Programme note by Chris Darwin. Use freely for non-commercial purposes

György Ligeti (1923-2006) String Quartet No. 1 ("Métamorphoses nocturnes") (1953/4)

A single 20-minute movement is divided into 17 contrasting sections:

1. Allegro grazioso
2. Vivace, capriccioso
3. A tempo
4. Adagio, mesto
5. Presto – Prestissimo
6. Molto sostenuto – Andante tranquillo
7. Più mosso
8. Tempo di Valse, moderato, con eleganza, un poco capriccioso
9. Subito prestissimo
10. Subito: molto sostenuto
11. Allegretto, un poco gioviale
12. Allargando. Poco più mosso
13. Subito allegro con moto, string. poco a poco sin al prestissimo
14. Prestissimo
15. Allegro comodo, gioviale
16. Sostenuto, accelerando – Ad libitum, senza misura
17. Lento

It has been said that Ligeti suffered under three totalitarian regimes: the Nazis, the Communists and the Darmstadt school of modern music. Born in Transylvania to a Hungarian Jewish family, his brother and both parents were sent to concentration camps – only he and his mother survived. Between 1949 and 1953, when Ligeti strove to develop an individual style of composition, Hungary was a country in the grip of Stalinist repression. The young Ligeti could find no public outlet for his rebellious creativity. The state demanded endless helpings of folk-based choral music, so more interesting compositions (such as his Six Bagatelles for wind quintet which the Magnard Ensemble played last season) were kept concealed. Stalin's death slackened the state’s grip, encouraging Ligeti in the exuberant, fantastic invention of his first string quartet, although the work was not performed until 1958 when Ligeti had fled Budapest for Vienna, subsequently taking Austrian citizenship. Bartók was a major influence, but in the young Ligeti he appears with reduced angst – as if the young Bártok's adored girl-friend Stefi Geyer had rewarded his marriage proposal with a "Yes!" and a big ice-cream rather than turning him down flat.

Ligeti's first quartet consists of a series of variations – metamorphoses – of a chromatic figure (illustrated) that appears after quietly creeping chromatic scales have set a nocturnal mood like that of Bartók's 'night-music'. The figure recalls the various permutations of a pair of semitones that form the basis of Beethoven's late quartets. Another very different echo comes in the Prestissimo of episode 5 whose persistent iambic rhythm (illustrated) brings to mind the nightmarish night music of the second movement of Britten's 1945 Second Quartet. Had Ligeti heard the Britten or were both independently inspired by Bartók?

The variations are extraordinarily brilliant, virtuosic and inventive in their sounds, using the full range of string technique, including Bartók's 'snap' pizzicato. Ligeti's sensitivity to string technique perhaps came down from his paternal great-uncle the great Hungarian violinist Leopold Auer, founder of the Russian school of violin playing and teacher of Elman and Heifetz.