

NYS Feb 2025

Agate Quartet with Jonathan Leibovitz (clarinet)

Alexander Glazunov (1865-1936) *Rêverie Orientale* Op 14 (1886) for clarinet and string quartet

Adagio non troppo (c.7 mins)

Glazunov was blessed with an exceptional ear and musical memory. He started to compose aged 11. At 14 Balakirev recommended him to Rimsky-Korsakov, who taught him all he could in two years since he progressed '*not from day to day but from hour to hour*'. Eight years later when he and Rimsky were deeply involved in completing Borodin's legacy after his sudden death, Glazunov's phenomenal musical memory allowed him to write down the overture to Borodin's *Prince Igor* as he had heard it played on the piano by the composer.

Rêverie Orientale was composed shortly before this mnemonic feat, just after Glazunov had been taken by the rich patron Mitrofan Belyayev on a tour of western Europe including a visit to Liszt in Weimar. It is more often heard today in its orchestral version, but Glazunov preferred the more intimate chamber version played this evening. Its delicate interplay between the instruments conveys everything the title of the piece suggests – "the colourful imagination of a confirmed Russian dreaming of far-off lands". (Alan George)

Later in his life, Glazunov, through his directorship of the St Petersburg Conservatoire, exerted a major influence on the direction of Russian music after both the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, ensuring that a specifically Russian style was maintained against a broader European tradition. Although stylistically conservative in his own compositions, he nurtured progressive students such as the young Shostakovich, while maintaining a working relationship with the soviet authorities.

Erich Korngold (1897-1957) String Quartet No.3 in D, Op.34 (1945)

Allegro moderato

Scherzo. Allegro molto

Sostenuto. Like a folk tune

Finale. Allegro

Korngold's youth was a hard act to follow. Aged 9, the young Austrian prodigy played his cantata *Gold* to Mahler, who pronounced him a genius; aged 11 he composed a ballet whose performance caused a sensation two years later; aged 13 his Piano Trio and a Piano Sonata so impressed Artur Schnabel that he championed the works all over Europe. Richard Strauss remarked: "This assurance of style, this mastery of form, this characteristic expressiveness, this bold harmony, are truly astonishing!" Puccini, Sibelius, Bruno Walter and many others were similarly impressed. In his early 20s he composed his operatic masterpiece *Die Tote Stadt* and briefly outstripped Strauss as the most performed composer from German-speaking countries. Incidentally, he also had the distinction, aged 25, of having a brand of high-end cigarettes named 'Heliane' after his latest opera *Das Wunder der Heliane*. This opera contains some of his most intense music. However, Strauss' "concern that so precocious a genius should follow its normal development" proved prescient.

Around this time he began arranging and conducting classic operettas by Johann Strauss, Leo Fall and Offenbach - work that took up an increasing proportion of his time. In late 1934 Max Reinhardt invited him to Hollywood to work on a film version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Korngold was asked to arrange Mendelssohn's overture and incidental music to accompany the movie, though he also incorporated other Mendelssohn works and a small amount of his own original material into the score. Its success and the advent of the second war led to Korngold committing more to film scores for Warner Bros. and less to his own independent compositions. He became depressed and vowed not to write concert works until Hitler was defeated. The end of the war together with the death of his domineering father brought a questioning of his career path ('*First I was a prodigy, then a successful opera composer in Europe . . . then a movie composer . . . I feel I have to make a decision now, if I don't want to be a Hollywood composer for the rest of my life*') and a subsequent resurgence of creativity. In December 1945, he surprised his wife with a Christmas present - the final sketch of the new String Quartet No. 3, his first post-World War II classical work. His wife later wrote, "Erich had come back to himself."

The quartet is dedicated to Bruno Walter - another émigré living in Beverly Hills. The interval of the seventh which appears twice in the first bar (*illustrated*) is a unifying element throughout the quartet. The first movement is the most challenging for the listener, as if Korngold is at pains to assert that he is writing serious music again. Indeed, although the movement is nominally in D major, the violins in the first two bars somewhat wistfully play all 12 notes of the chromatic scale. In contrast to this generally descending opening theme, the second subject is a gently rising one (*illustrated*). The exploration of these questioning themes is interrupted by a *subito agitato* section that is like Shostakovich in its brutality. But these beasts are banished and the main, descending, theme returns strengthened and finally returns at a slow speed before the movement comes to rest with relief, home in D major.

Allegro moderato



Poco piu Mosso



The short, cheekily skittish *Scherzo* calls for virtuosic nimbleness especially from the first violin. Note that the viola's repeating accompanying figure (*illustrated*) is a sequence of three rising sevenths.

The *Trio* slides up a semitone into E major and then seduces us with a gorgeous tune (*illustrated*) based on one from Korngold's (allegedly favourite) score to the film *Between Two Worlds* (1944); but we are not allowed to wallow for long before another sequence of those sevenths takes us back to the skittish *Scherzo*.

Allegro molto



Meno mosso



The substantial *Sostenuto* third movement is based on a muted theme (*illustrated*) taken from the love scene of Korngold's 1943 score to the film *The Sea Wolf*. The theme itself mainly uses intervals of fourths which together with the simple accompanying line give it, an endearing open transparency. The movement consists of variations on this theme,

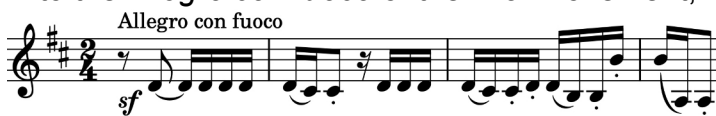
Sostenuto. Like a folk tune



Sordino

some of which, without mutes and introduced by tremolo and rising sevenths, enter a much harsher world.

A few bars of *Allegretto* introduction lead into the *Allegro con fuoco* of the final movement, whose rhythmically tense, unison theme (illustrated) could have been written by Korngold's neighbour in Hollywood Igor Stravinsky. This energetic fun gives way initially to the viola playing a theme Korngold later used in the 1946 film *Devotion*, about the Brontë sisters. The fun returns and subsequently gives way to reminiscences of earlier themes from this quartet and a version of the opening, before galloping off to a triumphant conclusion.



Korngold's willingness and ability to share his ideas between his film music and music for the concert hall are reflected in this comment from an interview in 1946: "It is not true that cinema places a restraint on musical expression. Music is music whether it is for the stage, rostrum or cinema. Form may change, the manner of writing may vary, but the composer needs to make no concessions whatever to what he conceives to be his own musical ideology."



Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Clarinet Quintet in B minor, Op.115 (1891)

Allegro

Adagio

Andantino - Presto non assai, ma con sentimento

Con moto

By March 1891 Brahms' creative impetus appeared to have faded away. He had composed nothing for more than a year and had completed his will. But then, visiting Meiningen, the conductor of the court orchestra drew Brahms' attention to the playing of their erstwhile violinist, now principal clarinetist, Richard Mühlfeld (1856-1907), who performed privately for Brahms. As Anton Stadler had previously inspired Mozart, so now Mühlfeld inspired Brahms. There rapidly followed four wonderful chamber pieces: a Trio for piano, clarinet and cello Op 114, today's Quintet Op 115, and two clarinet and piano Sonatas Op 120.

In the hundred years since Mozart wrote his clarinet quintet, the instrument had evolved into something akin to the modern "Boehm" clarinet. Its larger number of keys, and consequently simpler fingering, made rapid chromatic playing easier than was possible on the much simpler clarinets used, albeit to great effect, by Stadler.

The opening B minor theme on the two violins provides much of the basic material for the work. The clarinet then enters with a rising arpeggio just as in Mozart's quintet, and leads us to a contrasting staccato motif with rapid accompanying triplets that are tossed between the instruments.



The *Adagio* in B major has a slow melody in the clarinet accompanied by a Brahms trademark complex rhythm superimposing triplets with syncopated duplets in the strings.



The two illustrated themes are then combined in the turbulent B minor central section of the movement with gymnastic flourishes from the clarinet. The third movement opens with a calm *Andantino* leading to the *Presto* scherzo and a contrasting Trio section with pizzicato strings. The last movement is a theme and five variations, with the theme related to many of those in the previous movements.

The cello leads the first variation, the first violin and clarinet the



second, the more embellished third and the fourth, which moves into B major. The viola then returns us to B minor with a restatement of the theme but in the rhythm of the first movement. In the final coda the first violin returns to the very opening of the first movement, the clarinet adds a major version of the viola's restatement and the work ends in peaceful agreement.

Programme notes by Chris Darwin