

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797 - 1828)

STRING QUARTET IN D MINOR D810 'DEATH AND THE MAIDEN'

Allegro
Andante con moto
Scherzo: Molto Allegro
Presto

In the spring of 1824, the Austrian composer Franz Schubert returned to the medium of the string quartet after a lengthy absence. He knew at this time that his health was deteriorating and in a letter to his friend *Leopold Kupelweiser*, dated 31st March 1824, he revealed his state of mind:

'I feel as though I am the unhappiest, most miserable man on earth. Imagine a man whose health will never be regained, and whose despair at the thought makes things increasingly worse rather than better; imagine a man whose brightest hopes have come to nothing, to whom happiness in love and friendship offers nothing but the greatest pain.....'

Schubert's two quartets of 1824 (A minor and D minor) most certainly reflect the intensity and despair he felt in his life at that time.

The title of the quartet comes from the fact that the melody used as the theme in the second movement, is taken from Schubert's song by the same name. The text recounts an old myth where a sovereign - Death - demands a pre-nuptial night with a bride-to-be. If she declines, Death will take her betrothed on their wedding day. It is the 'Death' theme (in the piano part) which is used in this quartet. The musical language is very dramatic - it evokes death in all his guises, both harsh and gentle.

The opening of the first movement gives the impression of a macabre fanfare, heralding Death's arrival. The use of the triplet rhythm is insistent throughout the movement creating forward momentum - this is contrasted by a calmer second subject. After a coda in a quicker tempo, we are falsely led to what we think is an emphatic close but in fact, the music slows and softens to a stop as if all energy had disappeared.

Theme and variations in G minor make up the second movement. The chorale-like statement offers a haunting pulse and is almost a chant of death. This is followed by five variations of which only the fourth one is in the major. The movement ends in the major with a feeling of hope or perhaps a spiritual reaching out.

However, we are submerged once again into D minor with a fiercely insistent syncopated rhythm creating tension and almost a battle between the upper and lower stings. But the trio offers light relief in the tonic major with a beautiful melody very innocent in nature.

The *Rondo Finale* is a ghostly tarantella dance - according to legend, the dance was supposed to cure a person of the bite of a tarantula. The unison opening creates the sense of a chase weaving its way through adventurous keys and extreme use of dynamics. The chase spirals out of control in the accelerating coda finishing totally breathless and exhausted.