

14 January 2013

**Vienna and Schubert:**

**‘Death and the Maiden’ String Quartet**

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Good afternoon, and Happy New Year to you, first of all, and secondly, congratulations on braving the winter weather to come along and listen to one of Schubert’s most wintery pieces – we could not have arranged the weather and the repertoire better I think other than by singing “Winteriser”. Also, welcome to the Jubilee Quartet from the Royal Academy of Music, who are going to be playing for us the first two movements of the Schubert Quartet.

It is a big contrast I think with the last time we were here when we played “The Trout”, which was overtly sunny. It was interesting to see how it was put together and how effervescent and easy-riding it seemed to be. The interesting thing was of course nobody, for a moment, asked me “What does it mean?” because there is a natural tendency I think with music that people do not question happy music – happy music is happy music and it is meant to incorporate you and perhaps make you happy as well, but nobody asks any more leading questions about it.

Miserable music, on the other hand, has everybody queuing up to be told what does it mean, what is the music saying, and this is something impossible to do, so if you are hoping for that today, just because this is miserable music, you will be disappointed. One cannot tell you in words what music means – that is why it is music. Music begins where words leave off. So, I suppose, in literary terms, it is poetry, not journalism, and there is certainly no instant translation guide for anything in abstract music. It is basically up to you. I think people sometimes shrink from this nowadays, and it seems to me that this is one of the reasons for the current popularity of opera amongst people who otherwise might not go to hear string quartets or abstract music or organ recitals or Schoenberg for orchestra. They find with opera that there is a ready-made guide to what is going on. You know very well why the music is miserable because the heroine has just shot her husband or whatever it was in the opera you happened to be looking at. But the “see and tell” element is very strong. With abstract music, there is much more of an imposition on you to work out for yourself what is going on. Do not despair though: there are some ways towards an answer, I think, although it cannot be a verbal description of what the music means.

I do not know if anybody remembers, years and years ago, on the BBC, there used to be a series of programmes organised by Hans Keller called “Functional Analysis”. Hans Keller was always, they used to say in the BBC, going around doing his functional analysis, only of course they abbreviated to opening letters, not very politely, being the BBC.

“Functional Analysis” I thought was exactly what I would like for a guide to music which should remain abstract, and if you do not want too much of Paul Tortelier telling you that the gavotte of the Bach Cello Suite represents little children playing in the street. Once he has told you this of course, that image stays with you forever and spoils every other image and it is not a translation.

Hans Keller’s “Functional Analysis” had no words. It just began with a note or two notes. This was mostly played by string groups, string quintet maybe or a string trio, taking a famous piece, taking its initial ideas and then just making them a little bit more malleable, adding a note, subtracting a note, extending a note, playing it in double-tempo or half-tempo, and gradually, your ears heard all the elements that you were going to hear in the piece, represented by a natural genetic modification occurring amongst the abstract musical notes. So, not for a moment did anybody say anything, so there was no colour or adjective or mood or any sort of explanation pinned onto any of these things; nor was there any explanation given of the changes, and so of course we all came to the obvious, and I think sometimes not always taught, way of looking at musical development, that although in the analysis, the changes were quite obviously forced changes, there was no propulsion to this slow-moving and then something else appeared, something went upside down.

It was all incredibly observant, but without propulsion. The great thing was then of course, when you came to the piece of music, the genius of the composer was not doing these tricks but making them all part of a logical sequence so that there was a reasoning behind every change that went on, so that gave the composition its intelligence force, but everybody’s I suspect would be different, and Hans Keller never for one moment added his own interpretation or explanation of anything that was there – you did it for yourself.

We cannot do that, although I would love sometime to experiment with reviving this thing, but it does take a long time and you have to be very patient. What I will try to do is though give you some little hints that will help you find your way through the first two movements of “Death and the Maiden”.

The two things I think that can be transmitted, or that I feel scientifically are relevant to what you are going to hear, would be matters of context and matters of construction. It does really help, I think, that you know the context from which a piece comes, what lies behind its composition in sheer temporal terms. I am not a great fan of the school of innocent listening which says you should get the most out of music by knowing nothing whatsoever about its period, its composer, and you should never have heard the name “Beethoven” and it should all go on by some happy osmosis. I think it does help to know what the setting is that lies behind the composition of this quartet.

Schubert was very depressed, quite a different person from the person we met last time, who was sunny, happy and taking country walking tours. This time, he is towards the end of his life, most of his music has been unsuccessful, most of his hopes for publication have been dashed, his operas that he kept writing one after another have all been disasters, if they were even staged at all, and on top of that of course, he was in the tertiary stages of syphilis, taking mercury medicine, but of course everybody knew, in those days, this killed you – either the mercury or the syphilis. A kind friend of his with enough money provided him with a doctor who followed him every day, and thus his life was extended a very little, but he was not a happy person and this is not musicological guesswork.

He wrote to a friend and said exactly that, he said: “Think of a man whose health can never be restored and who, from sheer despair, makes matters worse instead of better. Think of a man whose brightest hopes have come to nothing, to whom love and friendship are but torture, and whose enthusiasm for the beautiful is fast vanishing, and ask yourself if such a man is not truly unhappy.” Well, that is a letter from the year when he wrote, amongst other things, this quartet.

He wrote because he had to write. It was not the situation with Schubert that he chose to write. It was an absolute compulsion, and in spite of all those negative factors, his depression, the prospect of a pretty soon death, and the failure of nearly all his works, there were also big questions on his mind, big challenges, clearly big fears, of death, and maybe big solutions.

This quartet was written in 1824. The song on which it balances was written several years earlier in 1817 and it did happen to be a song that was published, so Schubert is banking on the assumption that you already know the song of “Death and the Maiden”. If you do not, I will play it for you at the appropriate moment in a little while, so do not worry.

He also had a certain experience in writing string quartets. He had written a lot when he was younger, but he himself advised his brother not to bother playing them because they were complete rubbish, and it is true they are quite slight pieces. But from the “Rosamunde Quartet”, the A minor, and the “Death and the Maiden”, he is into a new world of quartet writing and there are quite a few qualities which set these quartets apart from the early ones.

In the early quartets, it is primarily the first violin who carries almost everything, and the other instruments are just obliging. I do not know, have you played some of the earlier quartets? It is pretty dull for the other three players and it is lovely for this player. He learnt to spread the jam rather more elegantly and generally in the later quartets, so everybody has something to do, every instrument maintains a character, often a separate character from the other three, and it results of course in a much more complicated, integrated texture. They are also, these later quartets, structurally more complicated, and that is the point at which everybody begins to worry I think, when they are listening to a complicated piece, four individuals all going their own way, and wondering how they can make sense of it – what you should follow, what you should be noticing, what you should be expecting or interpreting.

It is helped I think, in the case of this quartet, and that is the reason we chose it, in that you do have a song in the background, and so that gives us words. It is the dialogue, as you see printed on your sheets now, from a poem by Matthias Claudius, of the slightly hysterical maiden and the soothing words of Death, who has come to get her. The quartet itself is not a translation of that piece but a parallel set of feelings developed and going beyond of course what poetry can do. Poems are very nice, they are set to music very beautifully for Schubert, but they do have one impediment, which is they have words, and the words pin things down in a way that abstract music never needs to be pinned down. So the best solution to that dilemma, as Schubert obviously thought, was, first, have a song, and then take off from the song and go into a level of musical thinking where there are no words left.

Chamber music is particularly good for this. He had on his list of works to produce in his last months of life he wanted to do more quartets, he wanted to do more piano music, he wanted to do, he said, a big symphony, which he managed. He never once mentioned that he wanted to do more songs – he had done enough, more than 600. He wanted to break free from the words.

What he is giving you I think here is not of course entertainment music but essential information that he wants to share, or at the very least, severe problems that he would like to spread around.

Good string quartets I think are in a special category because there is, as you can see, with only four players here, there are no extra parts to do the waffle. When you are looking at orchestral music, there is usually quite a few people just going “do-bee-do-bee-do-bee-do-bee-do-bee”, doing nothing in the background, just providing general colour and canvas. With a string quartet – or maybe a viola just has to go “Scooby-dooby-doo” sometimes, but on the whole, I think all of you have something important to say, would you agree? All that you are playing is essential to the argument. So, it is a very x-ray formula for looking at the feelings of the composer because there is nothing to get in the way of the actual veins and arteries and the lines of thought that he is following. It is there very economy I think, that one has to be very careful with the elements, that makes it probably both more problematic for us to know what it is doing because we cannot switch on the verbal equivalent, but also just to navigate amongst what is there.

So, in terms of construction, let us just see what he gives you from the very start. The first movement begins with a little introduction, and we will see why in a moment, and straightaway in this introduction you know perfectly well this is not going to be a happy piece.

**[Music plays]**

So, certainly not happy. What you hear is aggressive octaves and these trills, “pa-pa-pa-pum, pa-pa-pa, pum” going very obviously downwards, springing certain ideas in your mind. Then he goes on with a little voice, taking those triplets. These triplets are going to be awfully important, so he just gives them to you again.

**[Music plays]**

Is that a new voice or is that those triplets speaking to you more softly? This is a piece of tremendous contrasts. You know perfectly well it is not a natural narrative; it is a controlled narrative, with the puppeteer really playing with the elements, suddenly very loud, suddenly very soft, but you can say the triplets carry on. You heard them loudly at the beginning, but are those triplets the same triplets, or is that a new voice, another narrator? It is a single instrument. Is the first violin speaking? Is it Schubert speaking through the first violin? In any case, that was left as a question. What does the question lead to? Here is the triplet leading into the answer…

**[Music plays]**

Most analyses of this piece call that the chorale element. I am not so happy with the “chorale element”. It is definitely more soothing, it is not aggressive, it does not have any triplets in it, it is linear, it is singing… “Chorale” though conjures up a sort of Christian idea and there is no evidence that Schubert thought this was a Christian piece. It has been analysed as though it was a form of liturgy, but that does not have to follow, and so, although we will call it “chorale”, in inverted commas, do not put into it any connotations that this building might occasion for this.

That was the end of the introduction, and here is how the piece proper starts, and you see immediately why this could not have been a real beginning – it had to have an introduction.

**[Music plays]**

The propulsion for all this, of course, is the business of triplets, which is here given to the cello and the viola, busy with triplets, not with melodies.

**[Music plays]**

Great! This leads on, you will notice, almost every bar is full of nothing but triplets. There is something about this triplet figure that is going to be important, and you will see it running through the whole piece – what are these triplets?

Well, Schubert never tells us. If it was a religious piece, Bach scholars would say triplets represent the Trinity. If it was a song, then it would be the earl king or something – it would be galloping. If it was something inexorable, triplets might be just the galloping of time – when you are fatally ill, time goes very fast, triplets are very important. It is possible to go faster than triplets, as we will see, in a panic, but maybe there is something to this triplet element that is going to turn the key on other things that go on, and we will see, when he has taken us through these triplets, we reach exactly the point where the introduction started, these big, bold octaves, but this time, instead of the silence, which leaves you feeling a little numb, you do not quite know what is happening next, there is a terrific uplift. All the instruments decide to come upwards to hit the next octave.

**[Music plays]**

For a contrast, after that, because maybe there is some optimism in this – upwards usually means optimism, downwards, I think most people feel is the other way round, it depends which way you hope to go in the end I suppose! Here is another element. Again, it is derived. Do not worry how it is derived. It has a little rocking figure from the cello, and it has what might be a lullaby over it.

**[Music plays]**

But Schubert did not leave it like that. We were deliberately missing out the viola. The viola is there, busily putting in, of course, triplets. They may sound a little easier, but certainly they make the whole passage and more running and something is underneath. Here is the same thing, with the triplets in place…

**[Music plays]**

You notice how he gets obsessive: he starts on triplets and will not stop. When he wrote the Ninth Symphony, the longest symphony ever written at that point, it was given to London for a premiere and the London Philharmonic Orchestra refused to play it. They looked at their music and they said, look, we have 360 bars, consecutive bars, of nothing but triplets – we are just not going to play this rubbish, it is worse than John Adams! So it missed its premiere and it was because of this manic idea Schubert had for the potency of the triplets doing many things.

Suddenly, there is a moment where they stop being triplets. This is quite shocking and you get into this panic mode, where the first violin suddenly plays semi-quavers, faster than the triplets, and everybody else discusses what we thought was perhaps a lullaby but certainly is not a lullaby any longer.

**[Music plays]**

The semi-quavers go on, they gradually work themselves down, and by now, you are wondering are these all part and parcel of the same discussion – are these semi-quavers just a version of the triplets or are they something different, and we see they are different characters. They are not part of the same family. Just put together maybe this next little passage, starting with the cello. Here is what the cello does after the semi-quavers have died down…

**[Music plays]**

Here it is, the same thing, with the second violin assisting this…

**[Music plays]**

Here it is with the viola, adding, as you might expect, triplets…

**[Music plays]**

And the very awkward semi-quavers, insisting on being on top…

**[Music plays]**

This is the reason why I think some of the greatest pieces of music are called “classics”, simply because, at a first hearing, that is terribly complicated to work out what is going on, even more complicated to explain to yourself why it is going on, even to hear it. It has to be heard several times, probably after first hearing, immediately go back and hear it again, and on repeated hearings, repeated things come to light. None can be put down in words. They can only work in your head as a musical language. Here is the whole of the first movement.

**[Music plays]**

That was a reconciliation with death, but not a good death, as they say. Schubert’s description of whatever was motivating that movement, coming to its end, is still quite frightening.

We will do now what you cannot do in a concert, and that is hear the song, “The Death and the Maiden”, for which you have the words, before we hear the variations on it, and that gives you some idea of what Schubert is actually thinking, of a more perfect reconciliation with death.

**[Music plays]**

As you see, although the poem has two parts, the song has three parts: Death arrives with no words, at the beginning, before the Maiden is alarmed, and Death ends on a monotone, whether that is the monotone of death or the monotone of the church, and it ends in the major. There is a disguised happiness. You will find the same in its transference to the string quartet. When you get to the end of Death’s music, there is just a beautiful little groupetto – just play that little last bar…[sings]… It is this, just comes to life at the end of the theme.

**[Music plays]**

It becomes human instead of stony. After that come a series of variations, all giving a different viewpoint onto the consideration of the death melody, which is hidden somewhere, with a very stuttering breathless first violin, and of course, essentially triplets hiding everywhere, and we gradually move into the major. There is wonderful triplets, eloquent and floating triplets, nothing like the ones we have heard before, and at the final variation, the movement goes from semi-quavers down to triplets, down to quavers, down to crochets, down to I think it is syncopated minims, and gradually into minims and gradually into nothing. It is a perfect picture of the end, displayed partly through that very monotone voice of Death, but I think more importantly through the rhythms that we have been tracing all the way through the first movement, now doing a real job at showing the declining heartbeat until you come to the very end of this set of variations. Go directly in…

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