

Programme notes by Chris Darwin – Use freely for non-commercial purposes

Henri Dutilleux (1916-2013) String Quartet 'Ainsi la nuit' (1976)

Nocturne; Miroir d'espace; Litanies; Litanies II; Constellations; Nocturne II; Temps suspendu

Dutilleux's published output is rather small. He did not lack creative spirit, but rather was too self-critical:

"I always doubt my work. I always have regrets. That's why I revise my work so much and, at the same time, I regret not being more prolific. But the reason I am not more prolific is because I doubt my work and spend a lot of time changing it. It's paradoxical, isn't it?"

His care is appreciated by conductor and composer Esa-Pekka Salonen: "His production is rather small but every note has been weighed with golden scales... It's just perfect – very haunting, very beautiful. There's some kind of sadness in his music which I find very touching and arresting." Not everyone agrees. That skilful skewerer of reputations, Philip Hensher, calls him "the Laura Ashley of music; tasteful, unfaultable, but hardly ever daring ... Personally," Hensher admits to his Daily Telegraph readers, "I can't stick him."

Dutilleux's only string quartet 'Ainsi la nuit' is a good piece to judge whether you are with Salonen or Hensher. Dutilleux's sound-world builds on his compatriots Debussy, Ravel and Messiaen but also includes Bartók and Stravinsky, with a preference for the modal and atonal over the simple tonal. Many of the quartet's intriguing sounds are based on the opening six-note chord (illustrated) which particularly contains the intervals of the fifth (C#-G#, F-C) and the second (F-G, C-D). The seven short movements explore different string techniques: pizzicato, glissando, harmonics, very high and very low, very quiet and very loud. Dutilleux, like Sibelius, has in his own words "a tendency not to present the theme in its definitive state at the beginning. There are small cells which develop bit by bit". So, see what you think and do talk about it in the interval.

