

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 16 March 2023
7.30pm

Novus String Quartet

Jaeyoung Kim violin
Young-Uk Kim violin
Kyuhyun Kim viola
Wonhae Lee cello

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

3 Divertimenti for string quartet (1936)

*March. Allegro maestoso • Waltz. Allegretto •
Burlesque. Presto*

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

String Quartet No. 1 'Kreutzer Sonata' (1923)

*I. Adagio - Con moto • II. Con moto •
III. Con moto - Vivo - Andante •
IV. Con moto - Adagio - Più mosso*

Interval

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 9 in E flat Op. 117 (1964)

*I. Moderato con moto • II. Adagio •
III. Allegretto • IV. Adagio • V. Allegro*

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Britten's association with the string quartet formally began in 1941, with the Los Angeles world première of his first catalogued work in the genre: Op. 25. The Second String Quartet followed in 1945, with a première at Wigmore Hall, before Britten composed his third and final instalment in tandem with the opera *Death in Venice*. But this official triptych is only part of the story. Towards the end of Britten's life, and following his death, several earlier works for string quartet began to appear from the archive, including the *3 Divertimenti* of 1936. Although the work had been performed at Wigmore Hall at the time of its composition, the score was only published in 1983.

The *Divertimenti*, in turn, stem from a 1933 student composition called *Go play, boy, play*, with different movements intended to represent Britten's childhood friends. The music was then plundered for later projects, but a trace of the original scheme remains in these three highly contrasting movements. The opening *March* is at turns cussed and capricious, offering an exuberant range of playing techniques, albeit always kept at arm's length. The lilting *Waltz* that follows is more open-hearted, even if its otherworldliness can give way to pugnacity, before the *March's* mercurial energies return in the final *Burlesque*, dedicated to Francis Barton, a friend from prep school.

Ten years before Britten began work on *Go play, boy, play*, Janáček returned to the string quartet for the first time since his own student days, thanks to an October 1923 commission from the Prague-based Czech Quartet. Unencumbered by earlier crises of confidence, Janáček was able to compose rapidly and had completed the Quartet by the end of the month. Such speed reveals something of the work's basis in a 1908-9 Piano Trio, similarly inspired by Tolstoy's novella *The Kreutzer Sonata*. Concerning a violent marriage, the story reaches crisis point when a husband discovers that his wife is having an affair with a violinist; together, they have been performing Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 9 in A Op. 47, dedicated to the French violinist Rodolphe Kreutzer.

The score of Janáček's Trio was lost after its first performance in Brno in 1909, when it was given alongside Beethoven's Sonata to mark Tolstoy's 80th birthday. Any other evidence is likewise scant, though Janáček later told his German translator Max Brod that 'the Quartet arose from some ideas' from the Trio. Neither, then, were slavishly programmatic, but suggestive of the Russian writer's furtive, passionate story.

The Quartet opens with a pining appeal, which alternates with more energetic, foreboding music. The juxtaposition of these ideas becomes increasingly exaggerated over the course of the first movement, with Janáček often demanding severe playing techniques. While the second movement portends a dance, its energy falters, instead offering a sequence of ominous silences and tremolos.

The conflict continues in the third movement, where a resemblance to the music of Beethoven's eponymous sonata is at its most suggestive, before the work closes with a remorseful finale, as muted as it is weeping. 'I had in mind a poor woman, tormented, beaten, battered to death', Janáček wrote to his friend and confidante Kamila Stösslová. An opera in embryo, perhaps, the Quartet reaped significant rewards during the remaining years of Janáček's life. It was included in both the 1925 ISCM Festival in Venice and in a concert introducing the composer's music to Britain at Wigmore Hall on 6 May 1926.

We leap forward nearly 40 years to the first performance of Shostakovich's Ninth String Quartet, on 20 November 1964. The première in Moscow was, as so often, given by the Beethoven Quartet, albeit with a new viola player, Fyodor Druzhinin, who had replaced Vadim Borisovsky. The work was itself also something of a replacement, following the composer's destruction of a 1961 composition 'based on childhood themes'. This 'attack of healthy self-criticism' was, he explained, 'the second such case in my creative practice. I once did a similar trick of burning my manuscripts in 1926.' Luckily, Shostakovich was happy with the work that emerged, which he decided to dedicate to his third wife, Irina, whom he had married in 1962.

Fittingly, the Quartet opens with what Schumann would have called '*Innigkeit*', signifying intimacy of feeling. And while the home key of E flat major may hark back to the Beethoven of the 'Eroica' Symphony and the Fifth Piano Concerto, Shostakovich turns away from such grand thoughts in favour of quieter murmuring. Tonality is, likewise, mutable, with flecks of the minor mode and a free, almost 12-tone theme sounding in the first violin. This passes through the texture, as the music moves towards a clipped second subject, 'in' the distant key of B minor. The eventual return to E flat major brings recurrences of both themes and there follows a greater sense of contentment, as in the ensuing *Adagio*.

A more insidious quality comes to the fore in the galloping third movement, quoting, as would the 15th Symphony, Rossini's Overture to *Guillaume Tell*, but it is only in the fourth movement that Shostakovich reveals something truly unsettled. Here, the ululating accompaniment of the opening *Moderato* reappears, now slower, to provide an eerie rocking figure. Violent pizzicato passages follow, before an unbearable violin threnody over organ-like chords.

After such strength of feeling, the finale must purge as well as conclude, entirely free from irony and driving towards a common goal. Yet it is a journey marked by unexpected milestones, including folk dances, a furious fugue and recollections that prove even more barbed in the context. And for such a symphonic gathering together of strands, Shostakovich must demand orchestral levels of strength from his players, as the work hurtles towards its conclusion.

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