



# Married to the Amadeus: Life with a String Quartet

*Muriel Nissel*

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The Amadeus Quartet, which was active from 1948 until 1987 when its viola player Peter Schidlof died, is probably the most famous and distinguished string quartet of the 20th century. It played to a wide variety of audiences on innumerable occasions in all the major countries of the world, and produced a galaxy of recordings, many of which are still available. The intensity of its music-making was breathtaking. Muriel Nissel, the author of *Married to the Amadeus*, is the wife of Siegmund Nissel, the second violinist. Her book tells the extraordinary and moving story of the Quartet, with its many triumphs and its periodic setbacks and traumas, from the inside for the forty years from its inception during the time after the Second World War up to the 1980s. She reveals how it moulded the lives of the four players and their wives and families in unexpected ways, and how they all became inextricably involved in this unique joint enterprise. The fashion in which work and family life interacted was crucial to the Quartet's survival. She returned to her professional life as a statistician when the children went to school and describes how difficult it was in the 1960s for a married woman with children to achieve equal status with men at work; and she tells of the problems she also had to face at home finding satisfactory ways of caring for her family. Remarkably, the four members of the Quartet remained unchanged throughout. They each of them had exceptional qualities. Norbert Brainin, the first violin, Siegmund Nissel and Peter Schidlof, all refugees from Vienna, had first met in internment camps in Britain in 1940. Martin Lovett, the cellist, joined them not long after the war, at a moment when the musical climate was sympathetic to chamber music and the record industry was booming. They never looked back. Nobody who has read Muriel Nissel's absorbing book will ever be able to listen to a string quartet again without being aware of the immense commitment such a group demands of the players and of their families too, and of the longstanding emotional, aesthetic and organizational complexities it entails. Andrew Green in *Classical Music*: '...a thoroughly absorbing, well-written account of the Amadeus Quartet story observed from the inside...[It] has the benefit of many penetrating insights - not simply into how wives and families are affected by the lifestyle adopted of necessity by the members of a top-notch ensemble, but into the true nature of that lifestyle itself...It is a book, in truth, about an octet, with all the characters utterly believable, aided by an excellent photographic record, plus an appendix containing not just a complete discography but a list of all the quartets who have benefited from the Amadeus' International Summer Course. Very revealing.' Patrick Carnegy in *TLS*: 'There are memorable sketches of musician colleagues - Cecil Aronowitz...Alfred Brendel...David Oistrakh... and of the Amadeus playing Britten's Third Quartet privately to the composer only months before his death. The legacy of the Amadeus lives on in their recordings and in the many fine ensembles they have coached. Looking back on the forty years of their pre-eminence in the classic string quartet repertory, it is amazing how much of their reputation was won by the sheer quality of their performances, unaided by the marketing and image-making that is par for the course today...the story of the invisible life of the Wolf Gang is never less than candidly and engagingly told.' Martin Boyd in the *Strad*: '...the eloquent and cerebral wife of second violinist Siegmund presents us with an engaging account of the Amadeus' rise to pre-eminence...she successfully conveys a sense of how important a stable family life was to her husband and the other members of the jet-setting Amadeus...This book is about the vicissitudes of personal and professional relationships. Muriel Nissel's close proximity to the Amadeus Quartet enables her to give a privileged insight into the workings a

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