

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 13 November 2023
7.30pm

Quatuor Danel

Marc Danel violin
Gilles Millet violin
Vlad Bogdanas viola
Yovan Markovitch cello

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 1 in C Op. 49 (1938)

I. Moderato • II. Moderato • III. Allegro molto • IV. Allegro

Mieczysław Weinberg (1919-1996)

String Quartet No. 1 Op. 2 (1937, rev. 1985)

*I. Allegro commodo • II. Andante tranquillo •
III. Allegro molto*

Interval

Dmitry Shostakovich

String Quartet No. 2 in A Op. 68 (1944)

*I. Overture. Moderato con moto •
II. Recitative and Romance. Adagio • III. Valse. Allegro •
IV. Theme and Variations. Adagio*

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Dmitry Shostakovich's turn to the quartet genre came relatively late in his career. The string quartet, with its tradition of introspection and an audience of connoisseurs, seemed to go against the Soviet requirement for 'music of the people'. Despite this, his First Quartet was well-received. Shostakovich later wrote: 'In composing my First Quartet, I visualised childhood's scenes, somewhat naïve and bright moods associated with spring'.

The first movement sets the scene for the relaxed and airy mood of the quartet, and the easy-going approach extends to the movement's simple structure. A brief development sees the two themes collide, though the laidback *glissando* theme seems to retreat as the opening is reprised for the ending section – only for an adapted version to reappear in the closing bars.

The second movement is a theme and variations, with a melancholy folk-like theme first presented in the viola. Seven variations follow, with a rough arch shape centred around the fourth variation. This middle variation features frantic triplets across the parts, scattering away from the central theme. The variations that follow retreat and fade to a *morendo* ending, followed by a *pizzicato* A minor chord.

The short third movement is the only fast one and introduces a mischievous character that harks back to Shostakovich's earlier works for stage. It is firmly tongue-in-cheek and creates a highly-strung atmosphere. The movement ends sooner than expected, presenting a tightly-knit dialogue that is left open to interpretation.

The finale plunges back into the spring-like character of the opening, with a joyous first theme. Despite an aggressive development section, the movement concludes in an affirmative C major. It is intriguing to note that Shostakovich initially wrote the work with this movement and the opening swapped around; the rather more ambiguous ending of the opening was not 'positive' enough to end a work. The decision to end with the *Allegro* gives the Quartet an energetic and passionate conclusion.

Mieczysław Weinberg was just 17 when he began work on his First Quartet (a year before Shostakovich's own First Quartet). The musical environment of inter-war Warsaw influenced the piece, including Bartók, Berg, and especially Szymanowski, and the work evinces signs of youthful over-ambition. Weinberg was critical of his earlier works in later life, but he valued this piece enough to return to it in the 1980s to produce the revised version, to be heard in this evening's concert.

The opening movement gives an uneasy sense of pulse, with a chromatic theme with a downward lilt. The musical language tends towards dissonance but framed with traditional tonal gestures, and the move away from tonality and then back again can be traced through practically every phrase. The mood becomes increasingly agitated and hurtles towards a series of dissonant climaxes before a brooding central section. This may be the music of a precocious teenager, but it portrays an intense world of crisis.

The main revisions were in the second movement. The one heard here includes its main theme, derived from the opening movement, which moves into a broad divertimento-style contemplation with even darker themes. With transparent texture, the cello takes the focus from the opening in a slow dance-like mood that never achieves the tonal closure that it slowly floats away from.

The finale features a mischievous four-note motif that revives the chromaticism from the first movement. Despite that, this is the only movement that really focuses the C major tonality of the piece. The opening four note motif is given urgency through a kind of rhythmic interplay and contrasted with unison themes that include an almost folk-like variation on the opening, with klezmer-style ornamentations. There is an almost complete repeat of the opening material before a frenzied accumulation gives way to icy notes to finish.

Shostakovich's Second String Quartet reflects some of the optimism that was returning to Soviet life as victory in the war became clearer, but the piece remains an enigma. The tone is darker compared to his First Quartet, made darker still by his folk-like themes, including allusions to klezmer and oom-pah accompaniment figures. His interest in Jewish themes was provoked partly by his pupil, Veniamin Fleishman, but also partly by his friendship with Weinberg.

The first movement (titled *Overture*) begins in a declarative A-major flurry. The second subject is hesitant but comes to dominate the development. With a complex structure of near-symphonic proportions, the movement has a notable darkening of the first theme in its restatement. Soon afterwards, the opening theme is recast as a waltz, in an incongruous juxtaposition that is not addressed by the movement's end.

The *Recitative and Romance* movement forms the emotional backbone for the work. The 'recitative' sections comprise lengthy solos for the first violin, with chromatic lines over the top of haunting chords in the lower three parts. The 'romance' that forms the central section is a pained and twisted version of that genre. The romance line becomes increasingly agitated and reaches towards a shift back to the 'recitative' that opens the movement.

The 'Waltz' third movement presents a distorted dance, taking the second theme from the first movement and recasting it in the grim key of E flat minor, played by the cello. The theme is then taken up by the upper parts, in a rumination that provides a short sense of relief from the intense tone of the movements that surround it.

The finale is a *Theme and Variations*, taking its theme from the first movement of Shostakovich's Second Piano Trio. The theme is first heard in a bold unison line, followed by a quiet rumination. The variations present an audacious tonal scheme which ends in the minor key, despite the major key of the work: a note of pessimism to conclude.

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