

NOTES for FEBRUARY 27, 2020

Alban Berg's String Quartet (1910) is always described as the last work he wrote under the direct supervision of his teacher Schoenberg; that is true, but there is a great deal hidden behind that simple statement. Berg first became Schoenberg's student in 1904 when the younger man was, as one biographer puts it, "little more than an enthusiastic amateur." He was put to work on a thorough grounding in harmony and counterpoint and it was not until 1907 that Schoenberg promoted him to being a composition student, although he had been producing some compositions before then – mostly songs. There is nothing particularly strange about this sequence; it is one followed by thousands of composition students today. What marks it out as worth comment is the timing of the two men's association. The years between 1904 and 1910 saw Schoenberg not merely developing as a composer, but moving, often blindly but inexorably, towards something he didn't fully understand. Here was no master just passing on the fruits of his greater experience, but a man who felt, in his own words, "as if I had fallen into an ocean of boiling water, and not knowing how to swim or to get out in another manner, I tried with my legs and arms as best as I could." Put simply, he is talking of the abandonment of tonality as the underlying logic of musical architecture. It was in this atmosphere that Berg composed his Op. 3 quartet, which is thus both a work supervised by the older composer and at the same time one in which he was coming to grips with similar challenges to those of his teacher and often finding his own idiosyncratic answers. Schoenberg's Second Quartet, written at the same time, introduces a soprano voice singing Stefan George's words, "Ich fühle Luft von anderem Planeten" (I feel air from another planet). Berg could feel that same air, but in exploring this dangerous and exciting element he was not driven to abandon everything from before, and as a result his music manages to combine radical modernist gestures with often overtly nineteenth-century Romantic ones. He saw nothing incongruous in this fusion and it was to mark his musical style for the rest of his life.

Misato Mochizuki's quartet, *Brains* was commissioned by Radio France and written for the Diotima Quartet, who gave its first performance in February 2017. On her website Ms. Mochizuki explains that the work was inspired by discussions with the neurologist Yuji Ikegaya, and examines four features of the human brain. First are those "spontaneous activities which are expressed in the form of fixed patterns." Second is the principle of "infection / contamination" – that is, "the way in which one learns by imitating the gestures of others," and this is "the source of emotions such as compassion or sympathy." Third is the brain's capacity for "spontaneous learning and self-renewal, a faculty which singularly differentiates it from the computer." Finally, there is the "consciousness of the 'me', which is what differentiates it from the brain of the animal." The composer says that she found "the classical and austere form of the quartet an ideal field of exploration for developing this musical project ... The question of relationships - dependence, independence and/or interdependence [which is central to the string quartet genre] is at the centre of my compositional process. The examination of behavioural differences

through the voices of the quartet, is also a way of questioning myself as a composer, my identity and my own relationship to the world."

The Beethoven quartet on today's programme is the second of the three that the composer wrote on commission from the Russian musical amateur Prince Nikolai Galitzin. The prince had requested the quartets in 1822, but it was another three years before Beethoven completed the task. And if Beethoven was a little slow in fulfilling the commission, Galitzin was even slower in paying the fee of 50 ducats per quartet since the bill was only settled after the composer's death. Like a number of the late quartets, this one is unusual in structure with five movements and with the central slow movement, an immense piece lasting in clock time as long as many individual Haydn quartets. If you have just the tempo markings for this movement to go by, you will be missing important information. Beethoven added some words on his manuscript next to the tempo: *Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenden an die Gottheit in der lydischen Tonart – Molto Adagio*, and later the further inscription, *Neue Kraft fühlend – Andante*. 'Holy song of Thanksgiving of a Convalescent to the Deity in the Lydian mode,' and 'Feeling new Strength.' The immediate cause of this is purely biographical. Beethoven had been very sick during the winter of 1824-5 with a horrible litany of gastro-intestinal complaints. In May 1825, he left for Baden bei Wien, the spa town about 28km south of Vienna. He was under the care of a Doctor Braunhoffer who had told him to cut out all wine, coffee and spices, and who added, "Once you have been in Baden for a while you will feel better." And to some extent this was true, if only temporarily so. Beethoven was at least able to work once again and expressed his thanks in music: Braunhoffer received a rather foolish little canon with the text 'The doctor won't let death through the door; music helps us in our need,' while the more serious thanks were reserved for God and were turned into a universal celebration by their inclusion in this quartet. Beethoven's reference to the scale pattern known as the Lydian mode is also of significance. He is not just referring to a technical detail of the music that follows but is in essence recalling the style of church music by composers like Palestrina, which had been codified in the eighteenth century to form a staple of all musicians' education ever since; Beethoven was introduced to the discipline as a young man in his studies with Albrechtsberger. But the musical style of Palestrina was also invoked occasionally by later composers in a deliberately backward-pointing manner to indicate something particularly solemn and important, and frequently of especial religious significance. Bach did this in a number of his works and Beethoven had already used the concept in the *Missa Solemnis* and the *Ninth Symphony*. He uses it again to particularly striking affect in the *Adagio* sections of the third movement of this quartet. The work was given its first performance in Vienna in November 1825 by a quartet led by Ignaz Schuppanzigh, now back in the composer's favour after a disastrous première of his earlier Op. 127 quartet two years before.

-John Mayo