

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

### **György Ligeti (1923-2006) String Quartet No 2 (1968)**

*Allegro nervoso (5m)*

*Sostenuto, molto calmo (4m)*

*Come un meccanismo di precisione (3m)*

*Presto furioso, brutale, tumultuoso (2m)*

*Allegro con delicatezza (6m)*

The young Ligeti suffered under two totalitarian regimes: the Nazis and the Communists. Born in Transylvania to a Hungarian Jewish family, his brother and both parents were sent to concentration camps – only he and his mother survived. Between 1949 and 1953, when Ligeti strove to develop an individual style of composition, Hungary was a country in the grip of Stalinist repression. The young Ligeti could find no public outlet for his rebellious creativity. The state demanded endless helpings of folk-based choral music, so more interesting compositions (such as his *Six Bagatelles* for wind quintet which the Magnard Ensemble played last season) were kept concealed. Stalin's death slackened the state's grip, encouraging Ligeti in the exuberant, fantastic invention of his first string quartet, for which Bartók was a major influence.

After fleeing Hungary following the brutal suppression of the 1956 uprising, Ligeti was freed from the state control of his musical expression, only to be confronted by the avant garde ideologues of the Darmstadt-Cologne School. Although he lectured at Darmstadt and provided a classic analysis of that apogee of hard-core serialism - Boulez's *Structures 1a* - by both nature and experience he was suspicious of system and dogma. His own music incorporated whatever it needed whether serially approved or not.

The range and diversity of his techniques is well illustrated in his Second String Quartet composed in 1968. He regarded it as the work that most clearly reflected his style at that point. It features striking textural and timbral contrasts, both between and within movements: 'kaleidoscopes in which the bits of coloured glass are continuously shaken up and reassembled'. His compositional techniques include micro-polyphony, microtonality and (as in the *pizzicato* third movement of tonight's Second Quartet) *meccanico* (machine-like). An extreme example of *meccanico*, *Poème symphonique (1962)*, was given a rare performance in the Brighton Festival Fringe some years ago by 100 identical mechanical metronomes, set to different, random tempi and - after a '2 to 6 minute silence at the conductor's discretion' - all started off simultaneously and allowed to run down: micro-polyphony of unparalleled (and fascinating) complexity. The piece ends after the final metronome has clicked its last. Broadcast of a previous performance in Holland, to Ligeti's delight, was replaced on Dutch television by a soccer game.

Both of his String Quartets reflect Ligeti's exact ear and sensitivity to string technique. Perhaps this came down from his paternal great-uncle the great Hungarian violinist Leopold Auer, founder of the Russian school of violin playing and teacher of Elman and Heifetz.