

**Pre-concert talk given to Musica Viva, before the concert given by the  
Shanghai Quartet, Canberra, 13 July 1998**

**by Don Aitkin**

The choice of items in tonight's concert has pushed me into seeking an explanation for the death of the string quartet as a musical form. You will have noticed that tonight's concert begins with a late quartet by Haydn, finishes with Smetana's first (of only two) quartets, and includes some recently composed pieces, a set of brief Bagatelles by the American composer Alan Hovhaness and *The Song of the Ch'in*, an exploration by four Western stringed instruments of the sound spectrum of an ancient Chinese stringed instrument, by the Chinese composer Zhou Long.

Why, you might ask, aren't we hearing some modern string quartets? The answer is a complex one, and I don't for a moment suggest that my account of things is necessarily correct, let alone that there might not be other accounts. Let's begin with the weight of composition. There is not much doubt that of all the string quartets performed today, probably ninety per cent were written between 1750 and 1850. They are, I think, along with the quintets and trios of the same period, the staple items of Musica Viva concerts. Most composers of the last 150 years, however, have written only one or two quartets. Dvorak in the late 19th century and Shostakovich in the 20th century are exceptions — each having written a dozen or more. But Haydn, you will remember, wrote 83, Mozart 26, Beethoven 17 or 18, Schubert around 20. In the cases of Haydn and Beethoven at least, the string quartets were central to their musical composition. That would not be said today of any major 20th century composer, other than Bela Bartok (who wrote six most important string quartets) or (less arguably) of Shostakovich. Nor was it true of Dvorak. Why the falling off in more recent times?

One theme of my answer is the changing nature of performance, and therefore of composition. A good deal of early chamber music was written for talented amateurs: chamber music is above all music written for the players to enjoy, whether or not there are any others listening. It was certainly intended for publication, to reach those amateurs — who not only had the money to purchase the instruments and the music, but the leisure to indulge in this form of recreation. In the first half of the 18th century there were some important developments which made the string quartet possible: the 'consort of viols' was replaced by the violin, viola and cello, all in their recognisably modern form; the grouping of two violins (the first having a lot of the difficult work), a viola and a cello was becoming standard, with music being regularly written for it; and the sonata form, which had developed in the trio sonatas of the Baroque and *galant* periods, provided a set of rules and conventions which could govern the writing of music for the string quartet. Joseph Haydn was arguably the inventor of the form, and it flourished for three generations after 1750.

Yet, just as it began to flourish, two further things happened in the second half of the 18th century that had a major effect upon performance. The first was the development of a concert-going public ready to pay for its enjoyments, and entrepreneurs (like Salomon, who arranged for Haydn's English visits) able to fill the need, by hiring composers, orchestras and

venues. The second was a consequence or accompaniment of the first — the development of a class of professional musicians able to play virtually anything that a composer put on paper. So performance shifted from private places, in which the focus of attention was the enjoyment by the players of making music, to public places, in which an audience (often a paying audience) enjoyed the outcome of highly proficient professionals (usually paid for their efforts) making music. And composition shifted from cheerful and unproblematic music that was within the reach of most people with talent and some training, to music that required much more of an effort on the part both of the performers and of the audience.

Of course, there was a transitional phase, and it happened in different places at different times. Beethoven was part of the transition in Vienna — at many of the concerts in which his orchestral music was performed the orchestra consisted of a mixture of amateurs and professionals. The premiere of the Seventh, for example, was played by an orchestra led by Schubert's friend Ignaz Schuppanzigh, and among the musicians were the composers Hummel, Meyerbeer, Salieri and Spohr, plus a great double-bass virtuoso, Dragonetti. Our own Canberra Symphony Orchestra today is a mixture of professionals and amateurs, and includes musicians who are well capable of exemplary virtuoso performance.

So the first theme in explaining why the string quartet lost popularity among composers is that performance and composition shifted, in the late 18th century, from a focus on the private to a focus on the public. That led to a focus on the large-scale rather than on the small scale — and this is the second theme of my explanation. It is probably fair to say that the big orchestra became the chosen instrument of composers as the 19th century progressed, and it had that prominence for two main reasons. First, advances in the technology of instrument-making of all kinds produced an orchestra which had a bigger and more varied sound, and bigger halls were built to accommodate the growing audiences the big 19th century orchestra commanded. Second, given the possibilities of the symphony, the symphonic poem, the concerto for instrumental soloist and orchestra, the ballet suite, the overture — orchestral music offered a very wide range of style, argument and brevity, with something for everyone. Chamber music could not compete for popular attention in concert form with orchestral music; nor can it do so today.

Which takes us to theme three in explanation. As these shifts occurred, an important outcome was that the string quartet in particular began to occupy a different place in the composer's repertoire. It came to be the place where the composer set out his deepest and most meaningful thoughts, musically speaking. The exemplar here, of course, is Beethoven, and he seems to have had a profound effect on those composers who came after him, if only because of his status as the Titan of serious music. You know that Brahms was reluctant to publish a symphony because so much was expected of him, and he knew that his symphony would instantly be placed alongside those of Beethoven for comparison; he was 43 when his first symphony was first performed. After Beethoven's last six string quartets, which are still regarded as the high-point of the whole repertoire, which composer would dare to think that he had thoughts of equivalent profundity! Many composers tried their hand at the musical form of the string quartet, just as serious writers

would try their hand at the different genres of literary composition, but with the exceptions that I noted at the beginning, none of the well-known composers of the last 150 years has essayed a dozen or more string quartets; they were content with one or two.

There is a fourth theme in the explanation, connected to all the others. The 19th century was of course the century of Romanticism, and one aspect of Romanticism was an impatience with forms, especially if they got in the way of the free expression of the creative spirit. Beethoven again was the exemplar in this movement, because he was the bridge between the adherence to forms which was characteristic of the Classical period and the rejection of old forms which was characteristic of mature Romanticism. His own string quartets demonstrate the change, from the Haydn-like formal structure of his early quartets to the very different structures of his late quartets: seven movements for op. 130 and op. 131 five for op. 132, thematic linking between the movements, the collapse of the sonata-form 'argument', and so on. So after Beethoven the string quartet could be seen as a musical form of the 18th century, and the rules which went with that form. It was worth a try, so to speak, to show what you could do, like a sonnet or haiku, but it stopped being a major contemporary form of musical composition that continually adapted to changing circumstances. Here the string quartet is unlike the novel or play, in literary terms, and in musical terms unlike the musical comedy, which has a three-hundred year continuous existence and popularity. It is like, however, the symphony and to a lesser extent the concerto, which have similarly not survived to our time as continually adapting contemporary forms of serious composition.

But what is most interesting is that we, the audience, find these products of a past age musically and emotionally valid today. Why is that so? Why is it that we respond well to these forms, and today's composers, recognising our interest, do not offer their versions? I will try an answer to the first of these questions, but I am not in a position to do so for the second, other than to make the obvious point that there is nearly always a gap between the expression of the composer and the taste of the audience. One response is that we are an especially privileged group of listeners. We have available to us not only the concert platform, but the resources of the CD, the record and the radio station. Music surrounds us in the late 20th century. If we have had a lifetime's interest in serious music, we have been able to hear a very great deal of it, vastly more than was true of people in past generations. So there is a familiarity about a lot of what we hear which is both soothing and educative: even if we cannot read a note of music, repeated listening eventually gives us a sense of the flow of the argument, and something of what the composer intended comes to us.

Because there is now such agreement about who the really good composers have been — there is much greater agreement about the canon in the musical world than in the literary world — it is likely that we have been exposed to lots more of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, for example, than of Honegger, Copland or Sculthorpe. What is more, until our own century composers operated in a paradigm in which melody and harmony were both important, and melody and harmony are, I think, especially listener-friendly aspects of music. We return again and again to the musical forms of the 18th and 19th centuries with increasing familiarity and pleasure. A second aspect

of the answer (and it helps to explain why the music of the baroque period is so popular) is that there may be an increasing respect, even yearning, for predictable and balanced forms and structures in a world in which much else is neither predictable or balanced. I usually distrust explanations of this global kind, but that one has an intuitive rightness to at least this listener!

Let me bring this ramble to an end by saying that the decline of the string quartet as a form of musical composition is not a disaster. Nothing would have been worse for the development of music, I think, than some kind of injunction that the forms of the 18th and 19th centuries were to be followed forever. But, from time to time, I also feel that we have been deprived of many excellent examples of the various genres simply because composers of more recent times felt that these forms were too inhibiting. I wish it were otherwise. The success of Prokofiev's Classical Symphony, or Respighi's suites of Ancient Airs and Dances has not produced many imitators.

Now to some brief comments on the music we are going to hear tonight. The first is by Joseph Haydn, and it is the second-last string quartet he was to write, composed at the age of 67. Although he wrote more than 80 works in this genre, fifteen or so of them are lost. He wrote several quartets as a relatively young man, but his major works in this area, which come in sets of six or three, for the most part, were written in his fifties or later — 34 of them. Two sets of these, his Op. 20 and Op. 33, were much admired by Mozart, who dedicated his own set of six to Haydn (and they are thus often referred to as the 'Haydn' quartets). Haydn's two Op. 77 quartets are more or less contemporaneous with the composition of his pupil Beethoven's first two, the Op. 18 pair. Indeed each pair was commissioned by the same patron, Prince Lobkowitz (actually, the Prince commissioned three from Haydn, but only two were finished — the third lacked two movements when Haydn gave composition away as his health and strength declined).

The first of the Op. 77 quartets is a wonderfully civilised composition, easy to listen to, cheerful, melodious, like so much of Haydn's work. It could be Mozart, it could be Beethoven, for Haydn always seems to have taken note of what other composers were writing. It is undeniably the work of a master composer who disliked repeating himself, for it is new and fresh in inspiration. Beethoven's Op. 18 quartets are also fresh in inspiration, but they are bouncier and more aggressive than Haydn's, more rhythmical, more decided. If they are played as a group it is easy to see the differences, but instructive to note how much Beethoven kept to the form and the structure of the quartet which the older man had virtually invented.

Let me pass at once to the Smetana String Quartet No. 1 which finishes the concert, because this piece can represent the Romantic version of the string quartet very well. Bedrich Smetana is best known for his nationalistic operas and his symphonic tone poems, but as a teenager he composed and arranged for the string quartet. In adult life Smetana composed only two string quartets, and this one, written three-quarters of a century after Haydn's Op. 77, has the regulation four movements; but the order is different, and the earlier themes are re-assembled in the final movement. The quartet has a title, 'From My Life', and although Smetana himself believed that no-one needed to know what the autobiographical element was in order to appreciate the music, I think that it *is* important to know that he wrote it after

the death of his wife, at a time when he was seeing his life, after an exciting and creative time, as a series of disasters, the worst of which was the degeneration of his hearing (and there is a musical reference to the noises in his head in the last movement). Here is the composer expressing his deepest thoughts, and indeed he seems to have written it as much for himself as for a public audience. That does not matter, for it is fine music, not at all unrelieved gloom and doom, with the song-like quality of Schubert breaking through from time to time. Those who think they do not know this piece of music and wonder what it will be like may find that indeed they have heard it before; it is frequently played on radio.

Finally, to the 'non-quartet' works. There is a nice link between them, for the American composer has studied Chinese music, and the Chinese composer studied in the USA and now works there. (And the Shanghai Quartet seems to be three parts Chinese to one part American, too.) Alan Hovhaness is an old man now, and has been productive for a long time. (Since digression is the better part of blather, I feel bound to tell you that he is of Armenian and Scottish ancestry, and that Hovhaness is the Armenian equivalent of 'John'.) Alas, he seems to have destroyed 1000 or so early works half a century ago, having become dissatisfied with his own creativity. Those fearful of music composed in our own time should have no fear of his Bagatelles: they are delicate, sensuous and thoroughly approachable. They are also short and unpretentious, like Beethoven's own Bagatelles, the best known of which is 'Für Elise'. Incidentally, Hovhaness is not afraid of the older forms: we could be hearing one of his three string quartets, which — shades of the Schubertiads — were written for a group of friends who gathered at his house to perform music and study it. He has also written two dozen symphonies.

Zhou Long is 45, and one of the many thousands of talented people whose education and careers were interrupted by the Cultural Revolution. His 'Song of the Ch'in' has been recorded by the Shanghai Quartet — on the same CD as the Hovhaness Bagatelles and String Quartets. My musical reference collection is silent about him, and what I know comes from the information sheet on the CD. But the music itself is engaging, and grows on you when heard again. The Quartet say that they have played the piece dozens of times, and have been coached by the composer in how to play it as he composed it. The ch'in itself is a seven-stringed zither-like instrument, whose strings are plucked, in different ways for different effects. The Song itself is based on a poem by Liu Tsung-yuan, a public servant who was the victim of some bureaucratic downsizing in the middle of the Tang dynasty, a thousand or so years ago. Instead of setting himself up in a consultancy he travelled and wrote poems, including the one on the which the music is based. Called 'Old Fisherman', it is most reminiscent of Chinese landscape painting, and goes like this:

"The old fisherman moors at night by western cliffs;  
At dawn, draws water from the clear Hsiang, lights a fire with  
southern bamboo.  
Mists melt in the morning sun, and the man is gone;  
Only the song reverberates in the green of the hills and water.  
Look back, the horizon seems to fall into the stream;  
And clouds float aimlessly over the cliffs."

The music is certainly consistent with that tone painting.

Let us prepare to enjoy the concert. Thank you for your attention