



Letters

The Fitzwilliam Quartet at 50!

S ometime in Michaelmas Term 1968, four first-year Cambridge undergraduates sat down in Fitzwilliam College to play some quartets. The exact details of that occasion are hazy—not least the date; but the venue was definitely the Gaskoin Room. (The quartet still works regularly at the College, so the memories are easily kept alive.) Haydn's *Lark* and the Tchaikovsky no.1 were certainly tried out—possibly Schumann no. 3 and Mozart K. 499 as well. Shostakovich didn't appear until some months later: three of the group had been members of the National Youth Orchestra (of

Great Britain), and we had latterly performed the Tenth Symphony, which made a tremendous impact on everyone. In Spring 1969 our second violinist John Phillips, who had organised our public debut at Sheffield Arts Festival (his home city) arrived one day with the now famous Decca Borodin Quartet recording of Shostakovich's Eighth Quartet—which we were no less blown away by. It *had* to be the centrepiece of that concert—and indeed its composer became the centrepiece of our work for the following 49 years.

We were no different from any number of student quartets in

Cambridge—and we were certainly not the best! But through a combination of persistence and good fortune, we managed to stick together and move on to the beginning of professional life as York University's Quartet in Residence. But we *were* different from other groups who had tackled the Eighth: the work is marvellous, of course—and still the ideal way in, for amateurs, students, and professionals alike. But what of the other eleven...? (N.B. This was still 1969.) It seemed obvious to us to try another. And another... While at Cambridge I regularly took trips to London, to watch football and



to browse record shops: a favourite haunt was the Anglo-Soviet music shop, just next to Foyles. Early in 1971 I stumbled on something totally unexpected: an LP of “Quartet No.13”. I had no idea such a work existed, let alone that it was over a year old! I devoured it avidly as soon as I reached my room in King’s: again, I was dumbstruck at what I heard. We hadn’t yet attempted no. 12, so I wasn’t really prepared for the note rows—and especially the blatant atonality of the extraordinarily weird central section in no. 13. Neither was I ready for the harrowing experience this work delivers. It still disturbs me now, as much as it has always done.

Once we got to York later that year, we determined to play it there. But how, given that no material was available. Where to obtain it? An old friend from Clare College reminded me that the usual way to get hold of a new piece was to write to the composer: the rest is FSQ history. I wrote to Shostakovich, he replied, and then the music arrived, along with a promise to come and hear it! “(By great good fortune the composer was due to be in Britain in November 1972). He kept that promise—as he always did thereafter, notably with each new quartet as it was written. His death was one of my first experiences of real bereavement. But before that we had been lured by Decca into the studio, to record the last two quartets: being a huge commercial company their motivation was to be the first—which they were! We weren’t really ready for such exposure, but we did our best—wonderfully enabled by our marvellous recording team, led by the incomparable Peter Wadland. The discs were well received, and we quickly (*too* quickly) found ourselves going back four more times to record the rest of the cycle.

What we gained—apart from an international profile—was a deep inner authority, allowing us to tackle other areas of the vast repertoire (for example, Beethoven) with a confidence and assurance which could only have come through our association



Dmitri Shostakovich with Alan George—violinist of the Fitzwilliam String Quartet

with Shostakovich. This felt like a deeply spiritual connection, one which far outlasted his limited time on this planet. This connection has been passed on through more personnel changes than we might have liked: as the only surviving original FSQ player over all 50 years, I’m bound to ask myself time and again what it is about me that has driven all those people away.....! It’s likely that, as the age of 70 approaches, Lucy, Marcus, and Sally will outlast me. I hope so, because the Fitzwilliam’s future is in their hands, not mine. As if to set out their stall, they recently persuaded me to return to those last three quartets in our recording venue. For many reasons 13/14/15 did need

re-making—not least on account of mistakes in the hand-copied instrumental parts (however I still use mine!). It’s a risky business, re-recording something which has already proved successful: however 45 years of living with this music can bring a certain wisdom, which was inaccessible to us 25-year-olds—whatever the virtues of raw youth. What people will hear in 2019 are essentially the same performances—but having now passed the age when Shostakovich wrote these works I will gladly affirm that my colleagues have made this great music their own, just as much as we once did.

- Alan George

