

Program Notes by Chris Darwin. Please use freely for non-commercial purposes.

Béla Bartók (1881-1945) String Quartet No 1 Op 7 (1908-9)

I. Lento

II. Allegretto

Introduzione: Allegro

III. Allegro Vivace

At the beginning of February 1908, the 27-year-old Bartók was not a happy chap. The violinist Stefi Geyer, with whom he was infatuated, wrote to break off their relationship. A week earlier he had finished composing a violin concerto for her. Its first movement depicts the 'idealized Stefi Geyer, celestial and inward' and is dominated by her motif: D–F#–A–C#, a rising series of 3rds; the second movement has a jagged descending reordering of the motif - 'cheerful, witty, amusing'. On the day he received her letter, Bartók wrote the 13th of his *Fourteen Bagatelles* for piano ('*she is dead*') and then the last one, a grotesque waltz ('*my love dancing*'); both incorporate her motif. Geyer refused to play the concerto and other violinists showed little interest, so Bartók suppressed the work and recycled the first movement together with an orchestrated version of the last Bagatelle as '*Two Portraits: one ideal, one grotesque*'.

Stefi Geyer and her motif also figure prominently in Bartók's First Quartet which he started that same year. Bartók's friend Kodály commented on the quartet: "*The unity of the movements... is preserved... by the homogeneity of the thematic material, [and] with something more which I would call psychological unity – an intimate drama, a kind of 'Return to Life' of one who has reached the brink of the abyss. It is programme music...*". The programme is his recovery from Geyer's rejection. The style of writing of the quartet is transitional between the high romanticism of Bartók's youth (Brahms, Strauss and Reger were influential) and his mature, compact style that developed in response to Debussy and in particular to the native folk music of Hungary which he and Kodály were keenly exploring.

The first movement, which Bartók described as his funeral dirge, starts with material from the second movement of the suppressed concerto. Its slow opening fugue is strongly reminiscent both in form and mood of the opening of Beethoven's Op 131 quartet, which we will hear after the interval. The movements become progressively less funereal, and the folk element is particularly strong in the boisterous last movement, where life has clearly returned. In the recitative introduction to the last movement, Bartók allows the cello to parody the popular song '*Csak egy szép lány van a világon*' (*Just one beautiful girl in the world*).

Csak egy szép lány van a világon

Meno vivo

ff > Rubato