

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 19 February 2024
7.30pm

Silesian String Quartet

Szymon Krzeszowiec violin

Arkadiusz Kubica violin

Łukasz Syrnicki viola

Piotr Janosik cello

Mats Lidström cello

Mieczysław Weinberg (1919-1996)

String Quartet No. 7 Op. 59 (1957)

I. Adagio • II. Allegretto • III. Adagio - Allegro - Adagio

Witold Lutosławski (1913-1994)

String Quartet (1964)

I. Introductory movement • II. Main movement

Interval

Witold Maliszewski (1873-1939)

String Quintet in D minor Op. 3 (1904)

I. Allegro • II. Andante tranquillo • III. Scherzo •

IV. Allegro risoluto

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All the composers featured in this evening's programme were to a greater or lesser degree survivors of the cataclysmic upheavals that engulfed their homeland during the 20th Century. **Weinberg's** situation was undeniably the most precarious: as a Warsaw-born Jewish musician, he would almost certainly have perished if he had remained in Poland at the outbreak of World War II. He escaped from the Nazi Holocaust – which consumed the rest of his immediate family – by fleeing to the Soviet Union, only to find himself once more the target of persecution during the antisemitic purges instigated by Stalin after the war.

For Weinberg, the string quartet was always the medium in which he expressed his most intimate thoughts, which probably accounts for the fact that during the first decade of his composing career he produced no fewer than six quartets. However, No. 6 (1946) was followed by a long break in his output of quartets – possibly because the cultural climate then prevailing in the Soviet Union meant that composing chamber music (a genre for which the description of 'art for art's sake' could have been invented) was all too likely to lead to accusations of 'formalism' – a charge regularly levelled against any music that failed to conform to the diktats of socialist realism.

Stalin's antisemitism reached its peak with the fabricated 'Jewish doctors' plot' of the early 1950s, which saw one of Weinberg's wife's relatives arrested on a false charge in January 1953. The composer himself was detained the following month and was not released until after the death of Stalin in March. Following these traumatic experiences, several years elapsed before Weinberg felt able to return to the medium of the string quartet, and in No. 7 he produced a work that feels like a response to the terrible things that had happened to him in the preceding decades. The opening *Adagio* is imbued with a deep sense of loss, while the second movement is a spectral polka in which ghosts of the past continually emerge from the shadows only to fade away again. The third movement carries a huge expressive charge and builds to an unashamed howl of pain before appearing to achieve a measure of resignation in the final bars.

For Weinberg's non-Jewish contemporary **Lutosławski**, remaining in Poland during the war years was a less dangerous option, but life in Warsaw under German occupation was still fraught with peril. Organised gatherings such as concerts were banned, and so Lutosławski and his fellow composer Andrzej Panufnik eked out a living by arranging and playing piano duets in various Warsaw cafés.

Like Weinberg, Lutosławski also fell victim to the post-war ban on music deemed to be 'formalistic'. As a Soviet satellite state, Poland had no choice but to subscribe to the tenets of socialist realism in the arts, and any artist who refused to conform to this doctrine was denied a platform. Both Weinberg and Lutosławski survived this period as best they could: the former by

producing music for films and the circus, the latter by composing what he termed 'functional music': film scores, folksong arrangements and educational pieces.

In Poland as in the Soviet Union, Stalin's death led to a gradual thawing of the political climate, and in this freer atmosphere, artistic experimentation flourished. Lutosławski's most notable contribution to the repertory of avant-garde techniques was the concept of controlled aleatorism, which involved introducing an element of randomness or chance with the aim of creating new expressive possibilities.

The aleatoric elements of Lutosławski's String Quartet (his only work in this genre) present the performers with some stiff challenges, as the absence of a conductor means that the players have to rely on each other for cues. The composer was initially reluctant to provide a score of the work, insisting that he did not want anything to detract from the 'mobile' character of the music – the sense of endless possibilities within a clearly defined framework. However, the LaSalle Quartet, which gave the first performance, eventually persuaded him that a score was essential to help them prepare for the première.

Tonight's concert ends with the String Quintet by **Maliszewski**, Lutosławski's teacher at the Warsaw Conservatory. Though the older composer was spared having to live through some of the worst upheavals of the 20th Century, momentous historical events still had a major impact on his life and professional career. He was born in what is now the Ukrainian city of Mohyliv-Podilskyi, after his father was exiled from Poland as a punishment for having taken part in the anti-Tsarist January Uprising of 1863. He received his basic education in the Georgian city of Tbilisi (then known as Tiflis) and went on to attend university in St Petersburg, where he later studied composition with Rimsky-Korsakov. In 1908, he became the director of a music school in Odessa, staying there until 1921, when the increasing interference of the new Soviet authorities in the running of the school combined with general suspicion of Poles in the wake of the Soviet-Polish War of 1920 prompted him to move to Warsaw, where he remained for the rest of his life.

The Quintet dates from Maliszewski's time in St Petersburg, when he became active in the Belyayev Circle – a group of musicians who took part in regular soirées at the home of the publisher Mitrofan Belyayev. As a string player, Maliszewski would have been an especially welcome participant in the 'Quartet Fridays' organised by Belyayev. Though the Quintet – which is dedicated to Belyayev – shows the unmistakable influence of Tchaikovsky, Borodin and Dvořák and is written in a somewhat conservative style, it also reveals the extent to which Maliszewski was by then an accomplished composer of chamber music.

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