Brahms that was the progressive, around the turn of the 20th century that

ushered in neo classicism. Listen to Haydn: String Quartet No.4 in D Major as played by the Jupiter Quarter http://traffic.libsyn.com/gardenmuseum/haydn_op20.mp3



Written around the time that Beethoven left Bonn for Vienna in order to study with Haydn, around 1793, this quartet is part of a group of six (though, in actual fact the no. 4 was the last quartet to be finished) the op18 group were dedicated to Beethoven's patron Prince Franz Joseph von Lobkowitz. At the time Beethoven arrived, Vienna was the centre of the Habsburg Empire as well as the World centre for chamber music writing. With an aristocracy in competition in order to host the newest of chamber compositions (a sort of early version of 'keeping up with the Joneses) Beethoven found an eager supporter in the Prince, who would also become the dedicatee of the *Eroica Symphony*.

The op 18 group of quartets were Beethoven's first venture into this particular medium and it took two years of arduous labour to complete the six string quartets. These quartets show Beethoven's veneration of the older Haydn; they show a new approach to musical themes: slow movements; abrupt playing; dramatic urgency, moments of utter calm and a tendency towards using distant keys. The fourth quartet in the series, also shows the influence of Mozart (c minor being the key of many of Mozart's' compositions; suggesting a more serious and sombre mood).

The first movement, *Allegro ma non tanto*, has the first violin playing a hesitant theme whilst the other four instruments accompany in an agitated manner. This section plays with a lovely theme, taken up now and then, by the first violin and the other strings. Despite the lyricism of the theme there is a strong sense of the rhetoric to the movement.

What is novel for the period is that in this quartet there is no slow movement as such, and it is the second movement *scherzo* which functions as the slow movement. The section is certainly lively, with much wit ('*scherzo*' being Italian for 'joke') and although it is moderately paced, the movement maintains the geniality that the *scherzo* is noted for.

The third movement *minuet* is a leisurely paced dance but there is an unsettling feel to it that suggests Mozart's classicism but also the *Sturm und Drang* Romanticism that Haydn is noted for. The trio of instruments seem to be engaged in a light-hearted conversation with each other, only to be interrupted by a sombre sounding first violin.

As with quartets 5 and 6 in the op. 20 set, no. 4 ends with a strong finale, basically an allegro, that is played briskly but has a serious feel to it. It was, perhaps, the first time that the finale of a string quartet carries the major weight of the composition. This section almost sounds like a variation on the opening theme as the internal music has such diverting harmonics. In this it is perhaps more determined to create the tension of the second movement from the Haydn quartet.

C minor would come to be a key Beethoven reserved for highly dramatic works, including most famously the *Fifth Symphony*. He had used the key in previous works but not to signify any particular emotion. This was the first time that the composer would use the C minor key to suggest emotional depth.

The op. 18 string quartets are accepted by many as the quartets that laid the ground work for the string quartet of the future. Whilst Beethoven was aware of the pioneering importance of those quartets of Haydn and Mozart (acknowledged in this quartet), it was he who in this first attempt, completed the revolution in the form that began with these two predecessors. See an outstanding performance of the first movement by the Providence String Quartet <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aryBrwVWuYY>

This concert was the first that I have attended where the Ensemble of St. Luke's performed. As I have suggested in previous reviews, chamber music is one of the most difficult forms of music to perform and experience, but is also perhaps, the most rewarding as we get to see and hear the strengths (and sometimes the weaknesses) of the individual instrumentalist. The Ensemble of St. Luke's is certainly a group more than capable of meeting the demands of the genre and particularly these two string quartets.

The Ensemble will be returning to the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall to perform, what I believe is the greatest piece of chamber music of the 20th century: *Shostakovich's String Quartet No.8* and one not to be missed - see

<http://www.liverpoolphil.com/3483/events-classical-music/ensemble-of-st-lukes.html>

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Editors Note: Whilst we're on the subject of the relationship between art and politics, the Manchester Salon is organising a discussion entitled '[Valuing the arts](#)' looking at 'how the arts sector can ensure quality in the midst of dramatic budget cuts' on Tuesday 21 June.