

György Ligeti (1923 – 2006)

Ramifications (1968)

1968 was a turbulent year, bringing with it (among other things) anti-establishment protests around the world, the brutal Soviet suppression of the Prague Spring – and Ligeti's *Ramifications*. The pioneering sounds of the iconoclastic Hungarian composer's string-orchestra piece somehow seem to embody the revolutionary spirit of the times: it wasn't the first time he'd explored texture as a compositional device – he'd already done that in a sequence of works including *Apparitions* and *Atmosphères* – but *Ramifications* creates a gripping drama from its ever developing sonorities.

Ligeti divides his 12-strong string ensemble into two groups, each tuned a quartertone out from the other. Yet rather than simply sounding out of tune, the players generate a rich, iridescent harmonic palette, an effect emphasised by the clouds of whirling counterpoint that the composer calls for – a technique he named micropolyphony.

The piece opens with one such cloud of hyperactive intertwining lines. As the individual instruments' pitches slowly shift, so the overall sound evolves and moves, soon hovering around obsessively oscillating major thirds or perfect fourths. Later, harmonics take over and rise ever higher into the stratosphere, before the music plummets down to the cellos' and double bass's lowest range. Towards the end, there's a return to the scurrying repetitions of the opening, then the ensemble suddenly erupts in harsh, angular melodies before the music unexpectedly vanishes into thin air.

Anton Webern (1883–1945)

Five Movements for String Orchestra, op.5 (1909 for string quartet, revised in 1929)

- 1 Heftig bewegt
- 2 Sehr langsam
- 3 Sehr bewegt
- 4 Sehr langsam
- 5 In zarter Bewegung

In 1909, when Anton Webern completed his Five Movements for String Quartet op.5 (he arranged the piece for string orchestra in 1929), his hugely influential studies with Schoenberg had just finished, and he was embarking on a determined exploration of the newly discovered world of free atonality. Even in this early piece Webern had his material under firm control, though, compressing its intense expressivity (he later admitted the piece was a reaction to the death of his mother in 1906) into astonishingly concise structures. The five movements together last barely ten minutes, with the third over in under a minute.

Also remarkable is the range of unusual playing techniques that Webern calls for. In the first movement's opening few seconds alone, we hear pizzicato, playing with the wood of the bow, bowing near the bridge, and harmonics, as well as more conventional bowing. The slow, pensive second movement passes winding melodies from violas to violins, and ends in almost complete stillness. The eerie third-movement scherzo whizzes by in an instant, its driving pizzicato bassline pushing it ever onward. And after a brief fourth movement, the piece ends calmly, gradually evaporating into silence.

Claude-Achille Debussy (1862 – 1918)

String Quartet in G minor, op.10 (1893)

Arranged by Jonathan Morton

- 1 Animé et très décidé
- 2 Assez vif et bien rythmé
- 3 Andantino doucement expressif
- 4 Très modéré

It was in 1893, a year before his famous orchestral *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, that Claude Debussy completed his only String Quartet. But if you're expecting the Debussy of misty, impressionistic sound pictures, think again. Right from the start, there's a rough, tough, powerful vigour to much of the Quartet's music – and it left early critics somewhat baffled.

Debussy composed the piece for the quartet led by the renowned Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe, and he found tackling one of classical music's greatest forms something of a challenge. In a letter to the composer Ernest Chausson, he admitted: 'I've had to start all over again three times!'

Debussy's difficulties were in no doubt because of the pioneering techniques he was intent on exploring. Gone is any sense of a classical quartet texture, to be replaced by constantly shifting textures and instrumental combinations. Reacting against the traditional emphasis on thematic contrast and development that had long defined Austro-Germanic musical thinking, Debussy instead championed a particularly French approach to composition that favoured melodic reappearance and transformation.

Hence it's from the first movement's memorable opening theme that all of the Quartet's music grows – the melody's distinctive triplet turn, for instance, can be heard in different forms throughout all four movements. The first movement's

more languid second theme, accompanied by scurrying semiquavers, grows organically out of the first. Instead of a true development section, Debussy employs what he calls a 'circulation' of themes, whereby the melodies reappear in different guises, keys and textures. After an assertive return of the opening music, a remarkable unison coda, where the full quartet plunges from the top to the bottom of its register, ends with resolute chords.

The scherzo-like second movement is led by a husky viola in a quickened version of the first movement's opening theme, with a contrasting central section that projects long violin melodies against lightning-fast semiquavers in the inner parts. The recapitulation, played pizzicato and in an off-kilter 15/8 time, is full of rhythmic vigour.

The hushed third movement is like a lullaby, opening with a restrained violin melody before a more agitated middle episode that puts the viola in the spotlight. The final movement begins with what seems to be a continuation of the previous movement's contemplative mood, but it soon erupts in a stormy main theme full of surging harmonies and intense chromatic movement. The sudden return of the first movement's opening theme marks a shift to the major, and the lively coda is a dance-like celebration rounded off by a final flourish from the first violin.

Jonathan Morton's string orchestra arrangement of the Debussy Quartet paints the piece's pioneering textures on a broader canvas, while losing none of the original's intensity and subtlety.

Anton Bruckner (1824 – 1896)

Adagio from String Quintet
in F major (1879)

Anton Bruckner, composer of vast, hymning symphonies celebrating the glories of God, probably isn't the first person you'd associate with chamber music. And the String Quintet in F major, completed in July 1879 between his Fifth and Sixth symphonies, is indeed his only mature chamber work, but it ranks alongside his orchestral pieces in terms of musical achievement. Bruckner conceived the Quintet on a grand scale – it's almost as if he was trying to condense one of his epic symphonies into a piece for just five players – but initial reception to the work was cool. Nevertheless, it became one of the composer's most popular and often-played pieces during his lifetime.

The third-movement Adagio is the emotional heart of the Quintet, and is often performed alone in a version for string orchestra. It is music of affirmation, peace and serenity that begins with one of Bruckner's most moving themes, a deliberate, unhurried violin melody that seems lost in contemplation. After a lengthy transitional passage, repeated notes in violins and violas herald the second theme, a more active melody that keeps us guessing as to whether it's in the major or minor. In an extended development section, Bruckner combines the two contrasting melodies, and the piece reaches its climax with an impassioned unison passage before the first theme returns for a glowing, heartfelt conclusion.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809 – 1847)

Sinfonia No.10 in B minor (1823)

Adagio – Allegro

It's hard to believe that Mendelssohn was only 14 when he composed the Sinfonia no.10 in 1823. It was probably written as an exercise for his composition teacher Carl Zelter, and first heard at an informal Sunday afternoon concert in the well-to-do Mendelssohns' Berlin residence. And although in places it might recall Bach, Haydn or Mozart, Mendelssohn's melodic gifts are already apparent – the busy repeated notes of the Allegro's main theme, for instance, soon became a trademark of the composer's mature style.

Mendelssohn's 12 string symphonies were long thought lost, until scores were unearthed in the State Library of East Berlin in 1950. It's likely that what we now have as a single-movement piece originally had two accompanying movements, which have never been found, but the music still makes a satisfying and balanced whole as it stands.

After a tearful opening Adagio, full of sighing phrases and unexpected chromatic twists, the bustling B minor Allegro contrasts an energetic first theme with a more lyrical, lilting second subject. After a brief development section, the recapitulation's second subject, now in a glowing B major, is abruptly broken off for a helter-skelter coda that rushes towards the piece's assertive final bars.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 – 1750)

Violin Concerto in E major BWV 1042 (date unknown)

Allegro Adagio Allegro assai

Of the pieces in today's concert, Bach's E major Violin Concerto is furthest away from us in terms of time, but probably closest in terms of familiarity. Little is known about the work's origins, however. Bach probably wrote the concerto between 1717 and 1723, while he was in charge of secular music at the court of Cöthen, and later revived the piece for performances with the Collegium Musicum ensemble that he led in Leipzig.

He almost certainly conceived the Concerto's solo part for himself to play; although he was first trained as a keyboard player, he was also a skilled violinist. His son Carl Philipp Emanuel later wrote: 'From his youth up to fairly old age, he played the violin purely and with a penetrating tone and thus kept the orchestra in top form, much better than he could have from the harpsichord.'

The E major Concerto is extrovert in spirit, and written in the then fashionable Italian style sandwiching a slow movement between two fast ones. And the Italian influence doesn't stop there. The first movement owes much to the three-part da capo form found in much Italian opera of the time, and its decisive E major opening chords, sparkling scales and brilliant, driving repeated notes bring Vivaldi and Corelli to mind. The solo violin is carefully integrated into the orchestral fabric throughout the movement, emerging for solo displays of virtuosity. After a sudden change to C sharp minor for the introspective middle section, the soloist has a short cadenza before leading us back into the unmistakable opening music.

The slow movement is a poignant lament in C sharp minor, focused around a gently plodding theme in the lower strings above which the soloist floats an embellished aria of graceful nobility. The short final movement whizzes by in a flash, its easy-going, dancing melody alternating with contrasting episodes that put the soloist firmly in the spotlight – listen out for demanding double-stops in the third, and impetuous demisemiquavers in the fourth.

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