

West Cork Chamber Music Festival 2021

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Bantry and Beyond

Coda

28. Last Works

Filmed at Bantry House, Bantry, Ireland

Esposito Quartet

Mia Cooper, Anna Cashell [violins]

Joachim Roewer [viola]

William Butt [cello]

Mozart

Quartet in F major K.590

Alexandra Vrebalov

Pannonia Boundless

Mendelssohn

Quartet in F minor Op.80

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart [1756-1791]

Quartet in F major K590 [1790]

1. *Allegro moderato*
2. *Andante*
3. *Menuetto - Allegretto*
4. *Allegro*

In May 1789 Mozart arrived in Berlin in order to perform before King Frederick William, the King of Prussia. The King had a reputation as a fine cello player and as a generous supporter of composers. Naturally Mozart was hoping for a commission or even a job, so he performed several times for the King, who was sufficiently impressed to offer Mozart a post, the exact details of which are unclear. At that time Austria and Prussia were on far from friendly terms, so Mozart could hardly have accepted a posting in Berlin while remaining Court Composer in Vienna. The speculation is that Mozart was offered a post with a year to consider the proposal. In this case the commission for a set of six quartets for the King and set of six easy keyboard sonatas for the King's daughter may have been part of the proposal.

Modern research tells us that Mozart composed the first two movements of the F major Quartet in the summer of 1789, while he was still trying to meet the King's deadline. However events such as a seriously ill wife and the writing and production of *Così fan tutte* conspired against him and he was unable to complete the set for the King on time. Constanze's illness, in particular, terrified him, quite apart from the huge financial burden of doctors, medicines, special treatments and extra domestic help. However he managed to finish the quartet the following summer in order to make up a smaller set for publication.

This strikingly beautiful work is Mozart's last string quartet, completed about eighteen months before his unexpected death. The first two movements almost give the King's cello the status of soloist. In the last two movements the cello reverts to its normal place in the quartet, for, by this time, Mozart knew that the quartets would not be going to Berlin. Mozart's treatment of the cello in the opening movement is similar to his handling of the clarinet in the quintet K581, composed at exactly the same time. He holds the cello back from its prominent role until well into the second part of the first subject group, and only gives it a starring role when he reaches the second subject. The movement opens with a striking rhetorical flourish, one of those highly individual signature figures that is quite unmistakable whenever it appears. This theme is the main preoccupation of the entire movement, and even the cello's second subject is a smoothed-out version.

The normally restrained Mozart scholar, Alfred Einstein, waxed lyrical about the slow movement: *one of the most sensitive movements in the whole literature of chamber music...It seems to mingle the bliss and sorrow of a farewell to life. How beautiful life has been! How sad! How brief!* This may not be entirely fanciful as its composition coincided with the onset of Constanze's illness, which Mozart expected to be terminal.

Francis Humphrys

Aleksandra Vrebalov [b.1970]

Pannonia Boundless [1998]

'I wrote this piece as an homage to those musicians who from the margins of the society, as much as from the well known concert halls, have the power to touch our hearts.'

Aleksandra Vrebalov

Commissioned in 1997 by the Kronos Quartet, *Pannonia Boundless* is a magnificent virtuosic piece, less than seven minutes long, it is based on gypsy tunes and techniques from the Pannonia region of Serbia and Hungary. Vrebalov toured the region, seeking out the musicians and melodies that form the research and inspiration for this piece. From the beginning the influences can be heard, in the harmonies, the melodies and the interaction of the parts. The listener is transported to a gypsy camp – to listen and to dance. The opening is dramatic and atmospheric, the first violin setting the scene with a beautiful slow melody line and drawing in the listener. Vrebalov keeps the listener spellbound as the music progresses, packing in so much in such a short piece. In the middle, dance-like section, it's hard to keep your feet still and the pulse quickens in excitement. The final section hurries forward, building to a flourishing finish.

Helen Dawson

Felix Mendelssohn [1809-1847]

Quartet in F minor Op.80 'Requiem for Fanny' [1847]

1. *Allegro vivace assai*
2. *Allegro assai*
3. *Adagio*
4. *Finale - Allegro molto*

Thus far I have possessed his full confidence. I have watched his talent develop step by step and have even, to a certain degree, contributed to his musical education. He has no other musical advisor but me. Furthermore he never puts an idea down on paper until I have considered it. Thus for instance, I knew his operas from memory before even a single note was written down. So wrote the seventeen-year-old Fanny Mendelssohn of her thirteen-year-old brother. Mendelssohn remained exceptionally close to his sister even after they were both happily married and her sudden death from a stroke in May 1847 proved to be a blow from which he never fully recovered.

That summer of 1847 he took his summer holiday by the lake at Interlaken, where he found the energy to write this quartet, known to all as *Requiem for Fanny*. Those who met him that last summer found him paradoxically full of plans for the future on the one hand while on the other hand continually asserting that he would soon die. Those whom the gods love die young, barely two months later he too died of a stroke. The F minor Quartet reveals Mendelssohn at his most tormented, the music steeped in unhappiness and unfolding in tragic minor keys.

The first movement forgoes any hint of *cantabile* melody, rhythmic energy holds sway while harmonically inspired motifs provide scope for contrapuntal development. The thematic material consists largely of figuration like the opening tremolo. The mood is violent, contrasting sections are abruptly juxtaposed, often without any transition. This novel approach is even more evident in the second movement with its striking melodic motifs driving the music forward by way of vigorously animated and bare unison passages. The central trio is marked by ostinato lower parts and again no sign of *cantabile* to release the tension. The Adagio gives birth to a violin melody glowing with sadness and when its line blends with the other instruments its impact becomes still stronger. The precarious balance is interrupted several times as if to accentuate the effect of the lonely melody whose echoes, played on the bass strings, sound far below. The finale gives the impression of a violent shock whose tremors are tearing the fabric of the music apart.

Nor can ever have the fall of the Staubach looked more magical than it did in the bright light of that late summer day - its waters gleaming like a shower of rockets launched over the edge of the high cliff, their expended fires spreading and mingling as they fell and faded. Almost my last distinct remembrance of Mendelssohn is seeing him standing within the arch of the rainbow looking upward, rapt and serious, thoroughly enjoying the scene. My very last is the sight of him turning down the road to wend back to Interlaken alone. I thought even then, as I followed his figure, looking none the younger for the loose dark coat and the wide-brimmed straw hat bound with black crepe which he wore, that he was too much depressed and worn, and walked too heavily. But who could have dreamed that his days on earth were so rapidly drawing to a close? [Henry Chorley, English journalist and friend of Mendelssohn]
Francis Humphrys

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