

The GREAT VIOLINISTS Vol. XVI - The Kolisch Quartet

A History of the Kolisch Quartet

It is a strange fact that Vienna, the cradle of the art of string quartet playing, did not have a full-time quartet until the 1970s. One ensemble which came close was the Kolisch Quartet, which played in the light, singing *echt Wienerisch* style although it was never wholly Viennese. It started with an inbuilt advantage because its leader Rudolf Kolisch, after a childhood accident, had been forced to relearn the violin the other way round, holding the bow in his injured left hand and the violin in his right. The group could thus seat itself in an ideal manner, especially for classical works, with Kolisch at the front on the right, the other violinist on the left at the front, and the viola and cello behind. Other unusual aspects of the ensemble's working practices were that during its most celebrated period it played from memory most of the time, and rehearsed not from parts, but from scores. The group arose from Arnold Schoenberg's short-lived Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen [Society for Private Musical Performances], in which Kolisch, born on 20 July 1896 in Klamm-am-Semmering, Lower Austria, and a pupil of the famous pedagogue Otakar Ševčík was a protagonist. Although the society foundered in 1921, the string group continued as the Vienna Quartet; but its personnel changed fairly often until 1924, when it stabilised. Its members were Kolisch, Fritz Rothschild, Marcel Dick and Joachim Stutchevsky. In that year Kolisch became Schoenberg's brother-in-law and this bond strengthened the ties between them; indeed he encouraged Schoenberg to treat the group as his personal workshop. From the start it adopted a revolutionary outlook, with the violinists alternating as leaders. At one concert Kolisch led in Berg's Op.3, the ensemble's calling card, and Rothschild led a Haydn quartet. Rothschild was a fine player who had won the Mendelssohn Prize and had played in Adolf Busch's first quartet. He had, however, been fired from that ensemble and it seems he was not an easy man to work with. He also found it difficult to get on with the spiky Schoenberg. At any rate, he left the Vienna Quartet in 1925 and was succeeded by Felix Khuner, who had no leadership ambitions and worshipped Schoenberg. On 8 January 1927 the group gave the world première of Berg's *Lyric Suite*. Sadly, little more than a month later Stutchevsky quit, tired of being told what to do by Schoenberg; he was himself a composer, and had his own ideas about interpretation. His replacement was the Russian cellist Benar Heifetz. When Dick also left that May, Kolisch recruited the Hungarian violist Eugene Lehner; who had the same name as his compatriot, the quartet leader Jenő Léner, but used the German form to avoid confusion. Thus the quartet had a radical new look for the chamber music festival at Baden Baden in June, where the *Lyric Suite* was again played, and for the 1927/8 season.

Schoenberg's 53rd birthday party, at the Pension Schneider, Vienna on 13 September 1927, marked a watershed in the quartet's development. "On this occasion we played [Schoenberg's] First Quartet and the Third, which had still not been given its first performance," Felix Khuner recalled, "After the meal and several drinks, Schoenberg wanted to hear more music. We had to admit that we had no other music with us, at which he teasingly asked us what sort of musicians we were, if we always had to have the printed music in front of us. It then occurred to one of us that at every rehearsal we used

the finale of [Beethoven's] Op.59 No.3 as a quartet study, always changing the bowings and articulation, and naturally, after a certain time, no one opened their copy any more. So we sat down and played it for Schoenberg. He became very excited, "Yes, that's how to make music! You must play everything by heart in your concerts, too." Schoenberg's reaction was so inspiring and so infectious that we decided on the spot to memorise the remaining three movements. Shortly afterwards we had the opportunity to play it from memory for the first time at the Bauhaus in Dessau. The audience was most enthusiastic, and it seemed to us that a new dimension in music-making had been opened up."

The four gradually learnt their classical repertoire by heart, as well as selected works by Berg, Webern, Schoenberg, Bartók, Milhaud, Debussy and Ravel. Playing without the clutter of music stands and sheet music enabled them to sit closer together and to have more eye contact. With four memories being constantly tested, however, it also gave their music-making a slightly nervy quality; there was always the chance that someone might forget his line of music. Still, it was their example that inspired such post-war ensembles as the Smetana Quartet and Quartetto Italiano to play from memory.

Fortunately the new combination of players managed to stay together for more than a decade; and from the 1928-29 season it became known as the Kolisch Quartet.

In February 1929 the quartet was in London. Here its first records were made, the Minuet of Mozart's K.590 and the Scherzo of Schubert's *Der Tod und das Mädchen*, and here, on the 12th, it gave the broadcast première of Bartók's new Third Quartet over the BBC network. Later in the month, on the 21st, the work was repeated at a concert of the International Society for Contemporary Music in Frankfurt.

The election of Hitler in 1933 closed Germany to the Kolisch Quartet. German audiences had been the quartet's economic mainstay; new audiences had to be found. On 10 February 1934 the quartet performed Beethoven's Op.18 No.3, Bartók's Third and Schubert's G major in the Kleine Zaal of the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam; all from memory.

Schoenberg, who had been dismissed by the Nazis from his teaching job in Berlin, went to the United States, eventually heading for the West Coast, and his quartet friends started thinking of finding work there too. In 1935 the ensemble appeared at one of Mrs. Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge's sponsored concerts at the Library of Congress in Washington, giving the American première of the *Lyric Suite* and the world première of Bartók's Fifth Quartet. Thereafter the Quartet spent an increasing amount of time in the United States. In the last days of December 1936 and the beginning of January 1937, while giving concerts in California, the Kolisch Quartet recorded all of Schoenberg's mature works for the medium at a Hollywood film studio; indeed, their recording of the Fourth Quartet may have been the de facto première; the first public performance being at the University of California in Los Angeles on 8 January.

With the Anschluss of late 1938, when Hitler's troops marched into his native Austria, came the end of the old Vienna, in which musicians of Jewish origin such as Arnold Rosé, Friedrich Buxbaum, Arnold Schoenberg and the four members of the Kolisch Quartet had played prominent roles. Whilst Rosé and Buxbaum sought sanctuary in England, the Kolisch group again thought of the United States, where Schoenberg was now living. Indeed, when the war started the players were on tour there, but they quickly found that it was one thing to be distinguished visitors and quite another to be refugees.

America had hardly any infrastructure of musical societies and the vast distances made touring difficult. Mrs. Coolidge now had her own quartet, and many other European refugee musicians were competing for what little work there was. After a

concert in Chicago, the group disbanded, Heifetz joining the Philadelphia Orchestra as co-principal cellist and Lehner the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Kolisch and Khuner quickly found new colleagues, the excellent Russian violist Jascha Veissi and the well-known Viennese cellist Stefan Auber. At the Library of Congress on 14 April 1940 they played the Schubert Octet with four colleagues.

Fortunately two avenues now opened for the Quartet. Bartók had been able to reach New York, and had with him his Sixth Quartet. This had been promised to the New Hungarian Quartet, but its members were trapped in Holland. So it came about that the Kolisch Quartet not only gave the première of the work, on 20 January 1941, but also received the composer's dedication.

Their other avenue was in the form of a contract with the American Columbia company, which had been signing up various European immigrants including the Busch and Budapest Quartets. Two recordings ensued: Mozart's *Dissonance* Quartet and Bartók's Fifth. The Mozart was possibly the Kolisch Quartet's finest recorded performance, but Bartók's Fifth was a little quirky and remained unissued until more than half a century had passed.

Nevertheless, misfortunes loomed. Financial pressures necessitated Khuner joining the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, and Veissi injured a finger while he was working at his hobby of electrical engineering. Thus a planned recording of Schoenberg's First Quartet was never made, although Kolisch and Auber took part in a recording of *Pierrot Lunaire* under Schoenberg's direction.

At the beginning of 1942 Kolisch dissolved the quartet for good. However, on 19 March 1944 he led a performance of Bartók's Third Quartet at a concert organised by the American League of Composers in the Hall of the New York Times building; the other players were Lorna Freedman, Bernard Milofsky and János Scholz.

In the meantime the Belgian Pro Arte Quartet, which was resident at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, had lost its leader, and was being led by the Spanish violinist Antonio Brosa. This did not work out, so from the 1944/5 season Kolisch led a Pro Arte Quartet which gradually lost all semblance to its illustrious pre-war line-up. Under Kolisch's leadership it made a long playing recording of Schoenberg's Third Quartet.

Kolisch stayed at the university until 1967. Even after that he coached quartets at the New England Conservatory in Boston in the music of the Second Viennese School, and in Beethoven and Bartók.

Kolisch died at Watertown, Massachusetts, on 1 August 1978.

The Kolisch Quartet played in a very Viennese manner, and, in spite of its reputation for intellectual rigour, it tended to vary the tempo within movements and often gave a somewhat lightweight impression, as the violin tone was light and the inner parts were not strongly projected. It was noticeable, too, that Heifetz, with his Russian training, played in a rather different style from the others. He was a formidable cellist, however, probably the finest player in the group; Antonín Kohout, cellist and spiritus rector of the Smetana Quartet, has never forgotten the impression Benar Heifetz made on him at a pre-war concert in Prague, with the opening C of the *Dissonance* Quartet.

The Kolisch Quartet's playing could be very beautiful, there are notable examples on this disc, but its performances of modern repertoire must be seen in the context of its general style, and not treated as gospel. At its best the group could be very impressive; and although the members were not noted for their sense of humour, by sticking to both the spirit and letter of the score, they achieved perhaps the finest recording of Mozart's

Ein Musikalischer Spass (with two Bostonian hornists in support).

The Kolisch Quartet made five Schubert recordings: the four quartet recordings presented here, and the variations from the *Forelle* Quintet (with Kolisch's first wife Josefa Rosanska, piano, and Linus Wilhelm, bass).

Their G major Quartet is very different from the lofty, heaven-storming, angry and almost orchestral interpretation by the Busch Quartet. The Kolisch players present the old-style Viennese Schubert of sweetness and light. Their exquisitely drawn-out account of the Trio of the Scherzo could be that style *in excelsis*. Among the admirers of this performance is Peter Cropper of the Lindsay Quartet, who studied with Kolisch. Incidentally, this movement is an example of the sort of problem posed by the recording industry in 78rpm days, even to such dedicated artists as Adolf Busch and Rudolf Kolisch.

While the Busch Quartet had to forgo virtually all the repeats in the variations of *Der Tod und das Mädchen*, the Kolisch had to leave out the Da capo of the G major's Scherzo. The notes accompanying the album instructed the listener to hear this by moving the needle back to play the first part of the Scherzo side again. [On this transfer the repeat is included!]

The almost mechanistic way in which the three lower Kolisch musicians play the opening of the A minor Quartet would have pleased Hans Keller, who once walked out of a Busch Quartet performance in Vienna because this "accompaniment to nothing" was played *espressivo*. The whole Kolisch performance is quite radical in its tempi which are on the fast side compared with, say, the famous reading by the Quartetto Italiano. The Quartettsatz, too, is played quite fast and urgently.

It is good that these performances are here refurbished for a new generation, thus reminding us that the Second Viennese School saw its music as a continuation of the Schubertian tradition, not as a break with it.

Tully Potter

[Benar Heifetz was not related to the violinist of the same name; nor Eugene Lener to the leader of the quartet of that name.

The Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen was founded by Schoenberg in November 1918 to give a fair hearing to modern works in a world in which, as he perceived it, an ever widening gulf existed between the public and modern composers. Works were excellently prepared and repetitions were frequent.

Large-scale works were transcribed for four hands or chamber ensemble.

Admittance was strictly by membership passes bearing photographs.

The corrupting influence of publicity was avoided by excluding critics and forbidding public comment.

All indication of approbation or disapproval was proscribed.

To ensure equal attendance programmes were announced only when about to commence.

For fairness, for the first year and a half Schoenberg disallowed his own works.

In December 1921 the experiment was ended by worsening economic conditions.]

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