

Programme Notes by Chris Darwin – use freely for non-profit activities

Franz Schubert (1797 – 1828) String Quartet in G major, D. 887 (1826)

Allegro molto moderato

Andante un poco moto

Scherzo: Allegro vivace, Trio: Allegretto

Allegro assai

At the age of eight, Schubert started to learn the violin from his father; six years later he was composing for the family string quartet: brothers Ignaz and Ferdinand on violin, Franz on viola and his father on cello. However, the eleven or so quartets that Schubert wrote between the ages of 14 and 20 are now, like Mozart's early quartets, rarely played. The exuberant "Trout" piano quintet of 1819 and the surviving first movement of a C minor quartet ("Quartettsatz") written in 1820 set the scene for the great chamber works of his later years: in 1824 the Octet, the A minor "Rosamunde" quartet and the D minor "Death and the Maiden"; in 1826 today's G major quartet; in 1827 his two piano trios; and in his last year 1828, the incomparable C major two-cello quintet.

The G major quartet is, even for Schubert, written on an epic scale. As in the Haydn quartet that we heard in the first half, Schubert plays on the contrast between major and minor, but whereas with Haydn the contrast is between whole movements or substantial parts, Schubert presents us with a pervasive ambiguity between the two. It is there in the first 2 bars – G major



followed by G minor. The subsequent dotted rhythm contributes to a subdued theme which is accompanied by repeating triplets. Both the dotted rhythm and the triplets recur relentlessly throughout this unsettled movement.



The slow movement is one of extreme contrasts. The gently genial opening lulls us as it is repeated but eventually is forcefully interrupted by the dotted rhythm from the first movement's opening bars. There follows one of the most terrifying episodes in chamber music - the stuff of nightmares: rapid ascending runs and tremolo build to terrifying dagger-like stabs. The subsequent reassurance of the opening theme is now plagued by the certainty that the nightmare will return. Perhaps a similar but milder contrast exists in the third movement. The superficially light, Mendelssohnian Scherzo is not without an underlying threat whereas its Trio is a guileless Ländler.

The finale is almost unbearably, relentlessly long, as if some demonic force were compelling the music to continue. Again, the key is ambiguously minor and major as in the movement's opening bars. The demon



forces the first violin to perform almost impossible arpeggios before the music briefly pauses for breath with a commandingly majestic theme. But almost immediately the interminable dance returns. Finally the music sinks, exhausted by its demons, and this unsettling work ends with two loud chords definitively in the major.