

# scottish ensemble

## Re-defining the string orchestra

**Martin Suckling (1981- )**

**Musical Postcard No. 4 'Touch' (2013)**

This is the fourth postcard the Scottish Ensemble has received from me this season. Since it completes the set, I needed to consider how it would sit with its fellow postcards as well as tailoring it to this evening's programme. Something energetic was required, and knowing the precision and energy the Ensemble bring to everything they play, I found a toccata hard to resist, in this case dressed as one of the standard movements in the classical string quartet.

A 'scherzo' of scurrying semiquavers alternates with a rigid, loop-based 'trio'. While in the scherzo the players join, separate, and recombine in ever-changing groupings to create a many-voiced polyphony, the trio sees them bound together into a single machine. As in any well-behaved scherzo movement, the music repeats – though with each iteration it is squeezed into smaller and smaller spaces, until eventually it is barely there at all.

**Martin Suckling**

**Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)**

**String Quartet No. 2 (1944), arr. Jonathan Morton**

1. Overture: *Moderato con moto*
2. Recitative and Romance: *Adagio*
3. Waltz: *Allegro*
4. Theme with Variations: *Adagio*

Given its epic, symphonic scale – only his Fifteenth Quartet is longer – it's hard to believe that Shostakovich wrote his Second Quartet in just 19 days. This was in 1944, at Ivanovo, the Soviet 'house of rest and creativity' for artists and composers about 300km north-east of Moscow, during the second of three productive summers that the composer spent there. The composer Mikhail Meyerovich, another Ivanovo resident at the time, remembered how Shostakovich would play football, eat and drink with his fellow residents, then run back to his room for erratic periods – maybe an hour, maybe a week – to compose, only to re-emerge looking unshaven and exhausted.

And the year is significant: the Quartet's confident expansiveness was perhaps influenced by the feeling

of inevitability that the Soviet army would triumph over the Nazis – and likewise, Shostakovich's use of Russian folk themes, especially in the first movement, can be seen as the composer's loyal response to victory in a patriotic war. But in its syncopated rhythms, 'oom-pa' accompaniments and generous use of 'oriental'-sounding intervals, the Second Quartet is also profoundly influenced by Jewish music. Shostakovich was appalled by growing anti-Semitism in the USSR at the time, and keen to express his opposition – and there's no avoiding the fact that the Second Quartet was written at a time when advancing Soviet forces were discovering the true extent of the Nazi Holocaust.

The enigmatic first-movement Overture opens with a bold, folksy theme on the first violin, which stands in stark contrast to the later defiant, high-pitched melody based obsessively around a single note. The middle development section recasts the opening melody as a lilting waltz, and after a concentrated repeat of the opening themes, the movement ends with the ringing tonality of the very beginning.

The austere Recitative and Romance frames a song-like waltz with two long, pensive violin solos that have an almost religious air, not unlike the chants of the Russian Orthodox Church. The instruments are muted throughout the menacing third-movement Waltz, creating a ghostly sound world.

Shostakovich left the work's most searching music until the final movement. The Theme with Variations is the Second Quartet's emotional heart, a set of 13 variations that puts a Russian-sounding theme, stated by the viola at the start, through all manner of transformations. The theme re-emerges as the basis for church organ-style harmonies near the end of the movement, and the piece ends in a resolute but anguished A minor.

**Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-75)**

**Two Pieces op.11 (1924-5)**

1. Prelude
2. Scherzo

Shostakovich began work on what would become his Prelude and Scherzo for double string quartet while he was still a student, at the Petrograd Conservatoire. He originally planned the two pieces as part of a five-movement suite. But having completed just the Prelude in December 1924 and broken off work to finish his First Symphony, he found himself so caught up with ideas for his First Piano Sonata and Second Symphony that it was difficult

to focus his mind on the suite. Instead, he simply curtailed it, writing a Scherzo in July 1925 as a counterweight to the existing Prelude and leaving it at that.

Both movements, though, show Shostakovich the young modernist at work, with spiky dissonances, driving rhythms and neo-classical clarity. The two pieces – especially the sarcastic Scherzo – set the scene for similar movements later in the composer's output.

The episodic Prelude is dominated by its opening's powerful chords, which give way to a winding chromatic melody that begins in the cellos, and later slithering, muted triplets in the violins. In a faster middle section, the players pass fragments of melody back and forth to each other against a staccato accompaniment, before the return of the opening material and an unexpectedly bright, D major conclusion.

The fast and furious introduction to the Scherzo sets the tone for the rest of the movement, which – after a brooding cello melody – pits a gleefully dissonant violin theme against a pounding cello accompaniment. The music gradually builds to a climax on a held chord, before disintegrating into a rush of imitative lines and growing again to a brusque ending.

**David Kettle**

**Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)**  
**String Quartet No. 2 op.36 (1945),**  
**arr. David Matthews**

1. *Allegro calmo senza rigore*
2. *Vivace*
3. *Chacony: Sostenuto*

Britten's three numbered string quartets are among his finest works, and it is sad that in his full maturity he did not find the opportunity to write more. There was a gap of 30 years between the Second, composed in 1945 soon after Peter Grimes, and the Third, which was the last major piece he wrote. He mastered the string quartet medium at an early age, writing many quartets in his teens. He had learned the viola as a child, which gave him great insight into string technique, and through his adolescent devotion to Beethoven in particular he acquired a thorough comprehension of the classical forms.

The Second Quartet is a larger and more contemplative work than the First, to which it stands

in a similar relation as do Beethoven's 'Razumovsky' quartets to his op.18 set. All three movements are in C: the outer ones are in the major and the scherzo in C minor. The first movement uses sonata form in a typically inventive way, introducing three themes, each of which begins with the interval of a rising tenth, developing them within an eerie nocturnal atmosphere reminiscent of the 'Tenebrosos' of Berg's Lyric Suite, and recapitulating all three simultaneously.

The headlong scherzo, with muted strings, is dark and anxious. The finale is a passacaglia, appropriately enough for a quartet composed to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Purcell, for whom the passacaglia or chaconne was a favourite form. Britten gave the movement the Purcellian title 'Chacony'. The last of the 21 variations ends with 23 affirmations of the tonic chord of C major, paralleling the 23-bar C major coda of the first movement. (Berg was obsessed with the number 23 and often encoded it in his scores: could this have been a deliberate reference by Britten to the composer he greatly admired and with whom he would have liked to study?)

The premiere, by the Zorian Quartet, took place at the Wigmore Hall on Purcell's birthday, 21 November and the day before Britten's own – he was 32. Britten was pleased with the Quartet, writing to Mary Behrend, its commissioner and dedicatee: "to my mind it is the greatest advance I have yet made, & altho' it is far from perfect, it has given me encouragement to continue on new lines."

When I was asked to arrange one of the Britten quartets for the Scottish Ensemble, I suggested the Second, as I thought the Chacony in particular would benefit from a bigger sound. As well as adding a double bass part, I had to decide where it would be preferable to retain solo string parts. The three cadenzas in the Chacony were obvious places, but there are also several passages in the scherzo where I have made alternations between solo and tutti that I think will be effective.

**David Matthews**

