Ensemble of St. Luke's

at Royal Liverpool Philharmonic

Reviewed by Denis Joe October 2011

Aled Smith *Czárdás* (world premiere) & Shostakovich *String Quartet No.8*

Alexander Marks (violin), Kate Marsden (violin), Robert Shepley (viola), Gethyn Jones (cello)

The audience for this lunchtime concert were treated to a bonus from the ***Ensemble of St. Luke's*** , as they performed Mozart *String Quartet in C major* , K. 157 (I. *Allegro* , II. *Andante* , III. *Presto*

). Composed in 1773, when Mozart was around 17 years old, it is a beautiful piece that has its roots in folk music, particularly East European. The
Presto
seems to have borrowed from Czárdás, a traditional Hungarian folk dance (the name derived from
csárda
old Hungarian term for tavern). It originated in Hungary and was popularized by Roma music bands in Hungary and neighbouring lands. The music of the Quartet is lively, full of youthful energy, amd there is none of the romanticising of traditional music that became the hallmark of the later Romantics. The Quartet sounds as if it was composed simply for the pure joy of the music and nothing more.

Third year single hons music student, Aled Smith's *Czárdás* was an interesting and very mature piece. A student of Stephen Pratt at Hope University, the 21 year old cut an awkward figure when being interviewed by Gethyn Jones, prior to the Ensemble playing the piece. Aled suggested that his *Czárdás,* which was commissioned, for this concert, by the Ensemble of St. Luke's, was intended to compliment the Shostakovich
Quartet
. For me the approach Smith takes in the
Czárdás
has more in common with Bartok than Shostakovich. The
Czárdás
follows the path of that form of music but avoids caricature and simple replication. In doing so Smith allows the audience to appreciate the sophistication of the music as well as it's pure energy. It is a tribute to Aled Smith that at such a young age he can produce a piece of music that seems so mature that it holds its own in this programme, and if this is the quality of music being composed by students today then I think it is safe to say that the future of compositional music is in safe hands.

The Twentieth century was an exciting period for the quartet, with cycles from Bartok, Schoenberg, Elliot Carter and Shostakovich. Perhaps the quartet that has held the greatest affection is the latter's 8th and so when an opportunity to hear it performed live happens then it is a special occasion. Shostakovich wrote 15 symphonies and 15 string quartets, and the

common assumption is that the symphonies represent the public face whilst the quartets represent the personal. I have long thought this to be wrong, not simply because any work of art begins from the subjective view of the artist, but once it enters the public domain, that view becomes redundant as the audience impose their own understanding, but also that the 8th String Quartet, dedicated to “the memory of the victims of Fascism and war”, is a very public statement.

But there is also the fact that Shostakovich uses the DSCH motif (his initials)and this adds to the idea that it is autobiographical. But he also used the motif in two symphonies, 1 and 5, the latter a very public statement of ‘loyalty’ to the party, as well as the first Cello Concerto.

There is a great deal of confusion about Shostakovich: the man. As David Fanning noted in his book on the Eighth String Quarter (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004), Shostakovich could not be seen as a dissident in the manner of Meierhold or Solzhenitsyn, whilst he fought to maintain his individuality throughout the period of Stalinist terror, as well as after the dictator’s death, he made compromises. Yet even within those comprises (such as the Fifth Symphony, "a Soviet artist’s creative response to justified criticism" after Stalin voiced his disapproval of the opera *La dy Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*
) Shostakovich asserted his integrity. He was, in the words of one Soviet musicologist, *inakomislyashchiy*
: “the otherwise-thinker” [Fanning p. 11].

The DSCH motif open the quartet, rather hesitatingly at first. We have a fugue of the motif played first by the lead violin and moving around to be completed by the cello whilst the viola creates a dissonance. In one sense, as Fanning points out [p.57], the first movement could almost be titled ‘Introduction’ or ‘Prelude’. It sets the emotional tone for the whole of the quartet. The second movement is an incredible contrast to the opening movement (there are no pauses between the work's five movements but they are easily detected). The pace is *Allegro Molto* an

d is about four times as fast in one bar. The movement quotes the DSCH motif as well as a quote from the Piano Trio and the Eighth Symphony. What becomes (for me) the most thrilling section of the Quartet is the music based on Jewish dance. In one sense it seems like a celebration of the joys of Jewish culture but also, in the full picture of the quartet, there seems to be a grotesque urgency about it, especially as it follows a particularly desperate passage that threatens to tear the music apart. I don't know how many times I have heard this string quartet or how many different recordings, but no section of music conveys such intensity and conflict as this second movement. How the musicians can continue to play, after what must be such a physically and emotionally draining passage, is a wonder to me.

The third movement acts rather as a bridge between the second and fourth movement. It is taken up mainly by the cello and first violin and punctuated with a waltz feel. Though there is a strong sense of confusion about what we should be feeling about this waltz, as with the Jewish music, quoted earlier, the sense of threat hangs over it. This threat is made apparent in the fourth movement, particularly in the famous 'door knock'. For me this brutal rapping, that is captured so persuasively in this movement, is Shostakovich's most "personal statement". It is said that, having seen many of his friends 'disappeared', Shostakovich always carried a toothbrush around with him, expecting to be picked up by the state secret service at any time. These short bursts, played by all four instruments at once, is one of the most convincing portrayals of oppression. The fifth movement is almost a restatement of the opening - it is as if Shostakovich is announcing that he had survived it all.

The Eighth String Quartet's popularity is, perhaps, down to the fact that it is the most pivotal of Shostakovich's work. Premiered in 1960, during the 'thaw' of the Khrushchev years, its twenty minute length seems to cover in the whole of his work up to that point. There is almost a feeling of relief after the instrumentalists lower their bows; not that the music is over, but that it could be completed. Shostakovich was an artist who spoke for the people who suffered under that darkest period of the 20th century. He didn't set himself up as the 'voice of the People' it seemed that History forced that upon him.

Many people have, and will continue to, pore over the private and the public of Shostakovich's life in order to explain his music. But it is too simplistic to simply say that the use of the DSCH motif in his music suggested the autobiographical nature. To me the motif serves the same purpose that the universal 'I' does in the poetry of Walt Whitman: it is simply the portrayal of the *everyman*
.

This was my second experience of the Ensemble of St. Luke's , the Mozart and Aled Smith were played excellently, whilst with the Shostakovich there were a few scrappy moments in the first movement. That said, I have seen this quartet played live on a number of occasions, including the Fitzwilliam Quartet and it has never gone smoothly. Perhaps that is because of the demands placed on the instrumentalists, and the Ensemble of St. Luke's can take comfort from the fact that they excelled in the piece and provided
one of the best chamber concerts that I have been to
.