WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 15 January 2025
7.30pm

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

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 11 in F minor Op. 122 (1966)
I. Introduction. Andantino • II. Scherzo. Allegretto • III. Recitative. Adagio • IV. Etude. Allegro • V. Humoresque. Allegro • VI. Elegy. Adagio • VII. Finale. Moderato

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

Interval

Mieczysław Weinberg (1919-1996)

String Quartet No. 12 Op. 103 (1970)
I. Largo • II. Allegretto • III. Presto • IV. Moderato

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Shostakovich's Eleventh Quartet marks the beginning of a new phase in his writing, with a noticeable turn towards a bleaker mood. It is the first of a 'quartet of quartets', in which each is dedicated to a member of the Beethoven Quartet who premiered them. The Eleventh is dedicated to second violinist Vasily Shirinsky, who died suddenly in 1965. The work is set in seven movements, each showcasing a different mood, though with a stark sense of foreboding throughout.

The opening spotlights the first violin, which begins with a disjointed melody. This is not developed by the remaining parts, who instead provide a slow accompaniment. The Scherzo second movement features a harshly chromatic theme which is passed around the parts, as if in a fugue, but without that form's strict structures. The third movement is a Recitative, in which the first violin provides distorted adaptations of themes from the previous two movements above a dissonant chord in the three lower parts. The middle movement, 'Elegy', is the first moment of high energy, in the form of a virtuosic semiquaver line that is passed across the ensemble. The accompanying parts provide melancholy chords underneath.

The 'Humoresque' fifth movement has an *ostinato* in the second violin while other parts provide a distorted version of the first movement theme. If there is humour here, it is of the very bleakest kind, as the *ostinato* grinds on regardless. The 'Elegy' movement is the emotional heart of the work, and the clearest passage of mourning for Shirinsky's passing. The movement ends with a solo second violin passage – a kind of 'musical ghost'. The Finale then presents a retrospective of the previous six movements, with the second violin continuing to take a starring role. The Quartet was deeply personal for Shostakovich, though it took its toll; he suffered his first heart attack two days after the première in 1966.

If the Eleventh was stark, the Twelfth Quartet is even starker still: for the first time, Shostakovich deployed the twelve-note lines familiar from serialists like Schoenberg, though utilised within his own established musical language. For example, the work opens with a twelve-note line in the cello which then cadences into D-flat major, the overall key of the piece. This blending results in a further darkening of the bleakness encountered in the Eleventh, though now condensed into more economic means. The Twelfth is dedicated to Dmitri Tsïganov, first violinist of the Beethoven Quartet, who told Shostakovich that he disliked the twelve-note lines; Shostakovich supposedly replied 'but one finds examples of it in Mozart's music'.

The opening 'moderato' section blends Shostakovich's twelve-note lines with tonal responses before shifting into several waltz-like sections. The central section features the most literal tribute to Shirinsky's death, in that the second violinist is silent for 34 bars (also a nod to the 34 years that the Beethoven Quartet had been playing together). The Twelfth Quartet is replete with numerology – it is no coincidence that it took until the Twelfth Quartet for twelve-note lines to be centred so clearly.

The second movement is altogether stormier. It opens with a scherzo and trio that quotes several times from Beethoven's set of 'Razumovsky' quartets. This is followed by a central 'Elegy', where the cello takes the lead with a mournful solo. All of this is concluded by a short Allegretto, whose clear-cut tonality seems to go against the grain of all the twelve-note complexity that had preceded it.
Despite the Soviet authorities' dislike of twelve-note techniques, the Twelfth Quartet had an unanimously positive reception, with many critics observing its 'symphonic' scope. Across the whole cycle, it is arguably the most condensed representation of Shostakovich's entire musical language; if the Eighth Quartet is often cited as an audience favourite, it is the Twelfth that is often held most dearly by performers.

Weinberg's Twelfth Quartet came four years after its predecessor; in the time between, he had himself been using 12-note passages, including in his first opera *The Passenger*. Weinberg's own twelve-note language is similar to Shostakovich's, in that he does intermittently return to a tonal centre, but he is far more relaxed about doing so.
The first movement takes a simple ternary structure for its form. From the outset, his twelve-note writing does not centre around a line or 'row' in the style of Schoenberg or even Shostakovich, but instead runs the entire chromatic gamut in a short span, using this chromatic mass as an expressive tool. The Largo opening features slow overlapping entries across the parts with dissonance but played extremely quietly. The central section is more frantic, with searching semiquaver sets. A brief reprise of the opening recasts the pitch spread; a short coda then links straight into the following movement.

The Allegretto harks to the elegiac third movement of Bartók's Fourth Quartet, though now the solo cello takes the main focus, bookending several ensemble passages. Here, unexpected tonal passages represent a point of tension against the previous chromatic lines, which continue their threat of interruption. This is followed by a thunderous Presto third movement, which takes the form of a theme and variations. It ends with a kind of 'mock' conclusion with forced-jubilation that harks back to Weinberg and Shostakovich's works from the 1940s – a conclusion that rings eerily hollow. The finale then sets the record straight by returning to the more searching character of the opening, with a repeated cello interrupted by a series of slow canons that cause energy to dissipate abruptly. The work concludes with a remarkable final page that features various 'special effects', including a curious ending sequence of 'col legno' chords (played on the back of the bow). Lingering questions remain unanswered.