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Egon Wellesz (1885-1974)

Artis-Quartett Wien

Peter Schuhmayer, 1st Violin
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contemporary British music, and his Second Symphony, for all its Schubertian leanings, actually bears the subtitle *The English.* This forms an introduction to the spiky, almost neo-classical music of the *Comodo*, but this is not allowed to develop very far before a chant-like unison theme intervenes, clearly developed from the *Grave*. The *Comodo* music then forges ahead, but at the climax the *Grave* tempo returns and the lyrical following theme flowers into a kind of majestic chorale before the peaceful close of the movement.

The second movement, *Allegretto*, is a very short scherzo in 3/8 time. Out of repeated-note figures bandied about between the four instruments a busy, angular momentum appears and then dissipates back into a unison jab of repeated notes. The whole movement is like an epigram, with a hint of burlesque. The ensuing *Andante*, *molto tranquillo* is a delicate pastorale in Siciliano rhythm. Cello, viola and violin II stretching out a seven-note arpeggio over three octaves and back down again to its initial note, above which violin I sings a bittersweet melody, later in combination with the viola.

The finale is marked *Poco animato*, with the qualification *Grazioso*. Much of the material has a *scherzando* character: some of the figures in this brilliant and flamboyant movement suggest Wellesz may have been remembering the finale of the Third Quartet of Alexander Zemlinsky. A passionate *Incalzando* theme provides the main contrast to the busy *scherzando* motion, but it is the latter which eventually sweeps all before it to the decisive final bars.

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recapitulates some previously-heard elements but also opens out longer, questioning melodic lines, as if enacting some sort of spiritual quest. (Some passages seem to evoke the finale of Schoenberg’s epoch-making Second Quartet, with its setting of Stefan George’s line ‘I feel the air blowing from other planets …’.) From its emotional climax Wellesz’s movement unwinds to a peaceful, elegiac close, in which D reappears as an (almost) unequivocal tonal centre.

As mentioned above, after his forced emigration to Britain in 1938, Wellesz found himself unable to compose until 1943, when he began again with another string quartet – his Fifth. Its successor, the String Quartet No. 6, op. 64, is therefore a work of the second half of his creative life. Composed in Oxford in June 1947, the work is a close contemporary of Wellesz’s Symphony No. 2, op. 65, in which he saw himself as taking up ‘the line abandoned by Schubert’, and another work with clear Schubertian resonances, the Octet op. 68. In its lightness and ‘grazioso’ style the Sixth Quartet, too, might be said to be continuing from Schubert, though obviously in a full 20th-century idiom. In these three works, as in his First Symphony in C major and his Mass in F minor, Wellesz had returned to a clearer assertion of traditional tonality: his final developments of 12-note and freely ‘atonal’ procedures would not begin until the mid-1950s. The first performance of the Sixth Quartet was given at the Library of Congress, Washington D.C. on 12 November 1948, by the Loewenguth String Quartet.

Dedicated to his friends Elizabeth Mackenzie and Patricia Kean, this is a predominantly lyrical work in four movements, centred on F, with the second and third movements in A and D flat respectively. The first movement alternates two expressive characters, associated with contrasted tempi – an opening Grave and a succeeding Comodo, in effect an Allegro. The unison writing and homophony of the Grave music is in striking contrast to the contrapuntal intricacies of Wellesz’s earlier quartets. The movement opens with stern, almost gruff chordal writing and gives way to lyric melody that seems to have almost an English accent (Wellesz was in fact very interested in
EGON WELLESZ: String Quartets Nos. 3, 4 and 6

Egon Wellesz was born in Vienna into an affluent family of Jewish origins. Encouraged by his parents and by decisive encounters with Gustav Mahler’s performances of the operatic and symphonic repertoire, he chose a musical career and studied musicology with Guido Adler at the University of Vienna, graduating Ph.D in 1908 with a thesis on the 18th-century Viennese composer Giuseppe Bonno. He also privately studied harmony and counterpoint (though not, in fact, composition) with Arnold Schoenberg in 1904-5. Although often classed with his fellow-pupils Alban Berg and Anton Webern as a member of the ‘Second Viennese School’, Wellesz did not remain so long with Schoenberg. He was in fact the first of Schoenberg’s pupils to gain independent success as a composer, receiving a contract from the publishers Universal Edition before Bartók, Berg or Webern did, which helped him remain semi-detached from the Schoenberg circle. He studied many other contemporary composers and as a result Schoenberg and he were on somewhat uneasy terms, though Wellesz’s admiration for his former teacher was unstinting and in 1921 he wrote the first book-length study of Schoenberg, which its subject considered excellent.

Wellesz taught at Vienna University from 1913, as a lecturer in music history, and from 1930 as Professor. He specialized in Viennese opera, Byzantine music and modern music, and remained one of the world’s leading authorities on Byzantine music, of which he published many editions and books. He was, however, first and foremost a composer, and a prolific one. In the early 1920s he participated in the activities of Schoenberg’s Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen (Society for Private Musical Performance), and also became friends with the poet and dramatist Hugo von Hofmannsthal, most famous for his operatic libretti for Richard Strauss, who also collaborated with Wellesz on several occasions. In fact, before World War II Wellesz was known above all for his ballets and operas, some of which – such as Alkestis, after Hofmannsthal, and Die 4 in fact forms a striking contrast to No. 3. Gone, for the most part, are the ‘exotic’ Hungarian or Impressionist elements. Instead this is a piece firmly aligned with the musical expressionism of the Second Viennese School. There is still a tonal centre – again, of D – but its influence is much more weakly disseminated through a work where extreme chromaticism is the norm, and frankly diatonic effects the exception. The five-movement form, with the first three movements being comparatively short, gives a suite-like character to the conception – and indeed the work of which Wellesz’s quartet may most strongly remind us is one that would not be written for some years: the Lyric Suite of Alban Berg.

The first movement, presenting a number of contrasted ideas, is a kind of prelude in the manner of an instrumental recitative. In addition to the highly chromatic initial material, the contrast of organum-like progressions in viola and cello, and grazioso imitative writing in all four instruments, defines the wide range of musical characters to be encountered in later movements. This passes straight into the second movement, a short, scherzo-like movement deploying a number of witty and/or grotesque melodic ideas. The third movement, Sehr langsam, occupies a mere two pages of score but is an expressive slow movement containing some passionate polyphony built around the second violin’s lamenting five-note phrase heard at the movement’s beginning.

The fourth and fifth movements are more substantial. The fourth, which Wellesz directs should always give an impression of rapidity, is in fact a kind of spectral moto perpetuo, powered – after the initial occurrence of a rhythmic chordal theme and an expressive rising line – by an almost constant semiquaver pulse. In the middle of the movement this becomes a four-note ostinato reminiscent of ‘Peripeteia’, the first of Schoenberg’s opus 16 Orchestral Pieces. At the movement’s climax the rising theme heard at the outset is enunciated ff by all four instruments in unison, and – after a manic return of the moto perpetuo – that theme, and the chordal figure, are reprised and lead straight into the fifth movement. This slow finale, the profoundest music in the work,
Bakkchantinen, after Euripides – represented an attempt to create a new musical theatre based on Classical Greek drama: a kind of 20th-century continuation of the aims of Gluck. The premiere of Die Bakkchantinen at the Vienna State Opera under Clemens Krauss in 1931 probably marked the summit of his pre-war success. Wellesz was also one of the founders of the International Society for Contemporary Music, with Edward Dent and Rudolf Réti. In 1932 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Oxford University for his compositional achievements – the only previous Austrian to have been given this distinction was Josef Haydn. The words of the citation, hailing him as musicae hodiernae dux et signifer (a leader and standard-bearer of today’s music), reflect his international prestige at that time.

On 13 March 1938 Wellesz was in Amsterdam, attending a performance by Bruno Walter of Prosperos Beschwörungen, his symphonic suite after Shakespeare’s The Tempest, when he heard of Hitler’s annexation of Austria that very day. Seeing no future in a return to Austria, he emigrated to England where, in January 1939, he was offered a fellowship at Lincoln College, Oxford. He lived in Oxford for the rest of his life, and taught many composers and musicologists who went on to exercise an important influence in post-war Britain. Wellesz’s musicological work continued unabated – in 1947 the special post of Reader in Byzantine Music was especially created for him, and he held it until his official retirement in 1956. But after the shock of exile and the ensuing World War he found himself unable to compose until 1943, when his Fifth String Quartet marked the return of his creative powers. From then on Wellesz concentrated on instrumental and orchestral music, including an important series of nine symphonies, occasionally making use of 12-note technique and more often a personal development of chromatic tonality. In 1972 he suffered a stroke from which he never recovered, and died in 1974.

Despite its being such an impressive piece, Wellesz’s Third Quartet was neither performed nor published at the time of its composition. For whatever reason, Wellesz put it aside. The premiere did not take place until 8 December 1997, when the Hugo Wolf Quartet performed it in Vienna in the edition by Hannes Hoher that is used in the present recording. Even though his next work in this genre, String Quartet No. 4, op. 28, scored a resounding success, Wellesz seems to have been content to let the Third Quartet remain unknown. The Fourth Quartet, completed in April 1920, was premiered in London in the Spring of 1922 by the Kolisch Quartet (previously the Wiener Quartet), who seem to have commissioned it, and published by Universal Edition in 1929. In this starkly concentrated, five-movement work Wellesz appears to have found the individual voice for which he had been searching. It may be significant that after it he wrote few instrumental (and no purely orchestral) works for the rest of the 1920s, but concentrated on works for the stage.

Dedicated to a Dutch friend of the composer, Dudok van Heel, Quartet No.
large, received few performances: and this despite the fact that he received many international awards for his distinguished career. His music continued to develop in its own terms, and remained uncompromising in its language, but he viewed himself to some extent as standing ‘against the stream’ of modern fashion for continuous novelty – an attitude reflected in the title he gave his Seventh Symphony of 1967: Contra torrentem.

Just as he wrote nine symphonies, so Wellesz also wrote nine string quartets, but unlike the symphonies, which all date from the last half of his career, these span his entire creative lifetime. (The First Quartet, op. 14, dates from 1912.) His first three quartets are among the most ambitious and extended compositions of his early years.

String Quartet No. 3, op. 25 was composed in July 1918, when Wellesz was 32, during a summer holiday with his family at the spa of Altaussee in the Salzkammergut. The work therefore dates from a period when Wellesz found himself at a stylistic crossroads, pondering how he could synthesize the competing inspirations of the contemporary Viennese influences that pressed upon a pupil of Schoenberg and admirer of Mahler; the great Austro-German compositional traditions; the claims of French Impressionism, represented by Debussy and Ravel; and the modern Hungarian school represented by Bartók (Wellesz’s own forebears were of Hungarian origin).

To some extent he resolved the question in the Third String Quartet by turning to Baroque models in the 18th-century period he knew so well from his researches. As Hannes Heher has pointed out,* the work is laid out along the lines of a Baroque sonata, with no movement in a true sonata form but with four movements in the succession slow-fast-slow-fast, albeit combining this with a highly chromatic harmonic idiom and techniques of thoroughgoing motivic development in the tradition of Brahms and Schoenberg. It is also possible that this turn to the Baroque had the effect of shutting out contemporary cares, for the outer movements of the Quartet give little hint that it was composed in the closing months of the Great War, just before the final defeat and fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The more haunted atmosphere of the second and third movements may be more significant in this regard. But one feature that will strike any first-time listener is the number of episodes which recall the quartet writing of Debussy and Ravel, a melodiously ecstatic style which (to judge by one of his expressive markings) Wellesz thought of in this work as a ‘dreamlike’ element.

Like the two previous quartets, the String Quartet No. 3 has a clear tonal centre (in this case D minor) despite its remarkably fluid blending of chromatic and diatonic elements. The first movement (Langsam) opens with an expressive, highly chromatic theme with a plaintive and more diatonic second phrase. The theme is soon treated in canon, marked sehr ausdrucksvoll (very expressive), and the tonality shifts to F sharp for a contrasted, breit gesungen (broadly singing) second idea, whose clearly diatonic, even folk-song-like character comes as a complete contrast to the opening material – and the contrasts continue in the almost Debussian textures and harmonies that open out for a while. These various elements are worked together in a kaleidoscopic manner before the opening chromatic subject returns, followed by the more impressionistic figurations and the song-like second theme, now marked verträumt (dreamily). A reprise of the chromatic canon leads to a powerfully elegiac concluding cadence.

The second movement, marked Leidenschaftlich bewegt (passionately turbulent), is in G minor and starts out as a kind of danse macabre, the first violin propounding the main theme over a continuous jerky dotted-rhythm ostinato in the other instruments and then continuing in forceful dialogue with the cello. A smoother contrasting theme opens the way into a more Debussian-impressionist central section, with some exquisite melodic writing over rich-textured accompanying figuration. The movement is roughly palindromic in form, working its way back to the danse macabre which brings it to a decisive close.

Sehr gedehnt (Very flexible) is the marking of the third movement, which contrasts

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* In the foreword to the edition published by Doblinger in 1997.