



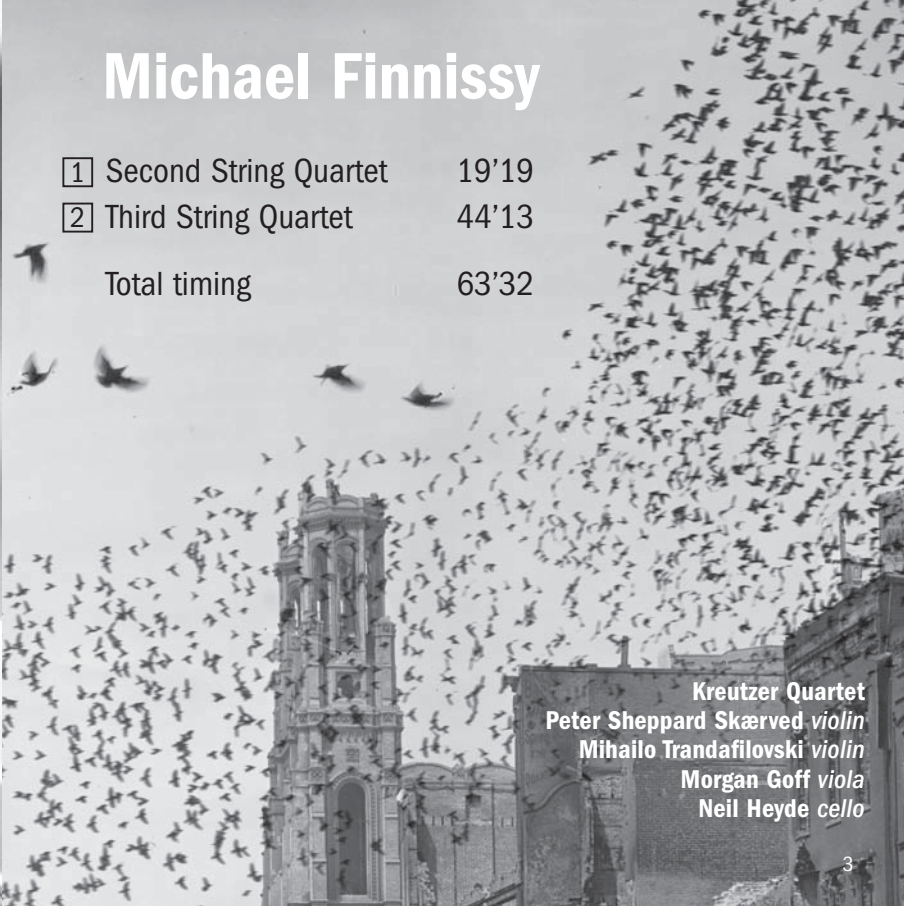
Second & Third String Quartets
Kreutzer Quartet



Photo: University of Southampton

Michael Finnissy

1	Second String Quartet	19'19
2	Third String Quartet	44'13
	Total timing	63'32



Kreutzer Quartet
Peter Sheppard Skærved *violin*
Mihailo Trandafilovski *violin*
Morgan Goff *viola*
Neil Heyde *cello*

Michael Finnissy's Second & Third String Quartets

Christopher Fox

The string quartet holds a unique place in western European art music. No other instrumental ensemble has such a long and, more importantly, continuous history, a history reaching back into the middle of the 18th century. But it's a history with ambiguity at its heart because the string quartet is both a medium – two violins, viola and cello – and a form. The form is represented by the works which we now regard as the ensemble's core repertoire, from Haydn to Mozart to Beethoven, Brahms, Bartok and Shostakovich, and it's that form with which most composers choose to engage when they write for the string quartet.

In 1998 the Kreutzer Quartet released their first Michael Finnissy CD (Metier MSV92011) and, as a number of critics noticed at the time, the CD was entitled

'Works for String Quartet'. Not 'String Quartets', because although all the music on the CD used the four instruments of the ensemble only one of the six pieces was called 'String Quartet'. Of the others, *Plain Harmony* (1993) was a work for ensemble which on this occasion just happened to be a string quartet and *Multiple forms of constraint* (1997) was conceived as a work setting a soloist (the first violin) against a trio (the rest of the group).

This new recording is different. Finnissy's Second & Third String Quartets are string quartets which engage with the form and its history, albeit in strange and radical ways. This CD is also different in what it tells us about Michael Finnissy. The Kreutzers' previous CD presented a series of works which rather neatly captured the

changes in Finnissy's compositional preoccupations over a period of nearly 20 years, whereas the two works here have a much more convoluted and interconnected genesis, as the composer explained to me: 'I had intended to write the third quartet a little earlier than I did – and, because of time constraints and knowing that it was going to be a much more extended piece, I wrote the second quartet instead.' Why is this interesting? Because it establishes that the conception of the Third Quartet, written between 2007 and 2009, preceded that of the Second Quartet (2006-7) and it also establishes that, though very different in scale, the two works share the same concerns.

The question of scale is especially important. Many Finnissy works derive

both material and structural principles from older music by other composers and for the Third Quartet he had decided to model the large-scale structure on Bruckner, stretching out, as it were, beyond the string quartet tradition to its larger symphonic brother. Finnissy says that he has 'loved Bruckner's music since the first time I heard his Ninth Symphony at the Proms (probably about 1963). I just love the harmony and how he builds up structural shapes,' and in the opening of the Third Quartet the Brucknerian model is very clear. 'The piece is in blocks, proportionally organised according to a numerical cipher based on the dedicatee's name: A.M.A.N.D.A.B.A.Y.L.E.Y. (the recurring letters also signal recurring material, so all the 'A' sections are variants of the opening – which combines atonal and

tonal material)'. More specifically, the composer also says that 'the grandly tragic bits with key signatures' in the Third Quartet 'are allusions to Bruckner's first and second symphonies'. Listeners will quickly realise, however, that in their transcription from Bruckner to Finnissy these 'bits' have been seriously complicated: the Third Quartet begins with a dense *adagio* juxtaposing many different melodic lines, each following its own chromatically-inflected path through a different key; the grand-ness is evident, the key signatures less so.

But Bruckner symphonies were not the only point of departure for Finnissy as he began to plan this music. As he told me, 'I had started planning a quartet based on a problematically neo-classical model (Schoenberg's Second Quartet which, voice notwithstanding, is more conventional in layout than his First)'. Schoenberg's Second Quartet was premiered in 1909 and provoked

uproar, not only because it added a singer to the existing foursome but also because its four movements make a gradual journey into atonality. 'Ich fühle Luft von anderen Planeten', the singer announces, and the 'air from another planet' which she feels is no longer bound by key-signatures. Finnissy decided that he too wanted to 'get involved in exploring the idea of the 'air from another planet', and what this might, or could mean'. He says that, in 'trying for an unforced sort of equivalent, and - trying to keep it more low-key - of somehow embracing 'natural' elements (OUR planet, but the OTHER so-called musical voices of our planet)', he found himself looking for something which 'would contrast with the abstract design', the proportional structural scheme he had imposed on the music.

Eventually Finnissy realised that this 'natural element' in the Third Quartet should be birdsong; he started

transcribing it, as he puts it, 'from life' and birdsong became for him 'a reflection on the vocal conclusion to Schoenberg's Second Quartet'. As he rather wryly observed, 'had it been my second quartet too, this might have been clearer!' Like Schoenberg, Finnissy reserves his additional voices for the latter stages of his quartet, but there the similarity ends because, although the voice in Schoenberg's quartet extends the ensemble, it does so within the aesthetic space of concert music. The remarkable extension in Finnissy's Third Quartet is the inclusion not just of transcriptions of birdsong but of recordings of birdsong too, not just 'other' voices but voices which take us into a space beyond the concert hall, beyond music itself. It's an extraordinary inclusion which has an extraordinary effect on the listener; at first the recordings seem like an intrusion, interrupting the flow of Finnissy's invention, but as the piece moves towards its conclusion it is

the instruments of the quartet which come to seem intrusive, even though what those instruments are playing is based on transcriptions of birdsong.

Finnissy's birdsong transcription method is simple - 'just pencil and paper + ears', he says. 'Or sometimes record, especially if there's a crowd, and then pencil and paper + ears. The recordings are from my garden, and the nearby Downs, very early in the morning (usually before 6 o'clock) - it's the best time, I think.' But the passage from bird to ear to paper to instrument, however objectively done, involves human agency, and the juxtaposition of transcriptions and field recordings makes clear that agency. As the Third Quartet plays itself out - there is no real conclusion - we are left to muse on the elaborate artifice of what we humans do and its comparison with the unknowable, but obviously essential, purpose of this other 'song'.

'Why birdsong?', I asked the composer. 'Because I like to listen to it very much', he said, 'and I recall a very poignant story of the dying Ethel Smyth listening to the song of the nightingale (she was slightly deaf, but fortunately nightingales sing VERY loudly), and when one leaves this world I fancy it would be terrific to do so accompanied by some of Nature's most sophisticated musicians!' It's a telling remark. There is something valedictory about the end of the Third Quartet and one wonders at the significance of the work's trajectory, from its grandly symphonic opening to this final, strange, private dialogue between composer and birds.

The Second Quartet has a more straightforward relationship to the string quartet tradition. As Finnissy explained earlier, time constraints deflected him from the extended plans he had been developing for a new quartet and so what would have been his Second Quartet became the Third Quartet.

Instead of Bruckner, Finnissy says that the work which now became his Second Quartet is 'based on a compact Haydn model'. In part this also relates to the birdsong in the Third Quartet because at one stage he had intended to use Haydn's Quartet, Op.64, No.5, 'The Lark', as an 'abstract template' for the inclusion of birdsong. But as Finnissy explains, once he realised he was running out of time in which to complete a new quartet, 'I settled for modelling the piece more straightforwardly on Haydn, and left the real birdsong out.'

Finnissy says that the main references in his Second Quartet 'are to the first three movements of Op.64 No.5, most clearly the Minuet and the Adagio', and discerning listeners will hear Haydn-like melodic and rhythmic contours emerge at various points. Around 5'21, for example, a distorted version of the Finale of Haydn's quartet comes into focus, its allegretto triple-time rhythm

preserved, complete with appoggiatura-decorated upbeat, but its melodic shape transformed. It's as if we are listening to the aural equivalent of a series of photographic multiple exposures, some exposures more in focus than others, not all of them quite fitting the frame.

Part of the reason for this blurring is that the Second Quartet has no score, just a series of parts, each prefaced by the instruction that 'it is intended that the parts should drift slightly apart, and definitely not seem calculatedly or rigidly aligned'. This aspect of the music links the Second Quartet with Finnissy's earliest work for the medium, *Nobody's Jig* (1981), memorably described by Paul Driver as 'a daunting 19-minute essay in asynchronized abstraction', but it also connects the Second Quartet with much earlier examples of polyphonic ensemble music from the days when individual part-books had not yet been

supplanted by a unifying score. One of the delights of the Second Quartet is this dialogue between the quartet tradition and even older forms of consort music, the ascendancy of the quartet tradition asserting itself at each of the 'gathering moments' which regularly pull the music back together. But in the end, the composer says, 'the music should just stop, almost in mid-breath'.

How to sum up these two quartets, whose shared origins have produced such different music? I asked Michael Finnissy how he would characterise them. 'Rich and chewy', was his answer.

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Michael Finnissy

Michael Finnissy was born in London in 1946 and studied at the Royal College of Music and in Italy with Roman Vlad. He went on to the music department of the London School of Contemporary Dance, and has been associated as composer with many British dance companies. Finnissy has taught at Dartington Summer School, Winchester College, the junior department of the Royal College of Music, Chelsea College of Art, and is guest lecturer at many colleges and universities. He has also been musician in residence to the Victorian College of the Arts, the City of Caulfield in Australia, and the East London Late Starters Orchestra. In 1999 he was made Professor of Composition at the University of Southampton.

Finnissy's music is widely performed in the UK and internationally. He has written works for the BBC Symphony Orchestra, New London Chamber

Choir, Endymion, Schubert Ensemble, and London Sinfonietta, amongst others, and been featured composer at the Bath, Huddersfield, Almeida, Borealis, and Viitasaari festivals. In June 2009 Finnissy's evening length setting of the Passion of the Christ, *The Transgressive Gospel*, was premiered at Wilton's Music Hall, London as part of the Spitalfields Festival, and in 2011 Finnissy made an exciting new completion of Mozart's *Requiem*.

Recordings of many of Finnissy's works are available on various labels, notably NMC and Metier.

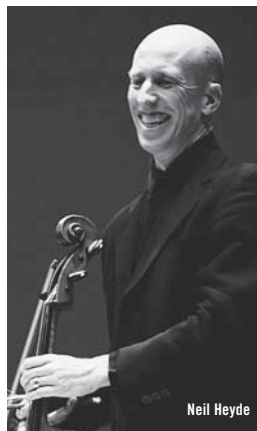
Kreutzer Quartet

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They are quartet in residence at Wilton's Music Hall in London.



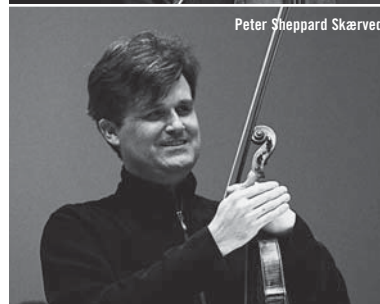
Neil Heyde



Mihailo Trandafilovski



Morgan Goff



Peter Sheppard Skærved

The Second String Quartet was recorded live at St Bartholomew the Great, Smithfield, London, on 8 March 2007. The Third String Quartet was recorded at St John the Baptist, Aldbury, London on 29 November 2010.

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