

Intimate Voices: The Edinburgh Quartet at The Queen's Hall



'That', said the man sitting next to me, 'was extraordinary'.

The Edinburgh Quartet had just finished a breathtaking performance of **Sibelius's *String Quartet in D minor Op 56, 'Voces Intimae'***, the conclusion of the first full concert in its new ***Intimate Voices*** series. Nobody knows exactly why the composer wrote '*intimate voices*' above the score of the slow movement of this work, but no matter – *intimate* is the hallmark of the Quartet's style, and last Wednesday's performance was no exception; these musicians' communication with one another, and with their audience, is akin to modern jazz. They may not be improvising, but their empathy is almost tangible.



Franz Schubert wrote his ***Quartet in E Flat D87 Op 125 No 1*** when he was just 16 years old, although it was not published until after his death 15 years later. The lush, sweeping first movement was evidently much enjoyed by violinist **Tristan Gurney**, whose facial expressions were a joy to behold. It is followed by an initially jaunty second movement in which the violins and viola become faster and faster, fall back, then work up speed again, whilst the cello plays a simple, slow note beneath them. Beautiful clear notes from the first violin opened the slower third movement, which continues in a more formal, almost funereal tone; reflecting this, as the movement ended, the players lifted their bows away slowly and reverentially – again their complete engagement with the music was palpable. Mark Bailey's cello plucking at the start of the

fast final movement put me in mind, I have to admit, of Jack Lemmon in *Some Like It Hot* – in other words, I loved it. Tristan Gurney's playing was positively bouncy, and the jolly little interchanges between the violins and the cello kept the mood light and relaxed.



Too much of a good thing, be it wine, women or song, and no matter how excellent that thing is, can lull us into complacency. The Edinburgh Quartet was clearly not having any of that; from the exuberance of a youthful Schubert the concert moved into much darker territory – **Shostakovich's Quartet No 7 Op 108**. Written in 1960, this piece was dedicated to the composer's wife, **Nina Varzar**, who had died at the age of just 44. Shostakovich actually joined the Communist Party in 1960, though it seems unlikely that he did so willingly; the Khrushchev regime was looking for support from the leading ranks of the intelligentsia in an effort to create a better relationship with the Soviet Union's artists, and wanted Shostakovich to become General Secretary of the Composers' Union.

The Quartet begins with some interplay between second violin (soon joined by viola) and cello, the latter sonorous, the former quick and sparse. Some fast *pizzicato* violin follows. In the second movement the first violin plays a haunting melody, high-pitched and fairy-like against the cello's sad, persistent notes, which creep back eerily as the second violin fades away.



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The 1960s would see the **Cuban Missile Crisis**, the **Vietnam War** and the construction of the **Berlin Wall** take centre stage; the Western world was in turmoil, a turmoil mirrored in the third movement, in which, from the outset, the music is positively frantic, with all bows thrashing furiously and both violinists out of their seats. Whatever is going on, there can be no question that the composer – and the musicians – feel strongly about it. The audience senses anger, frustration and violence as everything gets faster and faster; again one is reminded of film, although this time of the soundtrack to a silent movie, ever more threatening as the drama reaches its peak. Then, just as suddenly as it has begun, the moment is over, and the Quartet ends quietly, perhaps wistfully, suggesting words left unsaid, or even someone withdrawing from the scene.



Jean Sibelius, perhaps Finland's most famous son, started his *Quartet in D Minor* in London in 1908, by which stage in his career he was well into orchestral symphonies. In his programme notes, **Roger B Williams** likens Sibelius writing a work for four solo strings to '*an oil painter sketching in black and white*', but emphasises that '*there is nothing of the compromise about this Quartet*', which begins once more with

notes from the violin answered on the cello. The first movement develops with harmonious sound, but then moves into a lively, light second in which even the cello flies along. By contrast the slow third movement is graceful and majestic, opening with a quiet, slow, first violin as the instrument seems to develop a tiny theme all alone, but is gradually joined by the cello, viola and second violin in rich, sweeping music, which then becomes wistful as the violins end the movement with gentle, barely heard strokes.



Sibelius was a great drinker and smoker; by 1908 his lifestyle was catching up with him and in May of that year he had to have a tumour removed from his throat. Illness does not appear to have affected his spirits; the fourth movement (or *scherzo*) of the piece begins in slightly ponderous tone, evoking perhaps the forests and lakes around **Hameenlinna**, the city in which the composer was born, but soon becomes a light and energetic dance as the violins scurry to crescendo after crescendo. After a final movement of frenetic, urgent music – at one point the cellist is almost banging the strings – the Quartet comes to a triumphant close. Sibelius wrote of this piece, '*it turned out as something wonderful*'; the audience on Wednesday night clearly agreed.



In string quartets, Tristan Gurney says, composers write from the depths of their souls, creating works that sometimes sound like four musicians having an intimate conversation with one another. Intimate venues such as The Queen's Hall allow those musicians to convey what they're going through on the stage, to share their own 'whirlwind of emotions'. At the end of this spectacular concert The Edinburgh Quartet had taken its audience from 19th century Austria on to the Cold War and back to early 20th century Finland; the journey, as my neighbour said, was quite extraordinary.

The Edinburgh Quartet will play in Glasgow on 17th November and Stirling on 14th December, returning to Edinburgh on 13th January 2016 to begin the ***Storm and Stress*** section of their season with a rush hour concert at **St Andrew's & St George's West Church**, George Street.

Image of Dmitri Shostakovich: Deutsche Fotothek.

