



## **MUSIC CHRONICLE**

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*Oxford Outlook* 12 (1932), 133–8

During the last few months we have been visited by more musicians of genius and of talent than at any time during the past four years: Artur Schnabel, Josef Szigeti and Béla Bartók; and the Busch Quartet gave single performances, while the Léner Quartet in five concerts played the sixteen string quartets of Beethoven; this within the same six weeks. When this astonishing period came to an end one found oneself slightly bewildered by the sheer intensity and variety of music and musicians compressed into so brief an interval; but it remains a most remarkable and admirable experience.

I have paid homage both to Schnabel and to the Busch Quartet in these pages before. I have expressed my admiration in every way I know; by now their genius and their virtue need no advertisement. Those who are fortunate enough to hear them will, if they have ears, remember their experience as long as they remember anything, without the help of the gramophone; for without any doubt these artists reached the highest level of executive genius in music attained in our time; their methods are, however, so different that it may be interesting to dwell on this for some instant.

The Busch Quartet is for our generation what the Joachim Quartet was for the nineteenth century. The same ideal of absolute artistic incorruptibility, of unhesitating surrender to the composer, and finally of awareness of the value and dignity conferred by the work upon its executant, is the source of the peculiar greatness both of Joachim and Adolf Busch. What this meant in the case of actual performances by Joachim, I, who have not heard them, cannot know. What it means in the interpretation of the Beethoven Violin Concerto, anyone who heard the performance of it given by Adolf Busch will remember. The same [134] quality characterised the Oxford concert: it was almost the sole redeeming feature of the Reger Quartet (in E flat), a sincere and serious work, at times moving in virtue of these qualities alone, for it had no others. The Haydn Quartet (in F, op. 3) was lifted to its proper pinnacle of serene and placid beauty after its skilful and not wholly unattractive vulgarisation by the Léner Quartet. As for the Razumovsky Quartet in E minor (op. 59), it was played with

breadth, freedom and nobility, which Léner is constitutionally not capable of achieving, for all his undoubted technical brilliance and genuine pursuit of the immediately ravishing in music.

The greatest asset of the Léner Quartet is the flawless discipline of its ensemble, which makes up (though the phrase is not a happy one) in technical efficiency what it loses in individuality. This mechanical simile is not arbitrary – its fitness is plain to anyone who compares them (and in view of their claims the comparison is not unfair) to the Busch, for apart from the vast intellectual and emotional distance which separates them, they are divided by something even more personal. One receives the immediate impression of the Busch Quartet as consisting of four free and distinct individuals, each with his own peculiar artistic attitude, which is distinguishable even while it contributes itself to the whole, each aware of the equal and independent rank of his instrument, which is allowed to rise to its full stature among the others; in the other case everything is surrendered to purchase symmetry and smoothness; the individual differences are not reconciled but eliminated, and the residue acquires an inevitable tinge of something passive and oppressed.

The only person who remains unbroken is Jenő Léner himself, who is too obviously responsible for [135] this system. He is a remarkably gifted musician who frequently – invariably to one's fresh surprise and consternation – sinks to sudden depths of slickly expressed sentimentality, in which the other players become involved. This would be quite unexceptionable if it occurred only in such items of the Léner repertoire as Tchaikovsky's *Andante cantabile*; but occurring when it does, on occasions which demand the greatest insight and sensitiveness, it leads to ruinous results. Occasions such as these marred what was undoubtedly a very notable achievement – a complete recital of the sixteen quartets.

It is not frequently that anyone obtains the chance of hearing the whole series, and I wish therefore to put on record gratitude for this opportunity. Considered as a single achievement, there is surely no music which can claim equal status with it, either as music or as a constituent element of European culture; and since this is the case, no ordinary standards suffice in criticising a performance of it. Judged by the extraordinary standard implicit in the music itself, the Léner Quartet did not succeed, but it was not an ignoble failure. The six quartets op. 18 were played more than

adequately. They are of very varying merit, and no generalisation can be concrete enough to have value. On the whole, the cool, fresh, early-morning romanticism of these quartets, especially of the enchanting Quartets in F and in C minor, was successfully conveyed.

Even these works, written when the composer was comparatively young, and more symbolic of the transition from one mind and century to another than any other contemporary art, at times rise to heights of which not a glimpse was hinted at by the players; but since these moments are comparatively rare, this does not weigh decisively against the superb skill which the Léner display on what may be called the purely empirical level. [136] The magnificent Razumovsky Quartets, the finest flowering of European romanticism, were played uneventfully, without originality or fire, without any genuine lyrical impulse, with energy in place of intense emotion, with smooth and seamless sinuousness for tender feeling, which almost brought about a successful illusion. The real collapse occurred where it might have been expected, over the posthumous quartets.

The Harp Quartet (op. 74) is evidently the outermost limit of this quartet's normal horizon: beyond that, complete uncertainty prevails. The strange and haunting quartet op. 95 was played by them with complete assurance and even blitheness: they found not a hint of mystery in it; all was clear as day. With the exception of the Grosse Fuge, which depends so much on technical accomplishment that it attracted and brought out the most finished playing of which the quartet is capable – which is saying a very great deal – the posthumous quartets were treated almost as though they had been written by a Saint-Saëns. The slow movements were played with much beauty of tone, which was, however, enormously outbalanced by a mixture of complacency and tawdry feeling more irritating than can be described. The first movement of the C Sharp Minor Quartet, the movement marked *Andante moderato e lusinghiero*, and the playing of the second and third movements of the A Minor Quartet, for instance, or the cavatina of the Quartet in B Flat Minor, were, to those who knew them, movements of sheer suffering. The swifter tempi were disfigured by exaggerated buoyancy, with which this quartet sometimes arms itself to withstand the frequent charge of

effeminacy; the effect of this was a kind of forced liveliness, on the horror of which there is no need to dwell.

[137] And yet, after all deductions have been made, the performance of these works, which collectively mark the highest level to which chamber music, and indeed the romantic movement as a whole, has attained, the highest, one would like to add, to which it is conceivable that any movement or any individual could ever have attained, represents a public service on the part of the Léner Quartet more valuable than any other they could have performed: for their shortcomings they ought perhaps, at this stage of their career, no longer be held responsible.

I have been excessively long-winded about this matter, with the result that the initial reason for this disquisition – the discussion of the differences between Busch and Schnabel – was allowed to disappear altogether. It is too late to reopen the question: the thesis I intended to embroider consisted in the affirmation that whereas, in the case of Busch, as in the parallel case of Toscanini, the music is, as it were, allowed to play itself, there is no sense of deliberate choice between alternatives, of doctrine pressed home against encircling and eliminated possibilities, in the case of Schnabel the opposite occurs, the actuality which he develops moves forward in conscious opposition to the unrealised potentialities. In the first case there is no sense of conflict; the musical process of one of harmonious, natural, unquestioning self-revelation. What one admires is the nobility, the divine ingenuousness of treatment. With Schnabel, conflict arises at every stage. What one admires is the genius disclosed in each decision, each selected and asseverated element. The intellectual strain is much greater, the tension much severer, problems are presented and some are resolved, some not, but the urgency of all of them gives the whole process an aspect at once more tragic and more personal. This applies, of [138] course, primarily to Beethoven (it is absolutely true of the Diabelli variations, which Schnabel played here) and to a lesser extent to Schubert. To Mozart it does not apply at all. But I cannot enlarge upon this here.

The Bartók–Szigeti recital was extremely interesting. Bartók is one of the few genuinely original, genuinely creative composers alive in the present day. This recital was not representative enough to enable his audience to gauge his power. Such of his music as was played has a strong, tart, semi-barbaric character, gusts of

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violent feeling interspersed with patches of fierce, astringent wit. The piano is revealed as an instrument of percussion capable of yielding harsh and passionate discords the like of which have not been heard in Europe since the Mongol invasions. As for Josef Szigeti, tribute is due to his superb talent: if Busch continues the tradition of Joachim, Szigeti is within that other great tradition of the violin, the Paganini–Veniavsky–Sarasate tradition of the virtuosi of genius, of which Huberman is the greatest living representative. Szigeti played one of the Bach unaccompanied sonatas with the most ardent feeling, combined with remarkable attention to the lucid formal structure of the work, a taut and passionate discipline which never grew turbid and never grew cold, but held a proud and perilous course between the extremes into which violinists who play Bach continually fall. Of all violinists who recently played Bach in England, only Huberman and Szigeti rose beyond the temptation either to gush or to flirt and sparkle. It is doubtful how far this is generally recognised.

It was a most interesting, most engrossing term.

I.B.

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**Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online 15 January 2019**