Chamber music

Four into one does go

A life spent at the summit of chamber music—playing Beethoven’s string quartets

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THE string quartet is an invention of the classical age, brought to perfection by Mozart and Haydn. Goethe once defined it as “four rational people conversing with each other”, which suggests that a book on the subject might not be very exciting. But that would do an injustice to Edward Dusinberre’s memoir “Beethoven for a Later Age: The Journey of a String Quartet”. Mr Dusinberre is the lead violinist of the Takacs Quartet, one of the world’s most highly regarded string ensembles, and he has written a fascinating book about the musical life of this group of players. Interwoven with that is the story of Beethoven’s 16 string quartets, works of extraordinary power written over a quarter-century that moved the genre on from the earlier masters and are now regarded as the apogee of the chamber-music repertoire..

In Beethoven’s day many of them met with incomprehension and dismay, which the short-tempered composer had to learn to accommodate. When his now famous “Grosse Fuge”, originally the last movement of one of his late quartets, was shredded by critics, Beethoven grudgingly wrote a new ending. At a performance of another quartet he got his musicians to play the whole thing twice over, hoping that the audience might gain a better insight into the music the second time. And when a player complained in the composer’s hearing that the quartets were “not music” at all, he replied: “Oh, they are not for you; they are for a later age.”
A century later, Igor Stravinsky still judged the quartets “contemporary”, and thought they always would be. Another century on, Mr Dusinberre clearly feels the same way. He links each chapter in his memoir to a particular quartet, moving back and forth between the story of the composition (and the personal, social and political context it was written in) and the life of his quartet.

Founded in 1975, the Takacs Quartet still retains two of its original members. Mr Dusinberre joined more than 20 years ago to replace the founding first violinist, Gabor Takacs-Nagy. Even the most recent arrivals have been around for more than ten years, so all four musicians know each other very well, both musically and personally. The book is admirably kind about every one of the players, but at times the constant enforced proximity must become claustrophobic. When the four are on tour together they generally try to keep away from each other as much as possible.

When Mr Dusinberre auditioned for the part in 1993 he was only 23, almost a generation younger than the rest. He was English, everyone else was Hungarian, and he soon realised that he was being put to the test not so much for his prowess on the violin—given his training, that was taken for granted—but for his musical ideas, his personal qualities and his ability and willingness to work with colleagues. He felt green and rather nervous about playing with such a cohesive and experienced group, and also conscious that the others came from a different and somewhat more laid-back culture. But they offered him the job, or so he thought; it was only later that one of them told him that what he was taking on was not a job but a family and a life.

A lot of the time the work is just hard grind. The Takacs Quartet plays about 100 concerts annually, does a lot of recording and tours for around half the year. This is hard on spouses and children (who barely get a mention). When not touring, the players practise on their own and then rehearse together for hours every day. They endlessly debate their different approaches to the music, often argue, and try out each other’s ideas even if they don’t think they are very good. Every time they play they try to do something new, which may help explain why they have been so successful.

Anyone who has ever watched a good string quartet in concert will be familiar with the subtly effective way the players communicate—here a raised eyebrow, there a glance or a nearly imperceptible nod. It is almost as though they were a single instrument, not four working in harmony. And at its best, the experience of playing in a quartet can be sublime. In a performance of Beethoven’s quartet in A minor, Mr Dusinberre explains: “We were taken far out of ourselves, liberated from the confines of individual personalities as we surrendered to the music, a blissful state.” An achievement that makes all the grind worthwhile.

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