

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 17 February 2025
1.00pm

United Strings of Europe

Julian Azkoul director, violin I

Ellie Fagg violin I

Hannah Bell violin I

Will McGahon violin I

Ariel Lang violin II

Helena Buckie violin II

Rebecca Harris violin II

Kay Stephen viola

Christine Anderson viola

Raphael Lang cello

Kirsten Jenson cello

Marianne Schofield double bass

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Serenade for Strings in C Op. 48

*I. Pezzo in forma di sonatina • II. Valse • III. Elegia
IV. Finale*

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Chamber Symphony in C minor Op. 110a (1960) *arranged
by Rudolf Barshai*

*I. Largo • II. Allegro molto • III. Allegretto
IV. Largo • V. Largo*



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The late 1870s had been a turbulent time for **Tchaikovsky**. He had rashly married Antonina Milyukova in the summer of 1877, but abandoned her almost immediately. Suffered what some have seen as a nervous breakdown, he fled to western Europe. Yet for all the chaos of his personal life, it was a supremely creative period musically. He completed his Fourth Symphony and Violin Concerto, as well as his opera, *Eugene Onegin*. A generous stipend from his patron, Nadezhda von Meck, allowed him to give up his teaching position at the Moscow Conservatory and devote himself entirely to composition. Yet the decade that followed looks – at least at first glance – to have been disappointingly barren, and it would not be until 1888 that he produced another major masterpiece in the form of his Fifth Symphony.

This story is true only if we insist on seeing Tchaikovsky as a hysterical Romantic, pouring out his innermost emotions into works of unbridled intensity. There is another side to his character – one that loved order and grace, and which was capable of producing compositions of Neoclassical proportion and elegance. This was the Tchaikovsky who emerged in the late 1870s and early 1880s and who expressed himself in works such as the Second Piano Concerto, the four Orchestral Suites, and the Serenade for Strings. He composed it in late September and early October 1880 and thought of it as a tribute to his favourite composer, Mozart. As he wrote to von Meck the following summer, 'In the first movement I paid homage to my love of Mozart; this is a deliberate imitation of his manner, and I should be happy if you found that I was not too far from my chosen model.'

But the Serenade is about more than just nostalgic time travel. It also shows how fundamentally European Tchaikovsky was in spirit. As he wrote to a friend as he embarked on the score: 'I appreciate very much the wealth of material which the grubby and suffering people produce, but we, i.e. those of us who employ this material, will always develop it in forms borrowed from Europe, since although we are born as Russians, we are at the same time much more European, and their forms have been so profoundly and resolutely adopted and assimilated by us that in order to tear ourselves from them, it would be necessary to commit acts of great violence and force, and from such violence and force nothing artistic can come.'

Despite the use of two folk tunes in its Finale, there is nothing narrowly nationalistic about the Serenade. Its beguiling melodic surface marks a sophisticated treatment of musical form and profound command of technique that allowed Tchaikovsky to see himself the equal of the western European composers he admired so much.

With characteristic irony, **Shostakovich** described his String Quartet No. 8 as 'this ideologically flawed quartet which is of no use to anybody.' Since its

première on 2 October 1960, it has become one of his most popular works, and certainly the most frequently performed of his fifteen quartets. Earlier that year, Shostakovich had travelled to East Germany to work on the score for a film about the Allied bombing of Dresden. Whilst staying at nearby spa, he completed the new quartet in just three days, astutely dedicating it 'to the victims of fascism and war.' At the same time, Shostakovich larded it with abundant autobiographical resonances. To a trusted friend, he suggested that 'nobody is likely to write a work in memory of me, so I had better write one myself. The title page could carry the inscription: 'To the memory of the composer of this quartet'. At the very beginning, Shostakovich quotes his own musical motto – DSCH (i.e. the notes D, E flat, C and B natural as they are spelled in German). He includes references to his other works too, including the First and Fifth symphonies, the Second Piano Trio, the First Cello Concerto, and his beloved opera, *Lady Macbeth*, which had been banned since 1936, when Stalin objected to its bold and daring modernism. There are also allusions to Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*, and a revolutionary song, 'Tormented by grievous bondage'.

The reason for Shostakovich's obsessive introspection is easily found. Earlier that year, he had joined the Communist Party. It was a coup for Khrushchev, but Shostakovich was profoundly distressed, and many of his close friends were baffled. Many theories have been advanced to explain his decision, but perhaps the most persuasive is that he was motivated by a genuine desire to serve. In joining the Party, Shostakovich became eligible to become the First Secretary of the Russian Composers' Union, and in 1962, he was even elected a deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union.

What is most moving about the eighth quartet, however, is its affirmation of creative inspiration. Shostakovich may have been under immense ideological pressure, yet he found a way to work through his suffering and fashion a score of immense structural sophistication. The eighth consists of five movements – three of them marked Largo (slow) – and all linked to create a single coherent whole. Shostakovich's quartets are sometimes thought of as the musical equivalent of a private diary – personal documents hinting at the most intimate emotions of this most guarded of composers. By contrast, his symphonies are seen as public works, addressing large audiences and speaking to important issues of the day. The arrangement of the eighth quartet for string ensemble blurs that distinction, turning the quartet into a symphonic work in all but name. The transcription was made by Rudolf Barshai, the founding violist of the Borodin Quartet.

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