

The Zehetmair Quartet: Memorable Music-Making – from Memory

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United Kingdom **Janáček, Schubert, Debussy:** Zehetmair Quartet [Thomas Zahetmair & Kuba Jakovicz (violins), Ruth Killius (viola), Christian Elliott (cello)], Wigmore Hall, London, 14.3.2014 (CS)

Janáček: String Quartet No.1 'Kreutzer Sonata'

Schubert: String Quartet in Eb D.87

Debussy: String Quartet in G minor Op.10

In this thrilling concert at the Wigmore Hall, the Zehetmair Quartet created three distinct musical worlds – the terse energy of Janáček, the freshness of the youthful Schubert and Debussy's kaleidoscopic sound-canvas – all the while retaining the Quartet's distinct and individual 'voice'. This achievement was made even more astonishing by the fact that the entire programme was not only flawless but also performed from memory.

The extent of the trust between the four players was apparent from the opening bars of Janáček's first string quartet, which burst into life with immediacy and a sense of risk. Both of Janáček's two quartets are programmatic: while the second, 'Intimate Letters', more directly alludes to the elderly composer's passion for the young Kamila Stösslová, the 'Kreutzer Sonata' combines the experiences of fiction and life, drawing its narrative from Tolstoy's literary critique of marriage and the acceptability of relationships outside its destructive bounds. The naturalism of Tolstoy's language is reflected in the directness of Janáček's musical statements and arguments, and the Zehetmair Quartet played with a passion and clarity which perfectly embodied the composer's own declaration that the work was a 'profound excerpt from my own spiritual life, watered with my own blood'.

The initial motivic utterances were sparse and unsettling, the heavy silences emphasising the unpredictability of form and development. Leader Thomas Zehetmair encouraged a spirit of audacity. Phrases were attacked with unwavering commitment, then broken off, left daringly suspended. Each one of the small motivic ideas that tumble after one another in rapid succession was precisely and meticulously etched; brief moments of lyricism were swept aside, at times brutally, by eruptions of raw emotion.

The Zehetmair relished the harshness for which Janáček strives; there was no attempt to 'please' the ear, rather a reaching for extremities, as in the portentous second movement where *sul ponticello* tremolos juddered into silence.

The unremitting, searing intensity and the sense of unalleviated, frustrated longing that the Zehetmair generated was strenuous, almost exhausting, and occasionally I might have preferred a more Romantic richness. But, although they did not permit such an indulgence, the players' performance was remarkable in that it was simultaneously a private conversation between the players and an outward declaration, expressing the composer's desperate need to speak and love, and the pain of so doing.

How to follow such relentless, gruelling soul-searching? The Zehetmair chose to change tack entirely and offered a little-known quartet by the sixteen-year-old Schubert. Later in life, the composer was disparaging about his juvenile chamber music – he responded to his brothers' suggestion in 1824 that they might play some of his early string quartets dismissively, recommending that they would do better to play works by other composers, for his own had 'nothing in them, other than that you may like them, as you like everything of mine'. The Zehetmair conveyed the melodic charm of the Eb Quartet D.87, particularly the refreshing simplicity of the first movement's opening theme. The short Scherzo contrasted playfulness with lyricism, the crisp *acciaccaturas* and vigorous octave leaps of the start giving way to a more restrained elegance in the Trio with its balanced phrase structures and legato scalic arcs. Juxtaposition was also a feature of the bold *Adagio* which followed, with its sudden dynamic changes. The arching song-like melody contrasted with delicately fluttering *pianissimo* semiquavers on a single note, before the energetic finale, *Allegro*, raced home to a sunny close.

César Franck, who was briefly Debussy's teacher, described the latter's only string quartet as 'de la musique sur les pointes d'aiguilles' – or, roughly translated 'music on needlepoints'. Perhaps he meant this as a criticism – music

which scratched one's nerve-ends – but the suggestion of a precisely and finely sewn fabric is in fact a perfect image for Debussy's kaleidoscopic quartet, which in the hands of the Zehetmair was richly variegated, as they discovered an endless stream of colours and textures as the musical material was repeated and minutely modified.

The ceaseless ebb and flow of the first movement, 'Animé et très décidé', with its impulsive *accelerandi*, was wonderfully mastered, flexibility accompanied by a sureness of structure as the melody which forms the binding motif of the whole quartet roved and wandered. The *pizzicato* effects of the scherzo which follows were resounding and incisive while the slow movement retreated from such exuberance into more reflective realms. Here the bare intervals between the cello and violins were striking and contemplative. As the remnants of melody passed between the players, like snatches of reminiscence, the energy seemed to dissipate still further to be replaced by still meditation. But, just when time might have stood still, the Zehetmair effected a perfect transition into the finale, moving seamlessly from *Très modéré* to *Très mouvement*.

Most striking was the way in which the Zehetmair communicated their appreciation of the architectural stature of the quartet, as well as its sonorous beauty. A reprise of the Scherzo from Schubert's D.87 brought the concert to a close and a smile to the faces of the audience. Superlatives are over-used but phenomenal and astounding seem more than appropriate here.

Claire Seymour