WIGMORE HALL

Monday 15 April 2024
7.30pm

Novus String Quartet
Jaeyoung Kim violin
Young-Uk Kim violin
Kyuhyun Kim viola
Wonhae Lee cello

William Walton (1902-1983)

String Quartet No. 2 in A minor (1945-6)
I. Allegro • II. Presto • III. Lento • IV. Allegro molto

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 12 in D flat Op. 133 (1968)
I. Moderato - Allegretto •
II. Allegretto - Adagio - Moderato - Allegretto

Interval

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

String Quartet in G Op. 106 (1895)
I. Allegro moderato • II. Adagio ma non troppo • III. Molto vivace • IV. Finale. Andante sostenuto - Allegro con fuoco

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William Walton composed just two string quartets during his long career. The first was written in Oxford between 1912 and 1922, fully embracing the modernism of Central Europe at the time. Despite winning the (rare) praise of Alban Berg in Salzburg in 1923, however, the young Walton thought it was 'full of undigested Bartók and Schoenberg' and promptly withdrew the work. A gap of 24 years then followed, until the Blech Quartet gave the first performance of Walton's Second Quartet during a BBC broadcast. It remains a pinnacle of the composer's output.

Its first movement, an ingenious augmentation of sonata-form principles, pits melancholy lyricism against probing counterpoint. Where, in earlier works, Walton had been unable to assimilate points of influence, the voice here is his own, the material in constant flux. Something of the dauntless energy of the First Symphony reappears in the *Presto*, suggesting a malevolent apparition and with a parallel nod to Bartók, who had recently died. After initial gauntness, the *Lento* offers a heartfelt if guarded threnody – the viola prominent throughout – before all is gathered in a headlong finale. Opening with the strut of *Belshazzar's Feast* or Walton's coronation music, it proves to be a much more sophisticated creation.

By the time Walton completed his A minor Quartet, **Shostakovich** was already deep into his unfolding focus on the genre, thanks to his collaboration with the Moscow-based Beethoven Quartet. Founded in 1923, the group originally comprised the violinists Dmitri Tsyganov and Vasily Shirinsky, the viola player Vadim Borisovsky and cellist Sergei Shirinsky. Shostakovich's personal association with the ensemble began in 1940, with the première of his Piano Quintet, and would continue right into the 1970s.

Many of the composer's quartets were dedicated to members of the group, some of whom changed over time. The String Quartet No. 11 in F minor Op. 122, for instance, had been written as a posthumous tribute to Vasily Shirinsky, while its successor, completed in 1968, was dedicated to Tsyganov. Although the Twelfth Quartet was composed at a time of relative relaxation in Soviet cultural politics – Shostakovich was even allowed to undertake foreign trips – it was also a period marked by ill health. During the late 1950s, the composer had been diagnosed with polio, manifesting as a debilitating combination of diphtheria, angina and inflammation of the lungs. A heart attack followed in 1966, which prompted Shostakovich to give up public piano performances and cut back on work in general, though he was determined to keep on composing.

If this provides something of the emotional backdrop to Op. 133, its musical inspiration comes from the composer's interest in 12-note composition, even if serialism remained a subject of censure in Russia. Rather than the Second Viennese School, however, Shostakovich had been inspired by *The Turn of the Screw*, which he saw in Edinburgh in 1962. As in Britten's opera, 12-note themes are interposed here with more tonal music, the discrepancy perhaps indicating the difficulty Shostakovich experienced in being a composer in contemporary Russia.

Bachian tropes are likewise present, while the unashamedly lush tonality of D flat major brings another facet to the otherwise inscrutable first movement. Changes in tempo and mood, occasionally assuming the character of a mechanical waltz, only serve to compound the enigma. The 20-minute second movement, on the other hand, is much more exuberant, testing the virtuosity of all the players in its combination of scherzo and dirge, the former attacking the latter. The music of the *Moderato* will also return, though the final stretches of this impressive structure are scornful of almost everything, becoming one of those headlong marches, familiar from Shostakovich's symphonies, that have a flash of demonic fire.

When **Dvořák** returned from New York to his beloved Bohemia in 1895, his imagination was similarly captured by the string quartet. At first, working at his retreat of Vysoká, he completed an A flat major work (Op. 105) that he had begun in the States. He then turned his attentions to a new quartet in G major. Eschewing the snap rhythms and seemingly 'American' pentatonic tropes of the earlier F major Quartet Op. 96, this is a smiling but reflective composition, no doubt pointing to Dvořák's grief over the death of his beloved sister-in-law Josefína Kounicová (whom he had once hoped to marry). But despite the loss, the composer's return home had also brought renewed vigour to his work and a fresh interest in Czech nationalism, as later revealed in his symphonic poems and his operas *The Devil and Kate* and *Rusalka*.

These strands likewise flow through the score of the G major Quartet. The first subject of the opening *Allegro moderato* is ebullient but restless, moving uneasily towards a more autumnal secondary theme. The rhythmic and textural uncertainties continue until a tertiary modulation announces an unbridled development. Moving into E flat major, with a hint of the *Largo* from the 'New World' Symphony, the second movement is a haven, with progressively lush harmonies – 'one of the loveliest and most profound slow movements in Dvořák's creation', the composer's biographer Otakar Šourek called it. A withdrawn minor-key section follows. It seems both whimsical and distant, as if shrouded in grief, thereby ensuring that the initial calm never quite returns.

The third movement, a scherzo, is more dogmatic, stamping out its triple-time metre. The trio, on the other hand, is as reflective as the *Andante sostenuto* that heralds the main business of the *Finale*. Full of surprising tonal shifts, this last movement may not be able to escape the shadows of the Quartet as a whole, but a feeling of confidence remains, suggesting the various new avenues Dvořák's work would take.