

St Cuthbert's Church, a bitterly cold night and a young string quartet, the Cassia Quartet.

Haydn wrote his opus 64 quartets in 1790, fourteen years after the church was built. The Cassia played the first of the six with a brightness and geniality that warmed the evening. Here was a lively, sprightly conversation between the instruments, a dancing menuetto with a gesture towards sadness and an energetic presto to conclude which put a smile on everyone's face.

Haydn had been 58 when he wrote Op.64. In 1966 Dmitri Shostakovich was 60. His close friend, Shirinsky, the second violin in the Beethoven Quartet, had just died, and this spare, disturbing Quartet no 11 was his tribute to him. The first five movements were fragmentary, broken. Amy Welch, the superb first violin, played a poignantly sweet melody against the heavy resonance of Andy Crick's cello. Here was another conversation, at times angry and bitter, but also courageous, sometimes an isolated voice, quiet but resolute. Amy's e-string broke as the ironic humoresque ended. The voices united in the slow and dark funereal elegy. In the finale the quartet achieves a painful resolution, a fading, quiet scream in the face of a cold, pitiless world.

In 1806, Beethoven's voice was louder, more forceful, more heroic. His first Rasumovsky Quartet, op 59 no.1, is in F major in contrast to Shostakovich's F minor. In the third movement, a tragic adagio, the cello introduces a boldly sad melody which is taken up by the first violin and then the other instruments. Nothing could speak more deeply of the strength of the human spirit. The concluding lively, light allegro was all the more beautiful for the pain which had preceded it.

This was a concert of great emotional depth.

Steve Matthews