

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

Michael Tippett (1905-1998) String Quartet No 5 (1990-91)

Medium fast - very fast

Slow – medium fast

The impetus for Tippett returning to quartet writing in 1977, more than 30 years after finishing his third quartet, was hearing late Beethoven. A television documentary on portraiture ended with a series of Rembrandt portraits and in Tippett's words: *At that moment, music started to play... of the utmost intensity and poignancy, the beginning of a late Beethoven slow movement. I said to myself: 'I must before I die find that sound in our own time! But I can't find that sound in our time, because it depends upon a purity of harmony and structure which is largely excluded from my own acidic, ironic world of harmony'... To try to find that sound meant to shut myself away and write my Fourth Quartet.*

Today's fifth quartet, which followed 12 years later, also both rejects his previous acidic irony, and finds inspiration in late Beethoven. Like Tippett's early work it is lyrical and its often spare writing contains some of his most beautiful sounds. Beethoven's influence appears particularly in the feel and the structure of the second of the two movements, reflecting the 'Hymn of Thanksgiving' from Beethoven's A-minor quartet Op 132 (Tippett's final choice of record in his second appearance on 'Desert Island Disks'). Bartók was another enduring influence on Tippett; he had heard all six of his quartets performed in the 1940s. The plangent, falling *glissando* figure in the second movement reminds me of the opening of Bartók's first quartet, itself echoing the opening of Beethoven's C#-minor quartet Op 131. As you see, you can have fun spotting Tippett's references in this work!

The first movement contains a number of sharply contrasting episodes which are easy to identify as they recur and are developed. One is the opening call to attention – three loudly accented repeated chords. Another is an interesting 'clanging' chord whose special sound results from the two inner parts plucking the strings while the outer two bow. Seductively contrasting is an appealing little duet as the two violins link together in thirds (illustrated). Shortly after its appearance comes a dramatic abrupt increase in tempo as all four instruments scamper at high speed like disturbed ants; they are stopped by emphatically ringing bells. The third appearance of the ants is again stopped by the bells which eventually fade and the movement ends with an unexpectedly peremptory gesture (illustrated).

The overall structure of the second movement (as in Beethoven's Op 132) is of contrasting episodes which are repeated, becoming more complex with each repetition. The movement starts with chords hesitantly and ominously built up across the three lower instruments before the first violin enters with a high singing phrase that descends trippingly in triplets before a gentle *glissando* (illustrated). Tippett adds the following epigraph to the movement: 'Chantes,

rossignol, chantes / Toi qui as le coeur gai' ('Sing, nightingale, sing / you who have a happy heart'). The folk-song, though not Tippett's quotation continues: 'Your heart is for laughing / Mine is for weeping'. The movement poignantly explores deep emotions before ending with an unexpected and ecstatic chord (illustrated).