

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 21 February 2022 7.30pm

Novus String Quartet

Jaeyoung Kim violin

Young-Uk Kim violin

Kyuhyun Kim viola

Wonhae Lee cello

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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet in D minor K421 (1783)

I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante •

III. Menuetto and Trio. Allegretto • IV. Allegretto ma non troppo

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

String Quartet No. 2 in A minor Op. 13 (1827)

I. Adagio - Allegro vivace • II. Adagio non lento •

III. Intermezzo. Allegretto con moto - Allegro di molto •

IV. Presto - Adagio non lento

Interval

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 3 in F Op. 73 (1946)

I. Allegretto • II. Moderato con moto •

III. Allegro non troppo • IV. Adagio • V. Moderato

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In 1785, four years after **Mozart** had settled in Vienna, the publishers Artaria issued six of the composer's string quartets. Dedicated to Haydn, they were, according to Mozart's florid yet sincere text, 'the fruit of a long and laborious endeavour'. Certainly, the D minor Quartet K421, which was published second in the set and composed in 1783, communes that sense of intensity across its four movements.

The opening *Allegro moderato* begins with a nervy first subject. Although Mozart preserves its equal four-bar phrases, there are discrepancies in rhythm and dynamic. The lyrical second subject appears less restive, though there is nervousness here too, which is accentuated in the recapitulation, with the second subject and coda continuing in the minor mode. The deliberate irregularities of the first movement are likewise present in the aria-like *Andante*, where Mozart's typically flowing melodic style turns more stuttering. Even the courtly *Menuetto* shows signs of petulance, before the *Trio* strikes a more refreshing note, graciously skipping over the bruises of what has gone before.

The tensions reappear, however, in the D minor finale, with a highly involved set of variations. There are several feints towards major keys, though the movement proves tenacious, with the theme itself even returning in its original guise. Finally, a coda offers resolution with a last-minute shift to D major.

Mendelssohn's Second String Quartet Op. 13 is similarly couched in a minor key, though it reverses the overriding tonality's relationship with its major-key counterpart at the start of the work. Instead, the quartet begins with a calm but searching introduction in A major. Its questioning motifs are taken from 'Frage', the first song in Mendelssohn's *12 Lieder* Op. 9. The original text, also written by the composer, asks '*Ist es wahr?*' ('Is it true?'), both at the start and at the end of a charming Lied concerning fidelity. Here, however, the dotted gestures spur a chilling trill, which leads into the hectic energy of the first movement proper, with inquisitive rhythms returning throughout.

The *Adagio* begins in the same calm mood as at the start of the work, again belying the argument at the movement's core, here told in fugal form. Only in the *Intermezzo* does the sense of purpose relent, with Mendelssohn contrasting his lilting theme with the kind of scurrying music we might associate with his score for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

A more turbulent drama is told in the finale, announced by a cadenza-like passage for the first violinist. This is followed by an even more charged rondo – Mendelssohn's model was undoubtedly Beethoven's String Quartet No. 15 in A minor Op. 132. Occasionally, reflective passages ensue, though these also prepare for the conclusion, when Mendelssohn brings us full circle. Written at just 18 years old, this ingenious work may be numbered second, though it was actually the composer's first mature contribution to the genre, preceding 'No. 1' in E flat Op. 12 by two years.

Shostakovich began collaborating with the Moscow-based Beethoven Quartet in 1940. The personnel changed over time, though the composer's relationship with the group remained strong – right until the end of his life. In response, he often dedicated works to the individual players. But in the case of his String Quartet No. 3 in F Op. 73, composed and first performed in 1946, the ensemble itself is named at the top of the score.

The music reflects a taxing period in Soviet history and cultural politics, and was completed shortly before Shostakovich and other leading Russian composers became the target of Politburo member Andrei Zhdanov's censure. All of the group, including Prokofiev and Khachaturian, saw their works banned when they were accused of 'formalism', though the authorities never defined the term. While Shostakovich's Third String Quartet was not among the proscribed works, any performance would have been tantamount to treason and it was only in 1958 that the composer and his colleagues were formally rehabilitated.

There is an understandable feeling of apprehension in the music, which Shostakovich originally explained as having derived from his memories of war, even giving the movements suitable subtitles. He described the heavily ironic *Allegretto*, for instance, as 'Blithe ignorance of the future cataclysm'. The second movement, at turns dancing and pensive, was the 'Rumblings of unrest and anticipation', while the third saw the 'Forces of war unleashed' in frighteningly vivid terms. In response, the *Adagio*, 'In memory of the dead', offers a dark but subdued picture of grief.

After such a low point, the finale dares to pose 'The eternal question: Why? And for what?' Its music is dominated by a tritone, representing an uneasy reach into an uncertain future. At times, Shostakovich attempts to reintroduce some of the blithe expression of the first movement, though, ultimately, it offers little release. Only by acknowledging the mood of the *Adagio* does the composer reach a sense of understanding. Nonetheless, Shostakovich always felt a highly personal connection to the work, with the Beethoven Quartet's viola player Fyodor Druzhinin describing its effect during a rehearsal in the 1960s:

Only once did we see Shostakovich visibly moved by his own music. We were rehearsing his Third Quartet. He'd promised to stop us when he had any remarks to make. Dmitry Dmitriyevich sat in an armchair with the score opened out. But after each movement ended he just waved us on, saying, "Keep playing!". So we performed the whole Quartet. When we finished, he sat quite still in silence, like a wounded bird, tears streaming down his face. This was the only time that I saw Shostakovich so open and defenceless.

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