

**Bromsgrove Concerts**

**Friday 28 February 2014**

**The Artrix, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire**

Tippett String Quartet -

John Mills (violin)

Jeremy Isaac (violin)

Daisy Spiers (viola)

Bozidar Vukotic (cello)

- Mozart String Quartet in G major K387
- Simpson String Quartet No 11 (1984)
- Beethoven String Quartet in C major Op 59 No 3 (Rasumovsky)

The Tippett Quartet was formed in 1998 the year in which the composer after who they are named died. They are committed to combining mainstream repertoire with 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary works. Their eclectic recorded catalogue includes music by Bax, Bridge, Tippett, Rosza and Stephen Dodgson. In the penultimate concert of Bromsgrove's current season the Tippetts played one of Robert Simpson's fifteen quartets alongside core repertoire from Mozart and Beethoven.

Simpson's music features all too rarely on concert programmes. He was born in Leamington Spa in 1921 and studied composition with Herbert Howells. Better known for most of his lifetime as both a BBC Radio 3 producer and renowned writer on the music of Beethoven, Bruckner, Nielsen and Havergal Brian, Simpson ploughed his own furrow as a composer writing in a then unfashionable tonal language coupled with an unwavering commitment to the twin peaks of instrumental music that have dominated European Art music since Haydn and Mozart – the symphony and string quartet. Tellingly he composed no operas or vocal works.

Simpson did little to promote his works and in the last two decades of his life it was left to a handful of devotees to perform and record his music. Thankfully most of his compositions were set down for posterity on CD by the Hyperion record label. Unfashionable again since his death in 1997, because his music does not fit into today's cultural environment obsessed with populist easy listening and short term

gimmicks, it is high time Simpson's output was more widely performed. The rewards for those with open minds and ears are infinite.

The ever enterprising Bromsgrove Concerts have programmed Simpson's chamber music in recent years. In 2012 the 7<sup>th</sup> quartet was played by the Coull Quartet who also performed the 11<sup>th</sup> Quartet as recently as 2005.

Quartet No 11 is in one continuous movement with four sections seamlessly joined together. Instead of conventional tonality Simpson used the relationships between intervals as a springboard for organic growth and development of musical material. So in the 11<sup>th</sup> quartet the chief roots of the work are, in Simpson's own words, "a pair of intervals (major third and tritones) and a chromatic turn that twists upwards through a whole-tone and down through a semitone". Ultimately what matters, of course, is whether the nuts and bolts of the music make sense to the receptive listener.

The Tippetts captured the 11<sup>th</sup> quartet's bracing contrasts of turbulence and calm to perfection. Especially memorable was the way in which they built up the tension in the overlapping rushing scales of the third movement, bringing the work to its main point of climax. The hushed ethereal final movement had superb concentration and focus from the players - the music simply vanished into thin air as intended by the composer. The appreciative Bromsgrove audience listened attentively in rapt silence.

Simpson's work was a perfect companion piece for Mozart and Beethoven. In the first of Mozart's great series of quartets dedicated to Haydn the Tippetts brought out the wit in the first movement and the exuberant counterpoint of the finale (a clear precursor to the finale of the Jupiter Symphony).

Beethoven's Third "Rasumovsky" quartet, played after the interval, was on the same exalted level as the Simpson. Flowing tempi in all four movements were well chosen and fitted the music perfectly. The Tippetts playing of the second movement's Slavic tinged melody over throbbing pizzicato accompaniment was a high point of their interpretation. In Beethoven's brilliant finale the link was clearly made between Mozart's joyous fugal writing and Simpson's intense yet vigorous counterpoint – three great string quartet composers.

Paul Hearn.