

Programme notes by Chris Darwin: use freely for non-profit activities

Jan Ladislav Dussek (1760-1812) String Quartet Op 60 No 3 in E flat (1806)

Allegro espressivo

Adagio non tanto

Menuetto: Scherzo con moto assai – Trio dolcissimo e sempre sotto voce

Finale: Allegro moderato

'As has been frequently observed, much of Dussek's music resembles that of other composers. Most often, however, these composers are later than Dussek, and such resemblances show him to have been very much ahead of his time in the development of a Romantic piano style.' (Howard Crow, cataloguer of Dussek's work). Indeed, specific passages from Schubert, Beethoven, Weber, Rossini, Mendelssohn, Chopin and Schumann are all anticipated by Dussek, whose general style also presages that of Liszt, Smetana, Dvořák and Brahms. Dussek is now remembered mainly for his piano music (his father was a pianist and organist) and his harp music (both his mother and his wife Sophia Corri were harpists), but his works are rarely played in the concert hall. His influence remains not only in the music of his more distinguished successors but also in such innovations as Broadwood's enlarging of the piano, and the now universal habit of pianists sitting sideways to the audience (Dussek's profile was apparently particularly fine).

Born into a musical family in Bohemia, he led a varied and well-travelled life as a virtuoso pianist, composer and teacher. His fans included the aristocracy of much of Europe. A favourite of Catherine the Great, at whose court he mastered the glass harmonica, he fled Russia for fear of being arrested on suspicion of being involved in a plot to assassinate her. During his subsequent stay at Prince Radziwiłł's castle near Minsk, he had an affair with the younger brother's wife the Princess Sophie Friederike von Thurn and Taxis. The couple fled to Hamburg, where Sophie had second thoughts and returned to her husband. Dussek continued to Paris where he became a favourite of Marie Antoinette, but fled again just ahead of the Revolution for London. Here he stayed for 10 years, adored for his piano playing and earning large sums as a teacher. A misguided music publishing venture with his newly acquired father-in-law and later with Mozart's librettist Da Ponte bankrupted them all; Corri was confined to Newgate and Dussek bolted back to Paris where, despite his previous associations with Marie Antoinette, he was employed by Talleyrand. He drank heavily, ran to seed and died in 1812.

His little-known three Op 60 quartets were written after his time in London, where he had won the admiration of Haydn. They show well his melodic and dramatic gifts; there are powerful individual episodes with unexpected and touching modulations. Why then are they not performed more often? Share your thoughts on the Strings Attached blog: www.stringsattachedmusic.org.uk/wordpress/. Click on 'Leave a Comment'.