

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 17 October 2022
7.30pm

Silesian String Quartet

Szymon Krzeszowiec violin
Arkadiusz Kubica violin
Łukasz Syrnicki viola
Piotr Janosik cello

Wojciech Światała piano

Grażyna Bacewicz (1909-1969)

String Quartet No. 4 (1951)
*I. Andante - Allegro moderato • II. Andante •
III. Allegro giocoso*

Mieczysław Weinberg (1919-1996)

String Quartet No. 3 Op. 14 (1944)
*I. Presto attacca • II. Andante sostenuto attacca •
III. Allegretto*

Interval

Juliusz Zarębski (1854-1885)

Piano Quintet in G minor Op. 34 (1885)
*I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Scherzo. Presto •
IV. Finale. Presto*



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The history of Poland in the 19th and 20th centuries was marked by dramatically shifting boundaries – geographical, political and cultural – and displacement of people, and the lives of the composers represented in this evening’s programme offer a perfect illustration of this.

All three had a clear Polish identity, yet the circumstances of their lives could hardly be more different. Zarębski was born in Zhytomyr, capital of the historic region of Volhynia, which in 1793 was annexed by the Russian Empire as a result of the second Partition of Poland. Now in western Ukraine, the city still has a sizeable Polish minority. Weinberg was born in Warsaw but spent most of his life in Moscow, having fled to the Soviet Union after his homeland was invaded by Nazi Germany in 1939. Bacewicz was born in the central Polish city of Łódź, to a Lithuanian father and a Polish mother. She became one of the leading lights of mid-20th-century Polish music, yet her older brother Vytautas – also a composer – was drawn towards their Lithuanian heritage to the extent that he preferred to use the Lithuanian form of their surname, Bacevičius.

Bacewicz studied violin, piano and composition at the Warsaw Conservatory. After graduating from the Conservatory in 1932 she moved to Paris, where she became a composition pupil of Nadia Boulanger and also studied the violin with Carl Flesch. After her return to Poland, she made her living primarily as a violinist and teacher, only becoming a full-time composer in 1954.

Not surprisingly, music for string instruments occupies a central part of her output. She wrote many works for solo violin, as well as a considerable amount of chamber music for strings. Her seven string quartets are among her most personal chamber music works; of these, the String Quartet No. 4 is the most accomplished and accessible, the latter owing mainly to its genial neoclassical style and the clear influence of Polish folk music.

The quartet dates from the immediate post-war period – a time when Polish artists were increasingly expected to subscribe to the Soviet-inspired doctrine of Socialist Realism. Although Bacewicz must have felt the pressure to conform, she seems to have been successful in affirming that this genre at least should be seen as the pinnacle of art for art’s sake. Her determined rejection of artistic conformity appears to have paid off, for her work won first prize at an international string quartet competition held in Liège in the autumn of 1951.

Weinberg wrote his String Quartet No. 3 at a time of even greater historical upheaval. He was born into a Jewish family in Warsaw, where his father was the music director of a Yiddish theatre. At the age of 12 he entered the Warsaw Conservatory, where his piano teacher was Józef Turczyński (who had also taught Bacewicz). At the outbreak of World War II he fled to

the Soviet Union; the rest of his family stayed behind and subsequently perished in a concentration camp.

At first Weinberg only went as far as Minsk, but after Germany launched its invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 he fled once more, to the relative safety of Tashkent. It was in the Uzbek capital that he met Shostakovich for the first time. The two men soon became close friends, and in 1943 Shostakovich persuaded Weinberg to move to Moscow, where he was to remain for the rest of his life.

The first piece Weinberg composed after settling in Moscow was the String Quartet No. 3, a work of remarkable maturity and impeccable craftsmanship. While the yearning phrases of the slow movement could perhaps be seen as a meditation on the tragic events of the previous few years, the vigorous outer movements are surely more indicative of the 25-year-old composer’s determination to make his mark, now that he had been given the opportunity to make a fresh start in a city where he was accepted as an equal by other eminent musicians.

From an early age, **Zarębski** was destined for a brilliant career as a virtuoso pianist. Born into a well-to-do Polish family in Zhytomyr, he played in public for the first time at the age of ten; by his mid-teens, he was a student at the Vienna Conservatory. Not long after graduating, he was giving concerts throughout Europe. In 1874 he became a pupil of Liszt, who encouraged him to devote himself seriously to composition. For a while, Zarębski even lived next door to his teacher in Rome. By his mid-20s, he was himself professor of piano at the Brussels Conservatory.

One can only speculate on what further heights Zarębski might have scaled had he not succumbed to tuberculosis at the age of only 31. As the disease progressed, he was forced to curtail his public performances, and the last two years of his life were devoted almost entirely to teaching and composing. His output consists mainly of solo piano music, but in his final year he produced what is generally acknowledged to be his masterpiece: the Piano Quintet in G minor, dedicated to *‘mon cher maître Fr. Liszt!’*

The work makes a powerful statement, yet the piano is rarely allowed to dominate the texture, instead playing a supporting role to the intense lyricism of the strings. The influence of Brahms, who several decades earlier had enriched the repertoire for piano and strings with several equally powerful yet lyrical works, can certainly be heard. The cyclical structure of Zarębski’s quintet also suggests the influence of Franck’s mighty Piano Quintet in F minor (1879). But despite these undoubted influences, Zarębski’s own individual voice – most evident in his abundant melodic invention – still shines through.

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