

Music in the Afternoon 2016-17 April 6th 2017
Aizuri Quartet

Thirty, thirty-four, twenty-two, eighteen: an odd way to start a programme note, perhaps? These are the ages of the composers when they wrote the pieces on today's concert. Whatever else we are thinking about here, we are celebrating youth. These are all youthful works, but there is a lot hidden in those numbers, and they are youthful works in very distinctive ways. The six quartets of Op. 18, written between 1798 and 1800, are Beethoven's first compositions in a genre he was to dominate, one might say, up to the present day. He was already well-known as a pianist and composer and he seems to have deliberately held back from writing and publishing string quartets in which he would immediately be in competition with those of Haydn and Mozart. Caroline Shaw's *Blueprint*, a piece written specially for the Aizuri Quartet dates from 2016 when the composer was thirty-four, but since she had already won the Pulitzer Prize for Music four years earlier, one has to admit that *Blueprint* is youthful, only in chronological terms. Webern's single movement piece for string quartet dates from 1905, although it wasn't published until 1965, well after the composer's death. There is no doubt that this is youthful, both chronologically, and stylistically. It was written at a crucial point in Webern's life and the music reflects this unashamedly; he was deeply in love with his fiancée Wilhelmine Mörtl and he had just completed one year of study with Schoenberg. If the first provided the driving force behind the composition, Schoenberg's rigorous training in post-Wagnerian harmony, as well as the example of his own *Transfigured Night* provided a language in which the young composer could luxuriate in a way that would soon become unavailable, at least for the members of the Schoenberg circle. Mendelssohn throws off all calculations of youthful or mature. His A minor quartet was written in 1827 when the composer was eighteen. He already had under his belt the marvellous Octet, an undoubtedly mature work finished at the age of 16, and the overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, an equally accomplished work, one year later.

If youth is one theme of this concert, Beethoven is another, a connection seen in all but the Webern work. Although the Op. 18 quartets were not written in the order in which they were published, the B flat quartet was indeed the last one to be composed and shows signs of new directions in Beethoven's thinking, most notably in moving the centre of gravity of the work to the last movement and away from the first. For Joseph Kerman the opening movement is, as a result, bland; Lewis Lockwood prefers the much more positive 'Haydnesque,' which he expands as "compact, intimate and of high craftsmanship." From this relatively modest beginning the quartet builds through an expressive Adagio and a Scherzo which is "a tour de force of syncopation...[and] an explosion of rhythmic eccentricity..." The final movement is "the most unusual, the most original movement among the Op. 18 quartets, and Kerman calls this "a piece that cuts across the entire mass of Beethoven's early music, an arresting premonition of achievements to come." In the score this movement has a title 'La Malinconia' with the instruction that "it is to be played with the utmost delicacy." This slow section is followed by a faster moving one in triple time that Lockwood labels as melancholy's opposite mood – 'sanguine'. By bringing back the melancholy music a number of times Beethoven produces "a sense of indecision as to what will happen to these opposed emotional states." The final prestissimo statement of the 'sanguine' music provides a clear answer.

Beethoven's B flat quartet is followed by a work that is very closely related to it. *Blueprint* in this context has two interconnected meanings. The name of the group performing today is derived from the Japanese *aizuri-e*, a style of woodblock printing primarily using a blue ink, so

the name of the composition is a dedication to the performers. But blueprint also means a particular kind of reproduction of a technical drawing, often of a building, and Caroline Shaw's piece makes use of the basic harmonic design of the Beethoven quartet – that is the older work is a floor plan, or blueprint, for the more recent one. Shaw is both a performer and a composer and as such has an ambivalent relationship with conventional notation. It is a curious fact of classical music life that we require performers to reproduce exactly what is written in the score in the minutest detail, yet when it comes to assessing the quality of the performance we expect them to go beyond this and incorporate those elusive elements that cannot be notated. Shaw's score acknowledges this by providing the performers with quirky, sometimes comical instructions that are completely open in their interpretation. One of my favourites is “gooey rallentando to a lugubrious half-speed, like wearing heavy wool,” but other passages are marked “extravagantly Schumannesque,” “Quaker meeting vibe with the occasional 16th-run interruption, gradually becoming more and more ecstatic,” “gangbusters,” and in a direct reference to the Beethoven underpinning, “yay opus 18 partay.”

The connection of Mendelssohn's quartet to Beethoven is partly revealed in the date of the composition – October 1827. Beethoven had died in March of that year. Mendelssohn was unusual among his peers in taking a great interest in the late quartets of Beethoven at a time when many musicians thought they were incomprehensible. This A minor quartet may be thought of as Mendelssohn working out for himself some of the implications of Beethoven's works. The most obvious connection is Mendelssohn's use of a small phrase from his own song *Frage* which occurs with the text *Ist es wahr?* (Is it true?). This is an obvious homage to Beethoven's use in his last quartet of an enigmatic motto with the text *Muss es sein?* (Must it be?)

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