HENSCHEL QUARTET

Whether it's Mendelssohn, Beethoven or Webern, this young German quartet puts its own personal stamp on its recordings and performances, as UWE FRIEDRICH discovers

The members of the Henschel Quartet are at violist Monika Henschel-Schwind's home in Munich. They often rehearse in a studio at the back of a century-old bookstore in the Schwabing district of the city, but today they're working on their new programme of Schulhoff's Second Quartet and Berg's op.3 at her house. At the moment, though, they are sharing the culinary chores for lunch, chopping salmon for a pasta dish, preparing apple strudel and making coffee.

A string quartet is like a marriage. Four people make a commitment to spend a major part of their lives together, share the responsibility of making important decisions, and enjoy life's ups and downs in each other's company. It took the Munich-based Henschels – violinists Christoph and Markus, who are twins, and older sister Monika – some time before they met 'Mr Right', and it was only after a stressful period of trial and error that they signed up Mathias Beyer-Karlshøj as the cellist and fourth member of the 'family'.

But the Henschel Quartet has now enjoyed 13 years with the same line-up, and in that time it has become a household name on the international string scene, with a highly acclaimed discography, its own annual summer chamber music festival in the German town of Seligenstadt since 1997, and regular concerts around the world, including its 11th tour of Japan and its return to the Proms at Cadogan Hall in London later this year. The players' 2001 concert at the Wigmore Hall was called 'a highlight of my concert-going year' by Paul Cutts (*The Strad*, March 2002), who also said that he had rarely heard the Debussy G minor Quartet 'portrayed with such passionate commitment, insight and artistry'. Describing a 2005 release, Tully Potter wrote, 'I can still remember the first time I heard Beethoven's op.18 no.6 in concert... and the biggest compliment I can pay the Henschel Quartet is that its performance took me back to that' (*The Strad*, November 2005). Inspired by such groups as the Amadeus and Alban Berg quartets, and following successfully and imaginatively in their footsteps, there can be little doubt that the Henschel Quartet will in turn encourage a new generation of chamber musicians. ▹

Keeping the music alive (from left to right): Christoph Henschel, Mathias Beyer-Karlshøj, Monika Henschel-Schwind and Markus Henschel

MARCO BORGGREVE

Growing up in Sindelfingen, near Stuttgart, the Henschel siblings played in a quartet with a cellist – who is now a member of the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra – from the neighbouring village, and although theirs was a very high amateur level, becoming a full-time quartet was never a great ambition. The Henschels therefore all continued their musical studies, with Felix Andrievsky in Tel Aviv, Germany and at London's Royal College of Music, and aimed to concentrate on their individual instruments. However, a London summer course in 1989 with the Amadeus Quartet was to change this. The Henschel siblings realised how rich and wonderful the quartet repertoire is, and having enjoyed playing the very best chamber music, took the decision to form a quartet. 'We didn't even have to discuss it; it was perfectly obvious that this was what we wanted to do,' Henschel-Schwind remembers about their first proper encounter with the fascinating sound of a professional quartet.

Beyer-Karlshøj, who grew up in Essen, Germany, and later in Denmark where he is still based (although he has a flat in Munich), had a comparable encounter. In his case it was at a course with the Vogler Quartet: 'I sat on the floor, listening to their performance of the late Beethoven quartets and was immersed in this new world.' While a student at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen with Torleif Thedéen, he had wanted to play in a quartet but his contemporaries lacked enthusiasm for the medium.

A professor introduced the Henschels to Beyer-Karlshøj. However, preference was given to another cellist, which nearly led to the demise of the quartet. 'We chose our last cellist too quickly,' explains Henschel-Schwind. 'A lot went wrong and in the end we came very close to disbanding because it wasn't working any more.' Two years after first being considered, Beyer-Karlshøj was finally asked to join. 'We thought, we'll give this one a last try,' says leader Christoph Henschel, 'and if this doesn't work out, we'll just forget about the idea.' But one year later, in 1995, the Henschel Quartet won prizes at competitions in Evian, Banff and Salzburg, and later the gold medal at the 1996 Osaka International String Competition. The whole experience – by this stage they had tried out 30 or so cellists – taught the Henschels to understand that the four members of a quartet need to share a compatible approach and similar ideas.

One part of the music making process that they have very much in common is their passion for, in Henschel-Schwind's words, 'finding the truth behind the written music'. During the quartet's residency at the UK's Aldeburgh Festival in 1995 the players took the opportunity to examine the manuscript of Britten's Third String Quartet. 'It was very touching to read the handwriting of the old and sick man – unsteady but absolutely precise,' recalls the violist. 'Indeed, we even discovered that some mistakes had crept into the printed edition.'

Franz Beyer, Beyer-Karlshøj's grand-father and a former professor of viola and chamber music at the Hochschule für Musik in Munich, has been involved in the preparation of a new edition of Beethoven's late string quartets, and because the quartet loves to play them, he has kept the players informed about the latest developments in the editing of the music. 'Through my grandfather we also know how uncertain even the most scrupulous edition is,' says Beyer-Karlshøj. 'How do you deal with Beethoven's metronome markings? You can't take them seriously. According to his secretary and biographer Anton Schindler, he dismissed the metronome completely in his late works, arguing that the gifted musician doesn't need them and the musician without talent can't be helped by them anyway.' Similarly, prior to recording the complete Mendelssohn quartets – ▹

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The quartet studies manuscripts 'to find the truth behind the music'

PHOTOS HUGO JEHLE/HENSCHEL QUARTET

Below (from left to right): Christoph and Markus, both aged 3, and four-year-old Monika; Sergiu Celibidache conducting a Stuttgart children's orchestra, including the Henschel siblings, in 1978; Monika, 16, with her teacher Felix Andrievsky

OTTI LOHSS/HENSCHEL QUARTET

FINTAN DAMGAARD/HENSCHEL QUARTET

HUGO JEHLE/HENSCHEL QUARTET

Above (from left to right): Yehudi Menuhin with Christoph, Matthias and Franz Beyer in Munich in 1995; the Henschel in performance; Martin Lovett, cellist from the Amadeus Quartet, playing chess with Matthias on a train in Japan, 1995

which were released as a three-CD set in 2005 — the Henschel studied the music meticulously and came to the conclusion that the dynamic markings were not necessarily to be trusted. 'You are not doing him a favour if you do exactly what is written. Twenty fortissimo bars in a row do not please anyone,' says Christoph Henschel.

Beyer-Karlshøj believes that in taking an overly academic view, editors often neglect to provide adequate editions for musicians to play, and in the end the performers must find their own way. Decisions change widely, though, from concert to concert, adds Markus Henschel, and the players have to be very alert and tuned in to the decisions of each other. 'But we are happy to take this risk as it is the only way to keep the music alive,' he says. 'Our interpretation should live on and develop, change and grow.' This sense of a living interpretation takes place in the communication with audiences, which varies between venues. 'You go with what comes to your mind at the spur of the moment,' says Henschel-Schwind. She prefers halls with a dry acoustic because she doesn't have to hold back, whereas with stronger acoustics she feels she has to be more careful so as to keep the details audible.

'We want to express something lively and important, something that is very dear to us,' says Beyer-Karlshøj. 'We aren't four dusty old guys caressing their instruments with reverent seriousness.' Nevertheless, the instruments they play serve to emphasise their seriousness. The twins both play Stradivaris: Markus has a 1727 violin, and Christoph the 1721 'Cobbett', both bought by their father at a time when they were still affordable by private musicians. Henschel-Schwind plays a Gasparo da Salò viola, while Beyer-Karlshøj plays a Hjorth cello made 50 years ago 'because I love the tone, and it's not so sensitive to weather changes, which is important for touring.'

Like many other new German quartets, the Henschel works on presenting a more modern image. Still, the cellist says that the group sees itself 'very much in the German string quartet tradition, counting as mentors the Alban Berg and Melos quartets, which are known for their premiere performances'. Beethoven's op.127 in E flat major is central to the quartet's repertoire, and Mozart and Haydn are its gods. 'We are the Classical—Romantic types,' laughs Beyer-Karlshøj, and indeed, this is the music on which the Henschel Quartet has founded its reputation. But the players love the Janáček quartets for their emotional depth and are very much looking forward to the world premiere of Manfred Trojahn's quartet *Lettera amorosa*, which they will perform at the official reopening of the Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek in Weimar in October. In fact, the group is so taken by the new work that it is thinking about recording the complete quartets of the highly regarded German composer.

However, the quartet knows that cutting-edge contemporary music can be extremely difficult to sell, not only because of the musical challenges for the average listener but also because it is comparatively expensive for the promoter who, for example, has to pay performance rights. Audiences often want to hear the masterpieces they know again and again. 'They would probably be happy with a Beethoven "Rasumovsky", Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" and Dvořák's "American", but this would mean serving caviar, followed by caviar and caviar,' says Henschel-Schwind. 'And even though caviar is great, one doesn't really appreciate it if one eats it all the time.' But the violist doesn't want to give up: 'We fight wherever we can for modern music and also for unusual repertoire. Once we wanted to play a piece by Jean Françaix and the promoter didn't want us to, even though he didn't know the piece at all. We played it and afterwards he admitted that he loved it. It is important for audiences to know the whole range of the repertoire so that they can decide what they really love.'

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One group, though, that may not be too satisfied with 'caviar' is the younger listener, who Beyer-Karlshøj believes is no longer accustomed to larger classical ▸

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The Henschel plays more than just the classics: 'One doesn't appreciate caviar if one eats it all the time'

works: 'They are spoilt by Classic FM. They want nice tunes that don't last too long. An audience like this is rather shocked by Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*, whereas they love Webern's miniatures.' The challenge for the quartet therefore is to attract their attention: 'They are open to new experiences and a thrilling performance can still excite those who know nothing of sonata form,' says the cellist.

The potential is there. The number of students choosing to study violin at the Musikschule Vaterstetten near the Henschel Quartet's Munich base, for example, has soared during the past few years, and new chamber music series are evolving throughout Germany, many over-subscribed and with waiting lists for tickets. Christoph Henschel points out that in Poland, where chamber music is fashionable, youngsters flock to their concerts. Henschel-Schwind is a bit more circumspect. 'We have to let our audience come in their own time,' she says. 'The average chamber music lover just isn't young. For some years they are busy with their young families and careers. When they are about 40 years of age, they will discover symphony concerts, the opera – and chamber music.'

One point the Henschel Quartet does agree on is that presenting a personal view of music is key to winning a new public. Beyer-Karlshøj recently re-listened to old 78s of Kreisler and Fritz Busch: 'Technically, the playing isn't flawless and the aesthetic choices don't always correspond to our modern tastes, but these recordings always show an artistic personality making his own choice.' He feels that nowadays recording artists strive to record a 'true' and 'lasting' version for posterity – and in the process leave little room for the incidents and accidents that bring every concert to life. By choice the Henschel Quartet makes its recordings at the Bavarian public radio station Bayerischer Rundfunk – only its 2004 disc of lieder with Magdalena Kožená for Deutsche Grammophon was not made there – and over time it has developed a trusting relationship with the sound engineers. The players still have concerns about capturing the essence of live performances on disc, though. They embarked on the recording of quartets by Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Ginastera with the aim of doing them in takes that were as long as possible, reducing the need for too many edits. 'We find it rather frustrating to see, or rather to hear, how little of a concert performance can be preserved on disc and how the approach changes during the recording process in the studio,' says Beyer-Karlshøj. Christoph Henschel, for instance, is still not happy that the first violin is not dominant in the quartet's Mendelssohn recordings, although the other players like the balance.

Meanwhile, the Friends of the Henschel Quartet for the Support of Chamber Music, a trust set up by the quartet, commissions new works, subsidises concert tickets for young people and runs courses. The Henschel also visits schools, bringing classical music to pupils who hardly ever encounter it first-hand. In this context °the players enjoy huge success with contemporary music, says Markus Henschel, 'because the children have no preconceived ideas about repertoire and are amazingly open to new experiences. They are refreshingly unspoilt and appreciate everything that is seriously offered and explained to them.' Difficulties can arise if school groups are too large, though: in Japan the quartet played for 300 pupils who sat in complete silence in the hall. 'We couldn't stop suspecting that the children were being forced to sit there and didn't dare to say anything,' says Beyer-Karlshøj. And the quartet's support for young people doesn't stop there. For the past decade it has donated one per cent of its income to children in Bogota through SOS-Ki°nderdörfer (SOS Children's Villages), an international organisation which helps neglected children, orphans and disadvantaged families. The quartet members became official ambassadors of the charity in 2006, and they continue to display brochures about the charity at its concerts and play benefits.

What does it mean to play in a quartet? The Henschel Quartet is exploring that very question with a festival of concerts, workshops and talks that is likely to take place in Germany in 2008 and which will also involve conceptual artist Jai Young Park, composer and clarinettist Jörg Widmann and photographer Wolfgang Wesener. As well as examining notions of space, *Kammer.Chamber.Camera*. will ask: how do the four individuals within the ensemble form a new, non-hierarchical individual? Perhaps it will further enlighten the players as to how their musical marriage functions. ■

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