

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 16 October 2024
7.30pm

Quatuor Danel

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

Mieczysław Weinberg (1919-1996)

String Quartet No. 9 Op. 80 (1963)
*I. Allegro • II. Allegretto • III. Andante •
IV. Allegro moderato*

String Quartet No. 10 Op. 85 (1964)
*I. Adagio • II. Allegro • III. Adagio •
IV. Allegretto*

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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Shostakovich had 'drawn level' against Weinberg with two quartets of his own before Weinberg wrote his Ninth in the summer of 1963. It is this group of works that can be regarded as representative of their 'rivalry' in the quartet medium – though each would take different paths.

Following the introspective and intense world of **Weinberg's** Seventh and Eighth Quartets, in the Ninth he changes tack, with an explosive first movement and more pensive middle movements. The musical idiom touches on the chromaticism heard in his First Quartet. The work opens with a burst of energy in the first movement. The combination of dense chromaticism and frequently changing time signatures in this movement creates a sense of reckless unease. Particularly striking is the high-octave series of exchanges between the violins; the movement gives way seemingly without warning and links straight into the following *Allegretto*, shifting to a fragile yet menacing sound. This waltz-like scherzo begins *pizzicato* but then moves to a contrasting theme that lifts several rhythmic elements that are themselves signatures from Shostakovich's melodies. The third movement adopts a looser form, hinting at a *passacaglia* or variations. Each episode focuses on melody rather than a set structure, presenting a discursive mood overall. The closing *Allegro moderato* is an energetic but controlled scherzo that breaks from the slower preceding movement, but continues something of its mood, reflected in the cold and machine-like steadiness of the repeated quavers. The finale points to a triumphant conclusion, but the transformation itself only occurs in the final bars. This passage, with a quick increase in dynamics and chromaticism, is tellingly similar to endings in Weinberg's First and Second Quartets. Overall, we have a sense of Weinberg looking back, a kind of 'taking stock' before leaping ahead in his subsequent works.

Weinberg's Tenth Quartet can be viewed as a step into his later style, where provisionality, tentativeness and lyricism become the main focus. The work is dedicated to Olga Rakhalskaya, who would go on to become his second wife. Weinberg worked on the quartet July-August of 1964, though he had to wait several years for a first performance in 1971.

The first movement is headed 'Aria' in the manuscript, seemingly a reference to the declamatory first violin line, introducing the main motifs for the movement. In this opening, the C sharp in the first and second violins gives a feeling of restlessness and tension against the otherwise tonal stability in this sedate opening. Marked 'Night Music', the faster second movement takes the motifs from the opening movement and transforms them into a restrained scherzo. Despite several louder passages, mutes are kept on throughout this scherzo, giving slightly aggressive passages even more of a bite, emphasising a looming spirit of underlying violence. At this point in the manuscript, there is a 20-page break,

with only the final page remaining, a ghostly trace of a missing B flat major scherzo. This links straight into the third movement, titled 'reprise'. This third movement has a sense of stasis, giving way to a complete disintegration by its close. This short and slow movement is derived from the chords and the theme that opens the first movement; it is short-lived and soon ushers in the finale. With the shift into the final movement, many questions remain unanswered. At first, the gently-rocking idea that bridges into the final movement promises a shift to A major, in traditional classical harmonic trajectory, but instead the finale explores a ghostly kind of waltz that seems to never fully take form. By the work's conclusion, little is clarified. Overall, Weinberg's Tenth Quartet shows us a composer on the threshold of bringing together his own late style.

Shostakovich's Ninth Quartet has the longest gestation of any of his works, taking up to three years. A tantalising draft 'first movement' for a discarded version survives in the Shostakovich Archive, dated 1963. By the summer of 1964, he was experiencing (in his own words) a 'creative diarrhoea', and when he sat down to put the finished Ninth Quartet to paper, it took less than a month.

The first movement is a light 'sonatina', circling around something in a restricted manner; the opening violin figure is set to become the motif that unites the entire work, similar to the openings of his Seventh and Eighth Quartets. The character is dance-like, akin to the 'polkas' of Shostakovich's jazz-influenced scores from the 1920s and 1930s, but it remains uneven and unsettling. The second movement presents an elegiac meditation, entirely chordal and hymn-like in its texture. The third movement is a manic klezmer-influenced set of dance variations. It features episodes that come close to quoting Rossini's *William Tell* fanfare (which Shostakovich would go on to quote explicitly in his Fifteenth Symphony). The fourth movement is a slow series of exchanges. Intriguingly, this movement is an adaptation of the score for Grigori Kozintsev's film adaptation of *Hamlet* that Shostakovich was working on at the same time. The uneasy mood is explained when we consider that the music's role in the film is to illustrate Ophelia's descent into madness.

The Ninth Quartet concludes with a whirling and furious movement that seems to pick up the musical 'characters' of the preceding movement and lift them off in a burst of energy, like a hurricane sweeping through the memories of the music heard up to this point. This Quartet has prompted debate between critics, with little agreement on how to 'explain' or 'place' it within Shostakovich's oeuvre. In ways that parallel Weinberg's quartets of the same era, though, it can be seen as a kind of condensing of musical tools that then points the way to the later style that will soon follow.

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