

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

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937) String Quartet No 1 Op 37 (1917)

Lento assai - Allegro moderato

Andantino semplice (In modo d'una canzone) - Lento assai molto espressivo

Scherzando alla burlesca, vivace ma non troppo

Karol Szymanowski was born in 1882 to an affluent family who had settled after the partitioning of Poland in Tymoszkówka, between Kiev and Odessa. His early musical training was at home and in nearby Yelisavetgrad, but at 19 he moved to Warsaw to study. With three other composers he founded *Young Poland in Music*. Its outlook shared the transcendentalism of the *Young Poland* movement in literature: 'Art has no aim... art stands above life, penetrates the essence of the universe.' He visited Berlin and Vienna, and was much influenced by Scriabin and by the late German romantics, particularly Richard Strauss. He later travelled more widely to London, Paris, Italy, Sicily and North Africa, and his style moved away from Strauss towards Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky and the exotic imagery of Arab mythology. It was in this style - 'a wondrously seductive developmental process that was both static and mobile' (Adrian Thomas) - that he composed prolifically during the first world war. Major works from this period include his first violin concerto, his third symphony and today's first string quartet. They are regarded as among his finest achievements, showing 'his ability to meld high romanticism with the subtle harmonic shadings and instrumental textures of recent French music'.

The first quartet was written towards the end of this period in the autumn of 1917, when the upheavals of the October Revolution destroyed his family home. Perhaps because of this, the originally planned fourth, fugal movement was never written. Shortly afterwards his musical creativity temporarily waned and he wrote an erotic novel, *The Ephebe*, 'as a solace and sweet remembrance of things past, in order to exorcise the black pit of an endless succession of days, weeks, months spent amidst the most atrocious external conditions by a magic vision of Italy.'

Hearing the opening few bars of the first quartet with a drooping motif in the first violin accompanied by three notes of an ascending scale of major triads, you might be forgiven for thinking that the performers had put a newly discovered quartet by Vaughan Williams on their stands by mistake. But we soon enter a sound world of intense, lush chromaticism and frequent tempo changes nearer to that of Schoenberg's 1899 *Verklärte Nacht*. The range of

sound textures is extended by frequent long sliding *portamento* (as in the third bar) and the thin sounds of high harmonics and of rapid *tremolo* bowed near the bridge (*sul ponticello*). The slow movement is an intense song, perhaps allowing Szymanowski to indulge his 'magic vision of Italy'. It starts with another long upward *portamento* and again the sound texture is extended with harmonics and varied bowing techniques.

Except for the opening surprise call to attention, the whole of the *Scherzo* last movement, is written polytonally, with each instrument playing in a different key: initially cello C, viola Eb, violin 2 F#, violin 1 A - the four notes of a diminished seventh chord. Mid-movement the keys all shift up a tone for 30 or so bars again with a range of textural effects (illustrated) and

Musical score for the first movement of Karol Szymanowski's String Quartet No. 1, Op. 37. The score is in 3/4 time and marked "Lento assai". It shows the first four staves (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello) with various dynamics like *ppp* and *pp*, and a long *portamento* in the first violin part.

Musical score for the *Scherzo* movement of Karol Szymanowski's String Quartet No. 1, Op. 37. The score is in 3/4 time and marked "flautando". It shows the first four staves (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello) with various dynamics like *ppp*, *p dolce*, and *p ma poco marcato*, and a *sul ponticello* effect in the cello part.

then come back down. Curiously, the sound of the movement is not particularly dissonant but it has the lawlessness of a grotesque burlesque. Now we might wonder whether the players have a very early quartet by Shostakovich on their stands – he was only 11 in 1917.