

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 13 April 2023
7.30pm

Belcea Quartet

Corina Belcea violin
Paweł Zalejski violin
Krzysztof Chorzelski viola
Antoine Lederlin cello

Bertrand Chamayou piano

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Piano Quintet in G minor Op. 57 (1940)

*I. Prelude. Lento • II. Fugue. Adagio •
III. Scherzo. Allegretto • IV. Intermezzo. Lento •
V. Finale. Allegretto*

Interval

César Franck (1822-1890)

Piano Quintet in F minor (1879)

*I. Molto moderato quasi lento • II. Lento, con molto
sentimento • III. Allegro non troppo, ma con fuoco*



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In the summer of 1939, with the prospect of war in Europe growing by the day, **Dmitry Shostakovich** was appointed a full professor at the Leningrad Conservatory. He had survived the Great Purge that had so recently swept the Soviet Union and left him, in common with so many among the revolutionary nation's intelligentsia, in fear for his life. While Nikolai Yezhov, head of the secret police, was blamed for the mass shootings, torture and deportations to the gulags unleashed during the campaign to purge the state of 'enemies of the people', his role as scapegoat was chosen by the true author of the terror, Joseph Stalin, now fully in command as Soviet General Secretary. Shostakovich had good cause to fear Comrade Stalin. The so-called *Vozhd* or 'Leader' of the proletariat had been gravely offended by the young composer's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, which he attended in 1936 and denounced in an anonymous editorial headlined 'Muddle Instead of Music' that ran soon after in *Pravda*, the Soviet Union's official newspaper.

The excoriating *Pravda* article charged Shostakovich with missing 'the demands of Soviet culture to banish crudity and wildness from every corner of Soviet life', and was followed by an official campaign against 'formalism and falsehood' in music, nebulous terms guaranteed to undermine creative freedom. The author Maxim Gorky, hailed as the 'founder of Socialist Realism', penned a letter to Stalin (probably unsent yet known to the leader's spies), in which he questioned the idea of muddle in music. 'How and in what is that "muddle" expressed? Here the critics should give a technical assessment of Shostakovich's music. What the article in *Pravda* did is allow a herd of mediocrities and hacks to persecute Shostakovich in every way.' Gorky played a smart game by pretending not to know the article's author and flattering Stalin as the caring father of the people. The *Pravda* piece, he noted, had 'struck [Shostakovich] like a brick on the head, the fellow is completely depressed.'

The suicidal composer's rehabilitation, aided by the profound affect his Fifth Symphony had on the audience at its première in November 1937, ultimately depended on Stalin's whim, a terrifyingly unpredictable condition. It was against this background that Shostakovich composed his Piano Quintet, among the great monuments of 20th-century chamber music. He wrote the piece for the Beethoven Quartet, who had given the Moscow première of his First String Quartet in November 1938 and consequently began a long and fruitful association with the composer. In response to their request for a piece they could perform with Shostakovich, he created a work marked by the prevailing seriousness of its five movements and the clarity of themes stripped of artifice and developed as if they were characters in a Chekov story, charged with strong emotions and quicksilver changes of mood. The contrast between the *Prelude's* defiant tone and the contrapuntal *Lento* that follows sets the pattern for a

piece that moved its first audience in Moscow in November 1940 to tears.

According to an anecdote recorded by **César Franck's** pupil and biographer, Léon Vallas, the Belgian-born composer's wife was outraged by the strong emotions and complex harmonies that entered his music with the Piano Quintet. The story, while steeped in the patriarchal prejudices of its day, recalls the shock experienced by many who knew Franck's sacred oratorios or the often sentimental pieces he wrote as organist of the Basilique Ste-Clotilde in Paris; it also gives emphasis to the remarkable creativity of his final decade, which gave birth to such masterworks as the Symphony in D minor, Symphonic Variations and Violin Sonata in A major. Franck set the foundations for his mature style with the Piano Quintet in F minor, his first work of chamber music since the piano trios of 1840. The opening movement is ruled by an impassioned theme of two four-bar phrases, which Franck repeats 18 times in various guises within its 15-minute span. The music's outpouring of emotions, perhaps a sublimated expression of the composer's amorous feelings for his pupil Augusta Holmès, is only just held in check by its sonata form structure; indeed, there are times when it threatens to overwhelm the Quintet's performers and listeners alike.

The slow movement, cast in simple ABA form, makes a disjunct leap into the remote key of A minor, unsettling in its alienation from what has gone before. Despite the warmth of Franck's string scoring and his addition of '*con molto sentimento*' to the *Lento* tempo marking, the range of invention here takes a chilling turn; it narrows almost to the point of obsession with a melodic idea retrieved from the first movement and repeated with mantra-like intensity. Franck dismisses any trace of inertia, however, with frequent modulations and shifts between minor and major modes, symptoms of an underlying restlessness that eventually explodes in a coda supercharged with erotic energy. The *Lento's* ecstatic conclusion spills over into the opening of the finale, etched by tremolo fiddles and a rumbling piano part that sounds like it began life as an organ improvisation at Ste-Clotilde.

Franck again recalls the first-movement theme so prominent in the *Lento* and now used repeatedly as a retreat from the turbulence of the finale's main theme. The composer's pupil Vincent d'Indy was deeply troubled by the movement's meandering modulations and harmonic instability, which he regarded as 'a startling contradiction with the formal principles of tonal construction that the *maître* had taught all his life'. Yet on reflection his concerns fell away: 'only the genius of the *maître* could achieve a tonal equilibrium constructed on these paradoxical bases,' wrote d'Indy, 'and draw from them this moving composition that ... deserves our admiration.'

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