

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 19 March 2024  
7.30pm

## Quatuor Danel

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

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 4 in D Op. 83 (1949)  
*I. Allegretto • II. Andantino • III. Allegretto •  
IV. Allegretto*

Mieczysław Weinberg (1919-1996)

String Quartet No. 4 Op. 20 (1945)  
*I. Allegro comodo • II. Moderato assai • III. Largo  
marciale • IV. Allegro moderato*

*Interval*

Dmitry Shostakovich

String Quartet No. 5 in B flat Op. 92 (1952)  
*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Andante •  
III. Moderato - Allegretto*

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In 1948, a new crackdown on Soviet music began and composers had to publicly apologise for their supposed failings, including **Shostakovich**. When Shostakovich wrote his Fourth Quartet in 1949, he decided to put it to one side to wait until the ideological climate had relaxed. The piece is also notable for its influence from Jewish music. Shostakovich's interest in Jewish themes had been provoked partly by his student Veniamin Fleishman, but also through his friendship with Mieczysław Weinberg. Weinberg had been praised for using Jewish themes in his works and Shostakovich seems to have followed his lead.

In the quartet's opening movement, modal inflections drone over a D major chord. Despite this bright and sunny key, the scale is soon flattened to give a sense of hovering around the major and minor scale. The movement builds towards a dissonant climax, before subsiding into a repeat of its opening motifs. The second movement *Andantino* forms the emotional heart of the work, with a slow waltz-like accompaniment. The first violin presents a mournful singing line over the top of the lower parts.

The third movement is a *perpetuum mobile* and betrays the influence of Bartók, whose Sixth Quartet Shostakovich had heard while in America. Despite the movement's scherzo-like character and constant sense of pulse, it is played with mutes and never rises to any kind of dramatic height. The final *Allegretto* is the highlight of the piece, and arguably the high-water mark of Shostakovich's quartets so far. In this suspenseful finale, a tragic dancing motif is broken by aggressive, wailing intrusions that distort it beyond recognition. Several critics have related this finale to Soviet reports of the liberation of the Treblinka concentration camp five years earlier. If correct, the Fourth Quartet presents a disturbing account of a subject trying to grasp this horror. Its apparent folk-like tone belies a grim determination under the surface.

By the time of his *Fourth String Quartet* in 1945, **Weinberg** was composing at a rapid rate; it was also the first of his quartets to receive critical attention. One critic found the work to be the 'result of the author's profound experiences', and another claimed that it was 'a product of conflict'.

The first movement opens with a warm E flat major theme that soon wanders and brings a more complex structure, as the four players vie to present melodies. Since clear restatement of themes is avoided, the movement begins to take on a fantasy-like feel, hinting at darker emotions – such as in the subdued coda, where the cello reminisces on the opening theme.

The second movement is in stark contrast, with a Bartók-like character. Here, Weinberg deploys a range of extended playing techniques and aggressive bowings to create an almost nightmarish machine-like pulse. This

movement held special significance for the composer, as he quoted extensively from it in the second movement of his 21st Symphony 'Kaddish', dedicated to the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto.

The third movement explicitly takes on a Jewish mood, through textures that evoke a solo lament, as well as a funeral march that modulates to the major mode. The lower parts assume the role of a Slavic-style chorus intoning dirge-like dotted chords, while the first violin acts as leader, though their solo is frequently interrupted by repeats of the opening unison chords.

For the finale, Weinberg injects energy through a series of skittish themes. The third movement texture continues here but is replaced by chromatic 'smearing' gestures that confuse any sense of tonality or key. By the conclusion, the music has finally 'found' its home key, though an unusual one: the minor version of the overall key. It is difficult to find precedents for major-key works that end in the minor (rather than the opposite), and the expressive quality of dejection that this implies.

Shostakovich's *Fifth Quartet* marks a turning point in the cycle as he focused on more personal expression, clearest in the abundance of self-quotations. The viola's opening four notes are a permutation of the 'DSCH' motif, the famous musical signature that Shostakovich would embed most clearly in the Eighth Quartet. Even further, the first movement takes as its second theme a quotation by Galina Ustvolskaya, a pupil whom he held intense personal feelings for. Further still, the second movement quotes a string of Shostakovich's own works that had been banned from performance, including the *Third Quartet* and his *First Violin Concerto*. Together, these quotes create a tangled web of meanings and interpretations.

The first movement brings a dance-like feel that is darkened by churning octaves. With the entry of the Ustvolskaya quote, an intense counterpoint begins. The two themes appear in multiple combinations, sometimes in dancing textures, and then in aggressive, biting oppositions. The result is a whirling dialogue that contrasts tender expression with fiendish opposition.

The middle movement is a ghost-like rumination, where the energy of the first movement all but freezes over. Within this void, we hear the quotations of Shostakovich's banned pieces. There is a strong potential to interpret this movement as his expression of desolation and despair as his music was restrained – but Shostakovich keeps his cards close to his chest, and moments of light are just as frequently encountered as moments of darkness.

Failure becomes the organising principle behind the final movement. An attempt is made to return to the work's initial energy, including allusions to the first two

themes. Despite this, the middle movement's desolation proves too much, and the finale instead inhabits the spectral world established by its predecessor. Fittingly for a work that quotes the composer's banned pieces, the Fifth Quartet was only premièred after Stalin's death. The

work's intense self-expression signals the direction of much of Shostakovich's music thereafter.

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