Shanghai Quartet

WEIGANG LI *violin*
YI-WEN JIANG *violin*
HONGGANG LI *viola*
NICHOLAS TZAVARAS *cello*

&

ZHANG MANCHIN *viola*
QIN LI-WEI *cello*

MENDELSSOHN
String Quartet No. 1 in E-flat major, Op. 12

I. Adagio non troppo
II. Canzonetta (allegretto)
III. Andante espressivo
IV. Molto allegro e vivace

BRIDGE
String Quartet No. 1 in E minor “Bologna”

I. Adagio – Allegro appassionato
II. Adagio molto
III. Allegretto grazioso – Animato
IV. Allegro agitato – Allegro moderato – Adagio molto
BRAHMS

I. Allegro non troppo
II. Scherzo (Allegro non troppo)
III. Poco adagio
IV. Poco allegro

Programme Notes

Mendelssohn – String Quartet No. 1
Possibly the most phenomenally gifted composer in the whole of musical history was Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. Outside music he was an exceptional athlete, a strong swimmer, a talented poet and painter and was fluent in several languages. It is said that he excelled in virtually anything which held his attention for long enough. He was also something of a philosopher; a trait inherited from his grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, who had been as renowned in this field as Felix was to become in music. Felix’s father – who excelled only in finance and banking, making a fortune for him and his family along the way – used to complain that “I was once known as my father’s son. Now I’m known as my son’s father”. But the banker did much to nurture his son’s artistic gifts. In addition to the obvious financial support he was able to provide, the Mendelssohn household in Berlin was a well-known meeting place for the great artists of the day and, as a child, Felix rubbed shoulders with most of Germany’s social, cultural and artistic elite.

Despite such a wealth of talent, as well as early manifestations of the kind of business acumen which could easily have secured him a lucrative career in the finance industry, music was the young Felix’s first love and he was given every encouragement to pursue it. He was prodigiously gifted as both a violinist and a pianist and showed astonishingly early genius as a composer. He began composing in earnest in 1820, wrote his first string quartet three years later (the work remained unpublished until 30 years after his death) and composed what is universally regarded as his first masterpiece, the string Octet in 1825. He had an unusually perceptive understanding of string music and the six numbered string quartets he wrote over the course of his brief life (the last one he completed just a month before his death) have been described as "the greatest contribution to the genre between the twin peaks of Beethoven and
Bartók", while Julian Haylock suggests that in his quartets Mendelssohn “achieved something very close to perfection in terms of formal structure, internal balance, clarity and texture”.

The String Quartet No.1 was composed in 1829. Confusingly, it was written two years after his String Quartet No.2 and six years after his first (unpublished) string quartet, which is also in the key of E flat major. Mendelssohn wrote it while on his first trip to Britain; a trip which, beyond cementing very close ties between him and the country, had a profound effect on his creative output resulting in the composition of the Scottish Piano Sonata, the Hebrides Overture and the Scottish Symphony. But the inspiration for the Quartet was not a romanticised view of the British countryside but a romance of a very different kind - Betty Pistor, with whom he had developed a powerful adolescent passion broken only in 1828 when her father had forbidden her from seeing him on, Mendelssohn believed, anti-Semitic grounds. He wrote the first two movements of the Quartet in London in July and completed the other two on 14th September shortly after returning from his travels to Scotland and Wales. Wary of publicly proclaiming his love for Betty – and thereby causing problems between Betty and her father – Mendelssohn placed the initials “B.P.” at the head of his completed manuscript. Betty married one Adolf Rudorff before the Quartet appeared in print, so Mendelssohn instructed that the initials “B.P.” should be changed to the meaningless “B.R.”.

More intimately, however, the music contains several coded references to Betty, not least in the 1\textsuperscript{st} movement where, after the poised slow opening, the main theme of the Allegro section opens with the rising fourth B flat – E flat (in German notation B-Es), the letters in Betty’s name which have notational equivalents. (The same figure appears at the end of the movement and again at the very end of the Quartet) Perhaps more significantly, the overall mood of the movement is one of tenderness and warm affection. Inspired by the 16\textsuperscript{th} century vocal canzonetta the 2\textsuperscript{nd} movement is, in the words of Melvin Berger, characterised by “fairyland charm and daintiness”. It seems to look back to the days when, along with his sister and Betty, Mendelssohn would act out scenes from Shakespeare in the garden of their Berlin residence; it was at this time that he wrote his famous Overture to \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream} to which the lively central Scherzo section very clearly refers. The 3\textsuperscript{rd} movement is in the nature of a reflective interlude with the first violin breaking out into an improvisatory cadenza which becomes quite passionate before leading directly into the 4\textsuperscript{th} movement. We might suggest the very opening and the sense of frantic energy throughout is
reminiscent of the Highland dances Mendelssohn saw (and enjoyed) in Scotland. The movement spends almost its entire length in the key of C minor, before, at the very end, reverting to the home key of E flat for a restatement of material from the first movement and, perhaps, more happy reminiscences of Betty.

**Bridge – String Quartet No. 1**

Frank Bridge was born in Brighton, on the south coast of England on 26th February 1879 – 18 years before the death of Brahms - and died just a few miles along the coast at Eastbourne on 10th January 1941. From 1899 to 1903 he studied composition with Sir Charles Stanford at the Royal College of Music, and shortly after graduating joined the Jessie Grimson Quartet as second violin. Meanwhile he had been studying the viola and in 1906 was invited to join the famous Joachim Quartet as viola player. Later he became the viola player in the English String Quartet, with whom he remained until 1915, when he abandoned playing in favour of conducting and, later, gave up all performing to concentrate on composing and teaching. Probably today Bridge is best remembered as the teacher of Benjamin Britten (who wrote a famous set of variations for string orchestra on a theme by Bridge), but his own substantial output is dominated by songs and chamber music.

Bridge wrote no less than 12 works for string quartet; although only four are specifically entitled String Quartet. In his 1922 essay “The String Quartet Since Brahms”, Eugene Goossens describes Bridge as “chief among the composers of the present generation who have contributed so largely to the British school of chamber music. In all his works, we remark a flair for this particular branch of musical art possessed by few of his fellow writers. His writing displays a knowledge of the different instruments which could only have been obtained by first-hand acquaintance, and though the language in which he writes is not by any means couched in the newest terms, yet the technical facility and perfect command of all those devices which go to the making of an effective quartet, quite apart from genuine inspiration, gives him an importance in this field which the British public is still slow to realise”. The composer Herbert Howells wrote a retrospective six months after Bridge’s death; “The writing of chamber music is a creative effort of known and frightening delicacy. For Bridge it seemed scarcely an effort, and not at all frightening. He gave a half-assent to its delicacy - but from time to time permitted himself to speak with startling force through the medium of the string quartet”.

The first of his numbered string quartets dates from 1906 and was written for a competition put on by the Accademia Filarmonica in Bologna. Bridge read about it in an advertisement placed in the *Musical Times* of June 1906 which gave the closing date for entries as 31st October that same year. Altogether some 67 quartets were submitted from around the world and while no prize was awarded, Bridge’s was the only one to receive an “honourable mention”. It appears not to have been performed in Bologna and, since Bridge had worked so quickly to meet the closing date, he had only prepared one copy of the score. It took over two years to wrest it back from the Italians, and it seems that the work’s first performance was given in London by the English String Quartet in June 1909.

According to Fabian Huss, “the First String Quartet is something of a landmark in Bridge’s development of a mature musical language [and] employs a tone of anguished violence (particularly in the 1st movement) not otherwise encountered in Bridge's music before his abandonment of tonality”. A mournful theme from solo cello opens the work, to which the rest of the quartet responds with almost frenzied passion. The music has an unsettled quality, created by short, two-bar themes and a reluctance to settle on the tonic chord. A tender theme announced by the viola reminds us of Bridge’s own particular performing interest, and provides a powerful antidote to the stormy and agitated music which otherwise permeates the movement. The 2nd movement opens with a plaintive violin theme which again takes on a somewhat uneasy quality due to its being broken up into two-bar phrases. The viola presents a descending theme of almost heart-breaking pathos which, after a somewhat hesitant start, works itself up to a moment of true passion before the opening music returns, this time with the cello offering an even more plaintive voice. For the 3rd movement Bridge brings in something akin to an English folk dance, gently skipping in rustic fourths. A central trio section finds first violin and viola in duet against a rhythmically non-aligned *pizzicato* accompaniment. The 4th movement oozes English pastoral with its surging theme, but this quickly takes on a more agitated and spiky edge. With a return to material from the opening movement, Bridge closes the work as it began, with a mournful cello solo.

**Brahms – String Sextet**

Few 19th century composers came from such a privileged, wealthy and comfortable background as Mendelssohn, while few came from such an underprivileged, poor and squalid one as Brahms. Ironically, both were born in the same city – Hamburg – and both were born
into families whose income derived from the city’s position as one of the leading shipping hubs of the time.

The Mendelssohn family had opened their bank in Hamburg and were happily amassing their huge wealth from the city’s commercial activities, sufficient to purchase a substantial three-story house at no.14 Große Michaelisstraße which they continued to use as their winter residence even after relocating to Berlin. The Brahms family, on the other hand, rented rooms on the first floor of a dilapidated house at no.60 Speckstraße, in an altogether less salubrious part of town. That was where Johannes was born, his father working as a jobbing musician playing both the double bass and the French horn, while his mother (17 years older than his father) was a seamstress who tried hard to keep the family home clean. As one visitor commented, “The house and its surroundings testify only to the commonplace reality of a bare and repulsive poverty. On entering it is difficult to repress a shiver of bewilderment and dismay. The staircase door opens on to a diminutive space, half kitchen, half lobby, where some cooking may be done and a child’s bed laid up. This communicates with the sleeping-closet, which has its own window, but is so tiny it can scarcely be called a room”.

Despite these oppressive surroundings Brahms developed considerable gifts as a pianist and, at the age of 10, made his public début playing in a performance of Beethoven’s Quintet for Wind and Piano in which his father took the horn part. From the age of 13, Brahms started earning enough to support his family by playing the piano nightly in what Malcolm MacDonald describes as “the drinking and wenching dives of the notorious St Pauli area near the harbour”. At these Animierlokale (literally “stimulation places” where the stimulation on offer was musical, alcoholic and sexual – not necessarily in that order) the experiences the adolescent Brahms gained seemed to put him off playing the piano (and forming close relationships with women) for life and he not only abandoned piano playing in favour of composing, but he also never married.

Brahms regarded chamber music as the highest example of the composer’s art, and he considered the string quartet as the very summit of chamber music composition. His inability to handle the medium successfully – he published just six string quartets - disturbed him throughout his career and he maintained that he wrote no less than 20 before he produced one of sufficient quality to bear comparison with the great examples by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. A major problem for Brahms was writing for a piano-less ensemble,
but after hearing a performance of Louis Spohr's String Sextet he realised he might do better writing for this larger ensemble, and his First Sextet, dated 1860, was his first published chamber work. The Second Sextet - described by Sir Donald Tovey as “the most ethereal of Brahms’ larger works” - was completed in 1865 and intended as something of an act of homage to his former fiancée, Agathe von Siebold. They had become engaged in January 1859, but a few months later Brahms broke off the engagement writing, “I love you! I must see you again, but I am incapable of bearing fetters”. He never did see her again, and he kept the Sextet to himself as a kind of memento of this blissfully happy relationship, not sanctioning its first public performance until 3rd February 1867.

As with the Mendelssohn Quartet with which the programme began, the Sextet contains several coded messages testifying to the object of the composer’s love. The 1st movement opens quietly with a violin theme above a gently undulating viola. The warm, lyrical second theme builds to a climax at which, in its very highest register, the violin plays a theme which spells out the name AGAHE (there is no musical note equivalent to the letter T). In its own way the 2nd movement is a further homage to Agathe. It is based on a Gavotte, composed in 1854, which was the first music by Brahms Agathe ever heard. The “presto giacoso” Trio section, in the manner of a lively Bohemian dance, is in marked contrast to this unusually subdued Scherzo. The 3rd movement is a set of five variations on the “molto espressivo” theme announced by the violin against the sparsest of accompaniments. This theme, too, has a connection with Agathe in that it dates from the year the two first met, 1855. The unhurried 4th movement maintains an unequivocally sunny mood throughout.

*Programme notes by Marc Rochester*