

the smith quartet

IN THE FABRIC OF WESTERN MUSIC THE STRING QUARTET RUNS LIKE A GOLDEN THREAD. No other instrumental medium has such a long and continuous history, connecting unlikely musical companions across two and a half centuries: Joseph Haydn and John Cage, Brahms and the Beatles, Ruth Seeger and Philip Glass. Composers from Beethoven to Lachenmann have reserved their most extraordinary ideas for an ensemble made up of two violins, viola and cello; some, like Webern, have made it a medium for the briefest of utterances, other, like Feldman, have used it to make musical spaces on a scale so extended that they change our sense of time.

So it is particularly appropriate that a string quartet should be the ensemble in residence at the year's Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, presenting ten concerts which run like a thread through the festival programme, ten concerts in which the four members of the quartet can be heard together, individually and with another great chamber musician, the pianist John Tilbury. It is also appropriate that the composer at the heart of the Smith Quartet's Huddersfield residency should be Morton Feldman, a composer for whom the string quartet medium was 'the pinnacle of Western music'. 'That's Western civilisation', said Feldman of the instruments of the quartet, 'handed to us on a silver platter'.

The Smith Quartet is an ensemble which has embraced all these possibilities and played its own highly distinctive role in developing the medium still further.

The string quartet has survived so successfully partly because it is such a rich sonic resource; there may only be four instruments, two of them the same, all of them based on the same acoustic principles, but together and individually they are capable of a huge tonal range, from the tiniest short sounds to explosive attacks, from the sweetest singing sounds to violently abrasive noise. But the string quartet has also survived because of its extraordinary adaptability. The quartet as the intimate domestic medium of the 18th century gave way to the concert hall quartet of the 19th and 20th century, taking in occasional partners – most notably perhaps the piano and the clarinet – along the way. In the late 20th century its sonic potential grew again with the addition of electronics, allowing the four instruments of the quartet to project their sound into the largest of venues and offering composers the potential to multiply and transform that sound.

The Smith Quartet is an ensemble which has embraced all these possibilities and played its own highly distinctive role in developing the medium still further. Traditionally string quartets have often taken the name of a famous composer or piece of music. Even more often quartets have taken their first violinist's name and indeed Steven Smith did play first violin in the original Smith Quartet line-up, but it is

perhaps not too fanciful to see the Smith identity as also being a statement of aesthetic intent. Applying one of the most common names in England to this most 'classical' of instrumental formations locates the Quartet in new territory, as advocates of a repertoire less circumscribed by the past.

Fanciful or not, this is the direction the Smith Quartet has chosen to take. 'Post-minimal' might be the shorthand label for the music they have tended to play, but that hardly does justice to a repertoire that includes over one hundred new pieces written especially for them, ranging from the jazz-based loopiness of Django Bates *Pond Life* to the beguiling undulations of Howard Skempton's *Tendrils* (a 2004 Huddersfield premiere). As part of their commitment to taking their work to new audiences they have also embraced the potential of amplification and electronic sound processing, so that their sound designer is almost a fifth member of the ensemble, and this same commitment was in evidence when they played Steve Reich's *Different Trains* as part of BBC 2's *Holocaust – A Music Memorial from Auschwitz*. Recorded on location in Auschwitz in November, 2004, the film was shown in 2005 to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the surviving inmates of the Auschwitz concentration camp; it has subsequently been broadcast around the world, bringing Reich's most powerful work to many new listeners.

In this year's Huddersfield programme the current Smith Quartet – violinists Ian Humphries and Darragh Morgan, founder member Nic Pendlebury on viola, and cellist Deirdre Cooper – will play other modern classics like Kevin Volans' *White Man Sleeps* as well as lots of Feldman. They will also continue their expansion of the repertoire with new works whose approach to the medium demonstrates the extent of its potential, from the electronically transformed soundworld of Miguel Azguime's music to the exclusively acoustic resources of my own new work 1-2-3.

What makes the string quartet in general, and the Smith Quartet in particular, so exciting for composers like Miguel and me, is that out of the interaction of these four instruments and these four players everything is possible.

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