

Anton Bruckner (1824-1896)

String Quintet in F major

1. *Gemassigt (moderato)*; 2. *Scherzo: Schnell (allegro)* – *Trio: Langsamer (slower)*; 3. *Adagio*; 4. *Finale: Lebhaft bewegt (lively and varied)*

Of all the principal chamber music combinations the string quintet is probably the rarest. When the Muse of the string quintet was first distributing her largesse in the 18th century she rather carelessly awarded at least one hundred to Boccherini so thereafter had to be more frugal with her gifts. She avoided Haydn, allowed Mozart six; Beethoven one (though for him a minor work, plus a handful of arrangements of other works); gave Schubert a single, though major, example, while Spohr got seven. From then on it was a maximum of two – Mendelssohn, Brahms, Dvorak. Nothing for Schumann or the Russians. Even the important 20th century chamber composers were denied – Bartok, Janacek, Hindemith, Shostakovich never essayed a string quintet. On her return to Parnassus the Muse had one example left and thinking it a source of great amusement she dropped it in the lap of the least likely of all composers, Anton Bruckner, organist and composer of religious works large and small and huge orchestral symphonies but with no experience of chamber music save for a string quartet which was merely an exercise for his teacher Kitzler in 1862 when he was 38 years old ! An acknowledged master of the organ (he was one of the privileged few invited to inaugurate the Royal Albert Hall instrument) and already an experienced composer of choral music, once he decided to study 'seriously' he put himself in the hands of Kitzler and Sechter (who had been one of Schubert's teachers) and obeyed them to the letter even refraining from original composition save for the set exercises given – and this at an age when Mozart, Schubert and Mendelssohn would have been already dead. But this strict self-discipline did allow Bruckner to emerge as probably the most learned composer of the second half of the 19th century in all aspects of form and harmony and especially counterpoint which he was now able to put to good use in his composition.

On being examined at the Vienna Conservatoire at the end of this study period, in order to obtain a diploma allowing him to teach harmony and counterpoint, one of the examiners exclaimed: "He should have examined us". This particular individual, Johann Herbeck, became Bruckner's first advocate – something he really needed as he was a fish out of water in cosmopolitan Vienna, misunderstood, and considered something of a country bumpkin – strong proof, indeed, that appearances can be deceptive. Following this 1861 diploma examination another member of the panel, Joseph Hellmesberger the leader of a distinguished quartet, asked Bruckner if he would write an example for him and the following year he did write his only string quartet for Kitzler – but merely as an exercise. Not till 1879 did Bruckner respond to the original request – and not with a quartet but a quintet completed in June of that year. It received its first performance in 1881, ironically, not by Hellmesberger's ensemble who deemed it as being 'too difficult'.

String quintets generally fall into two categories – these are described as viola quintets or cello quintets. Bruckner's is the former while Schubert's is the latter. Though Bruckner was probably aware of Schubert's example it was to Mozart that he looked in deciding to add a viola

rather than a second cello as in Schubert. Other associations with either of these composers are negligible for if there was any model for Bruckner it is more likely to have been Beethoven. But of what? There is no direct evidence of Bruckner being familiar with Beethoven's quartets at this time, and though he came to admire the Late Quartets this was long after the composition of his Quintet. So those who 'hear' Beethoven in Bruckner's work can be said to be providing 'an unwitting compliment to its composer's instinct in the absence of experience or knowledge' (of Beethoven) as Robert Simpson puts it.

Bruckner's great British champion, the composer Robert Simpson, has described this Quintet as '.....a remarkable phenomenon – an almost pure chamber work'. What is unquestionable is that despite the odd passage where one can imagine Bruckner is thinking orchestrally, he has actually understood completely the requirements of chamber music and by no stretch of the imagination can this Quintet be described as a 'symphony in disguise' as was the common currency for far too many years. Yet it is undoubtedly a neglected work which I can only put down to the lack of imagination and adventure by many chamber ensembles – unlike tonight's performers – as it is the perfect companion to Schubert's masterpiece (quite simply the two supreme examples of the string quintet in the 19th century by the two supreme Austrian composers of the romantic age, each steeped in classical orthodoxy and each not merely breaking all the rules with their differing approaches but rewriting them and expanding their scope). Schubert's Quintet was only published in 1851, long after its composition, and Bruckner is likely to have heard it performed or at least seen the score – though there's no proof of this – yet it doesn't appear to have any direct influence save for scale and profundity – but this is, surely, coincidental.

How to describe Bruckner's Quintet in a nutshell? Well, to paraphrase Pirandello - 'Five players in search of a key' would do very nicely. The First Movement begins in F with a 1st subject melody which is strikingly wide ranging, serene and confident on first violin over a cello F pedal bass supported by gently moving chromatic harmony in the inner parts. This lovely melody sounds even brighter when repeated by the cello and is soon joined by a myriad number of musical motifs. Very gradually this F major calm becomes more and more disrupted by the increasingly chromatic harmony until it disappears completely. A big unison statement in C alerts us to the conclusion of the 1st subject group which has proved to be a compendium of short thematic phrases in addition to the principal theme. The 2nd subject group is in the alien key of F sharp major. The exposition returns to the serenity of the opening and the development continues in the same vein but the plethora of material already built up is soon subjected to an intricately complex tour de force of contrapuntal procedures proving the close relationship of the apparently random matter and continually moving from key to key in unexpected modulations as though searching for the elusive F major tonic yet the start of the recapitulation finds the 1st subject back in F sounding even more magical than before but this key is soon lost again as a tapestry of themes is rewoven in ever wandering harmonies until the brief climactic Coda assures us of the supremacy of F.

Technically speaking this whole movement – and much of the rest of the Quintet – is founded on 'Neapolitan' harmonic shifts – a procedure designed to undermine tonality and of which

Bruckner was an absolute master. The whole concept of 'Neapolitanism' as Robert Simpson refers to it is too complex to define here but it is what gives this work, and especially this first movement, its unique 'flavour'. Let Simpson have the last word here. "What a masterpiece is this first movement, so subtle intellectually, so human in spontaneous feeling; it plays off the chromatic and the diatonic against each other with consummate artistry".

D minor is the key of the Scherzo in ABA form and though F major is nowhere to be seen D minor gets the usual rough ride. The droll opening theme is the source of all the melodic content of the A section which gets an exact repeat following the harmonically tempestuous B section where a settled key never appears. The delightful Trio starts a semitone higher in E flat, a suave rustic waltz whose opening phrase is answered by pizzicato 'guitars' – or 'zithers'? The scherzo is repeated.

The Adagio is an expansive movement whose main theme is of an ineffable beauty. In the rich key of G flat it slowly and effortlessly unfolds in wave after wave of resplendent dignity spawning several closely related but subsidiary themes. A succession of repeated Fs leads into the glorious 2nd subject soaring first on viola then cello. A vast development reworks this material through ever-shifting harmonies rising to a magnificent climax before the tonic G flat is regained as the opening subject is heard for the last time, the movement dying away in a state of bliss.

But what has happened to F major, not remembered since the first movement? Well, the galumphing pp subject which opens the Finale is of no help as we're in a Neapolitan variant of A flat minor and by the time the slower 2nd subject is reached we're apparently in E. This subject is really two simultaneous themes – one given out by the first violin while the others present a prominent motif from the finale of the Second Symphony. All the preceding is continuously shunted through various keys, often coming close to F but never quite finding how to get there. Fugal procedures dominate the development and build to a unison climax whereupon the 2nd subject returns in D flat, then the 1st subject in the home dominant, whereupon for the first time since the first movement F major can thunder out its triumphant rediscovery – and having conquered – just stops – as there's nothing more to say. (It is interesting to note that Bruckner's next work is his Sixth Symphony in A. This most neglected of the mature symphonies follows an almost identical trajectory as the Quintet – a persistent search for the right key which is only found at the conclusion of the first and fourth movements).

This Finale, is packed with invention yet is extremely compact – and to quote Robert Simpson for the last time: "it worthily concludes one of the most idiosyncratic but deepest chamber works since Beethoven".

Joseph Brand 2014