

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 22 January – Sunday 23 January 2022

Carducci String Quartet

Matthew Denton violin

Michelle Fleming violin

Eoin Schmidt-Martin viola

Emma Denton cello

The complete string quartets of Shostakovich

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Saturday 22 January

1.00pm

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 1 in C Op. 49 (1938)

I. Moderato • II. Moderato • III. Allegro molto • IV. Allegro

String Quartet No. 2 in A Op. 68 (1944)

I. Overture. Moderato con moto • II. Recitative and Romance. Adagio • III. Valse. Allegro • IV. Theme and Variations. Adagio

Interval

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

I. Allegretto • II. Moderato con moto • III. Allegro non troppo • IV. Adagio • V. Moderato

String Quartet No. 4 in D Op. 83 (1949)

I. Allegretto • II. Andantino • III. Allegretto • IV. Allegretto

7.30pm

Dmitry Shostakovich

String Quartet No. 5 in B flat Op. 92 (1952)

I. Allegro non troppo • II. Andante • III. Moderato - Allegretto

String Quartet No. 6 in G Op. 101 (1956)

I. Allegretto • II. Moderato con moto • III. Lento • IV. Lento - Allegretto

Interval

String Quartet No. 7 in F sharp minor Op. 108 (1960)

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

String Quartet No. 8 in C minor Op. 110 (1960)

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

Sunday 23 January

11.30am

Dmitry Shostakovich

String Quartet No. 9 in E flat Op. 117 (1964)

I. Moderato con moto • II. Adagio • III. Allegretto • IV. Adagio • V. Allegro

String Quartet No. 10 in A flat Op. 118 (1964)

I. Andante con moto • II. Allegretto furioso • III. Adagio • IV. Allegretto - Andante

3.00pm

Dmitry Shostakovich

String Quartet No. 11 in F minor Op. 122 (1966)

I. Introduction. Andantino • II. Scherzo. Allegretto • III. Recitative. Adagio • IV. Etude. Allegro • V. Humoresque. Allegro • VI. Elegy. Adagio • VII. Finale. Moderato

String Quartet No. 12 in D flat Op. 133 (1968)

I. Moderato - Allegretto • II. Allegretto - Adagio - Moderato - Allegretto

String Quartet No. 13 in B flat minor Op. 138 (1970)

Adagio - Doppio movimento - Tempo primo

7.30pm

Dmitry Shostakovich

String Quartet No. 14 in F sharp Op. 142 (1973)

I. Allegretto • II. Adagio • III. Allegretto

Interval

String Quartet No. 15 in E flat minor Op. 144 (1974)

I. Elegy. Adagio • II. Serenade. Adagio • III. Intermezzo. Adagio • IV. Nocturne. Adagio • V. Funeral march. Adagio molto • VI. Epilogue. Adagio

It can be tempting to see **Shostakovich's** 15 symphonies and 15 string quartets as the public and private faces of this most inscrutable of composers. As with all simplifications, this distinction contains a grain of truth. The quartets are home to some of Shostakovich's most personal music. To hear them as a cycle is to undertake a moving journey through his often turbulent life. By the time he first turned to the form in 1938, he had already written five symphonies (not to mention two operas), whereas there are no quartets from the early, iconoclastic period of his career. Over the course of the next 15 years, between 1938 and 1953, his output of symphonies and quartets is perfectly balanced: five of each. Thereafter, he produced just five symphonies, whereas he turned ever more frequently to the quartet, writing 10 more of them before his death in 1975. The quartets also trace his often tense relationship with Soviet power. The first five date from the dark years of Stalin's dictatorship, the middle five reflect aspects of Khrushchev's liberalising 'Thaw', and the final five convey the increasingly stagnant atmosphere of the Brezhnev administration. Yet to hear them solely as documents of their time is to limit them. In each case, Shostakovich was engaged in a profound dialogue with tradition, exploring the legacy of the past, as well as responding to the demands of the present. Although he never achieved his ambition of writing 24 quartets, one in each major and minor key, those he did leave behind constitute an artistic and human document as significant as those of Haydn and Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, or – in the 20th Century – Bartók.

Saturday 22 January 2022 01:00 PM

String Quartet No. 1 in C Op. 49

String Quartet No. 2 in A Op. 68

Interval

String Quartet No. 3 in F Op. 73

String Quartet No. 4 in D Op. 83

Composed between 30 May and 17 July 1938 and premièred in Leningrad on 10 October that year, the **String Quartet No. 1 Op. 49** gives little indication of the stream of works that was to follow. Shostakovich began it as a compositional exercise, and in an interview, he cautioned listeners: 'Don't expect to find anything particularly profound in this, my first quartet opus. In mood, it is joyful, merry, lyrical. I would call it "spring-like".' Such sentiments seem deeply out-of-keeping with their times. The purges still raged, and an atmosphere of terror hung over the Soviet Union. Shostakovich himself had been virulently criticised for his opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, in January 1936, and later

that year, he withdrew his vast, Mahlerian Symphony No. 4. The triumphant première on 21 November 1937 of his Symphony No. 5 marked his artistic rehabilitation, and its classical structure paved the way for his first quartet. Some critics have suggested that it marks a retreat from the public realm, yet it was strangely consonant with the times. Under Stalin, Soviet artistic policy had rejected the revolutionary spirit of the 1920s avant-garde. In its place came Socialist Realism, an aesthetic explicitly modelled on the past. It was the era of the sprawling historical novel, the realistic oil painting, neo-classical architecture, and – in music – grand opera and the sweeping symphonic narrative. Artists were supposed to express the dignity of high culture in a language accessible to the masses. To write chamber music was, therefore, not an act of private dissent, but a contribution to a new form of official culture, as suggested by the award of Stalin Prizes for Shostakovich's Piano Quintet in 1940, and his Piano Trio No. 2 in 1946.

Superficially, the first quartet conforms to this paradigm. Cast in the guileless key of C major, made up of the conventional four movements of the classical quartet, and lasting around 15 minutes in performance, it feels more like an early Haydn divertissement than a Beethovenian drama. Nonetheless, it contains intimations of Shostakovich's characteristically ironic approach to musical dramaturgy. The simplicity and directness of the home key is destabilised by constant harmonic ambiguities, and there is something uncanny about the skittishness of the third-movement scherzo. Most of all, it is the work's structure that proves so unsettling. During the quartet's composition, Shostakovich swapped the original order of its opening *Moderato* and concluding *Allegro*, meaning that two extended and meditative movements are followed by two shorter, faster numbers. Classical form is seen through the distorting prism of a fairground mirror.

Six years elapsed before Shostakovich returned to the quartet, and the two examples that followed were conceived on a much grander scale. The **String Quartet No. 2 Op. 68** was composed in just 19 days in September 1944, and premièred in Leningrad on 14 November in a concert that also included the first performance of Shostakovich's second piano trio. The quartet's dedicatee was the composer Shebalin, one of the few figures to have defended Shostakovich at the time of the *Lady Macbeth* scandal. Shostakovich was moved by his friend's personal courage, but the relationship honoured in his second quartet is primarily musical. Shebalin's fifth quartet – the so-called 'Slavonic' – had won a Stalin Prize in 1943. In it, Shebalin subjected quasi-folkloric themes to serious, classical development, and Shostakovich followed his example. Each movement of his quartet is named after a particular musical genre – an 'overture', a 'recitative and romance', and a 'waltz' which leads into a concluding 'theme and variations'. The quartet's opening is heroic and muscular, suggesting the patriotic spirit of the war. A more sombre atmosphere prevails in the keening of the second,

slow movement, which gives way to the whirling of a macabre waltz. Perhaps the strangest feature of this movement is its key of E flat minor, which is about as far from the quartet's home key of A major as it is possible to get. Even more ambiguous is the finale, which concludes in a stark, stoic A minor. The quartet may have been written in the penultimate year of the war, but its tone is not yet one of celebration.

So what was Shostakovich's reaction to the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany? The **String Quartet No. 3 Op. 73** has been interpreted by some as his attempt to convey the experience of the war in musical form. Its five movements – composed between 26 January and 2 August 1946 – may even originally have been prefaced by explicit subtitles, although these were suppressed later on:

- I. *'Calm unawareness of the future cataclysm'*
- II. *'Rumblings of unrest and anticipation'*
- III. *'The forces of war unleashed'*
- IV. *'Homage to the dead'*
- V. *'The eternal question: Why? And for what?'*

Whether these were meant in earnest, or designed to distract the censor, the quartet certainly mimics the structure and even the tempo markings of the wartime Symphony No. 8, and there are similarities with the Symphony No. 9 too. Whatever the authenticity of the narrative that some have read into it, the quartet was particularly dear to its composer. For Shostakovich, as for so many Soviet citizens, contemplating the suffering of the war years became a way of alluding to the unspeakable trauma of the Stalin era. The violist Fyodor Druzhinin recalled him weeping at a rehearsal: 'the only time that I saw Shostakovich so open and defenceless'. Other listeners were haunted by it too, singling out the solemn passacaglia that forms its fourth movement, and above all its ethereal final chords. There were attempts to nominate it for a Stalin Prize, although Shostakovich's critics deemed its musical language too experimental to be accessible to the masses. In 1946, though, there was a prize for the Beethoven Quartet, to whom the third quartet is dedicated and who gave the first performances of all but the first and last of his quartets.

The ambivalent reception of the third quartet led Shostakovich to withdraw it shortly after its première on 16 December 1946. He also held back the first official performance of his **String Quartet No. 4 Op. 83** completed in late December 1949, until 3 December 1953. There were sound reasons for caution. In 1948, he – along with Prokofiev and Khachaturian – were accused of 'formalism', and many of his compositions were removed from the repertoire. After a phone call from Stalin, the ban was rescinded, although there was a price to pay: Shostakovich was sent as an official delegate to the Conference for World Peace in New York City in March 1949. He found the experience excruciating, although he did attend a performance of Bartók's first, fourth and sixth quartets whilst there. On his return, he completed the explicitly propagandistic *Song of the Forests*, which duly won another Stalin Prize.

At first glance, the fourth quartet might well have been expected to be passed for performance. After the symphonic scope of the

second and third quartets, it returns to a classical four-movement structure. Its home key of D major suggests optimism, its lyricism is open-hearted, and its tempo markings – three *Allegrettos* and an *Andantino* – are nimble. Yet if Shostakovich was aiming to conform to the expectations of Socialist Realism, his plan misfired. Written in memory of Pyotr Vilyams, a painter and set-designer at the Bolshoi Theatre who died in 1947, it is often grief-laden, especially its second movement, and its conclusion is introspective, rather than affirmatory. Most problematic, though, were its allusions to Jewish folk music, which also occur in the second piano trio, the first violin concerto, and most explicitly the vocal cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry*. Admittedly, the Red Army had uncovered many sites of the Holocaust in the final years of the war, and the Soviet Union was the first country to recognise the State of Israel in May 1948, but by this time, Stalin had already begun to pursue a series of increasingly anti-Semitic policies at home. Shostakovich's moving act of musical solidarity aligned him with the wrong people at the wrong time.

Saturday 22 January 2022 07:30 PM

String Quartet No. 5 in B flat Op. 92

String Quartet No. 6 in G Op. 101

Interval

String Quartet No. 7 in F sharp minor Op. 108

String Quartet No. 8 in C minor Op. 110

One of the many official honours bestowed on Shostakovich was membership of the Soviet delegation to the Bach bicentenary celebrations in Leipzig in 1950. There, he sat on the jury of the International Bach Competition, where the first prize for piano went to Tatyana Nikolayeva. Her playing inspired Shostakovich's *24 Preludes and Fugues*, but the impact of his immersion in the music of Bach can also be felt in the **String Quartet No. 5 Op. 92**, composed in 1952. Counterpoint and complex motivic development predominate, and if the quartet is less variegated than earlier works, it more than makes up for this with its astringent rigour. Its three long movements are performed without a break, heightening the demands it makes on listeners and performers. It certainly appeals powerfully to the intellect, yet it is also the product of Shostakovich's intense feelings for his student, the composer Galina Ustvolskaya. The quartet contains a number of citations from her unpublished Trio for clarinet, violin and piano of 1949-50, as well as references to his own withdrawn third quartet and the first violin concerto (composed in 1947-8, but not performed until 1955). The sense that the fifth quartet is an intensely private work is reinforced by its use of a short cell consisting of the notes B-C-D-E flat, or H-C-D-Es in German. Rearranged, this is the composer's musical monogram: DSCH.

Shostakovich feared that the complex musical language of the fifth quartet would mean that its première would be delayed. His anxieties were unfounded. Stalin's death on 5 March 1953 brought to an end more than two decades of repression and ushered in what became known as Khrushchev's 'Thaw'. The Beethoven Quartet – to whom it is dedicated – gave the first performance on 13 November, not long before the belated première of the fourth quartet on 3 December. A fortnight later came the first performance of the Symphony No. 10. The performance of three major works composed during some of the darkest years of Soviet history signalled a sense of creative release. Yet it was at precisely this moment that Shostakovich experienced a creative block, composing little of note over the next few years. The reason is not hard to find. In December 1954, his wife, Nina Vazar, died suddenly. Their open marriage had been as passionate as it was resilient, and Shostakovich was bereft. Ustvol'skaya rejected a hasty proposal, but in July 1956, he surprised everybody by announcing his marriage to Margarita Kainova, a young activist in the Communist Party. Few of Shostakovich's friends took to his new wife, and the marriage was dissolved just three years later, yet the **String Quartet No. 6 Op. 101** – composed in just three weeks in August 1956 – suggests something of the happiness that this new relationship may have afforded him. On the surface, it is an uncomplicated, carefree work. A classically proportioned sonata-form opening is followed by a gently nostalgic waltz. The third movement hints at deeper emotions. Written in B flat minor, it is a solemn passacaglia – a form to which Shostakovich often turned to express his most intimate feelings. Is the finale a restoration of order, or an equivocal attempt to put on a brave face? Although the quartet carries no dedication, Shostakovich joked that he had written it for himself. The first performance on 7 October 1956 took place just two weeks after his 50th birthday, and the final cadence of each movement conceals the DSCH motif.

The dedication of the **String Quartet No. 7 Op. 108** to the memory of Shostakovich's first wife might suggest a work of agonising grief or aching passion, yet at first hearing, it is one of his most nonchalant quartets, and certainly the shortest. Written in the first months of 1960 and premiered in Leningrad on 15 May, it consists of three movements, played without a break. The opening *Allegretto*, originally described as a scherzo, is laconic in the extreme, and Shostakovich employs the sonatina form, in which the development section of the classical sonata form is suppressed, leaving only an exposition and recapitulation. An equally concise middle slow movement – which Shostakovich originally described as a 'pastorale' – is numb and enigmatic. The finale opens with a vigorous fugue, but rather than resolving triumphantly or heroically, it dissolves into a ghostly waltz that reprises themes from the first movement. Officially, this was Shostakovich's first quartet in a minor key – in this case, F sharp minor – and its final resolution into the major is hauntingly ambiguous, like one of the composer's wan, unfathomable half-smiles.

The fugue in the seventh quartet is based Shostakovich's monogram, which is stated explicitly and unforgettably at the

opening of the **String Quartet No. 8 Op. 110**. Although Shostakovich described it to his friend Isaak Glikman as 'this ideologically flawed quartet which is of no use to anybody', it has eclipsed all of his other quartets ever since its première on 2 October 1960. In July 1960, the composer travelled to Dresden to work on the score for a film about the aftermath of the Allied bombing of the city. Whilst staying at a nearby spa resort, he completed the new work in just three days, dedicating it 'to the victims of fascism and war'. At the same time, Shostakovich invested the quartet with abundant autobiographical resonances. To Glikman 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"'. As well as the DSCH 'signature', the quartet is full of quotations from his other works, including the first and fifth symphonies, the second piano trio, the first cello concerto and the then still prohibited *Lady Macbeth*. There are allusions to Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*, and a revolutionary song, 'Tormented by grievous bondage'.

The reason for such introspection is easily found. Earlier that year, Shostakovich had joined the Communist Party. It was a coup for Khrushchev, but Shostakovich was profoundly distressed, and many of his close friends were baffled. Several theories have been advanced to explain his decision, but perhaps the most persuasive is that he was motivated by a genuine desire to serve. By joining the Party, Shostakovich became eligible to become the First Secretary of the Union of Soviet Composers, which he did in 1960. Honours increasingly came from abroad too: in 1958, for instance, he accumulated membership of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome, the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in Paris and the Royal Academy of Music in London, as well as collecting an honorary doctorate from Oxford University and the Sibelius Medal. What is perhaps most moving about the eighth quartet, however, is its affirmation of Shostakovich's creative inspiration. He may have been under immense pressure, yet he found a way to work through his suffering and fashion a score of tremendous structural sophistication. Like the third quartet, the eighth consists of five movements, and it continues Shostakovich's practice of linking each movement into a single coherent whole. At the same time, it distils the epic sweep of the second, third and fifth quartets to achieve a concision that only heightens its emotional impact.

If 1960 had been a trial for Shostakovich, the next years were less tense. On 30 December 1961, his fourth symphony received its long delayed première, reminding audiences of its composer's modernist credentials. Then, on 18 December 1962, he unveiled his Symphony No. 13. Conceived for bass solo, male chorus and orchestra, it set verses by the young and controversial Yevgeny Yevtushenko that broke a number of cultural and ideological taboos, further redeeming Shostakovich in the eyes of those who had felt that his genius had been compromised by conformity and careerism. Finally, on 26 December 1962, the revised version of *Lady Macbeth* opened in Moscow under the new title of *Katerina Izmailova*. The rehabilitation of some of Shostakovich's most cherished scores was a source of great pride, and his marriage that

year to Irina Supinskaya – who was 30 years younger than him – brought lasting personal contentment.

Sunday 23 January 2022 11:30 AM

String Quartet No. 9 in E flat Op. 117

String Quartet No. 10 in A flat Op. 118

Shostakovich had been attempting to compose another quartet for some time, but without success. He confessed to destroying a completed score in 1961, parts of which resurfaced in 2003. Then, in 1964, came not one, but two quartets in immediate succession. The **String Quartet No. 9 Op. 117** was completed on 28 May and is dedicated, appropriately enough, to Irina Shostakovich. The **String Quartet No. 10 Op. 118**, written between 9 and 20 July at a Composers' Union retreat in Armenia (where, incidentally, Britten was to compose his settings of Pushkin – *The Poet's Echo* – the following summer), honours his close friend, the Polish-born composer Mieczysław Weinberg. Both works were heard for the first time in Leningrad on 20 November 1964. Two years earlier, Shostakovich had referred to a quartet in progress, which he described as 'a children's piece, about toys and going out to play.' The composer's official statements should always be treated with circumspection, but there are certainly many flashes of wit in the ninth quartet, and even its bleaker moments have an energy and intensity about them that feel essentially life-affirming. Like the eighth quartet, it consists of five interconnected movements, and the eighth quartet's home key of C minor is replaced with its relative major of E flat. The heroic connotations of this key are most audible in the extraordinary dance-like finale, which concludes with a relentless crescendo lasting some two hundred bars. Shostakovich's previous six quartets had all ended *morendo* ('dying'); this is the first quartet since the second to end with such resolve. In the tenth quartet, Shostakovich returns to the classical four-movement structure that he had last used in the sixth, yet he invests old forms with new textures and sonorities. The predominantly restrained tenor of the first movement gives way to the sudden fury of the second. Then comes one of Shostakovich's beloved passacaglias, although its mood is closer to that of a dignified sarabande than an anguished threnody. There is a meandering, indecisive quality to much of the finale, despite periodic attempts at levity. Again, Shostakovich marks the final bars *morendo*, but this seems not so much a gesture of defeat or despair as the intimate companionability of those who appreciate what is best left unsaid. Some have seen this quartet as formulaic and lacking in vitality, but in truth, it marks the culmination of his mature style – and is a portent of the strangeness of his final quartets.

Sunday 23 January 2022 03:00 PM

String Quartet No. 11 in F minor Op. 122

String Quartet No. 12 in D flat Op. 133

String Quartet No. 13 in B flat minor Op. 138

By the time Shostakovich was diagnosed with a neurological disorder in 1965, he had already suffered a decade of increasing ill health and was spending extended periods in hospital. In 1958, he complained of pains in his right hand, and in May 1966, he suffered his first heart attack (the day after the première of the eleventh quartet, in fact). It is not just a sense of his own mortality that can be felt in the five quartets he wrote between 1966 and 1974. In the summer of 1965, Vasily Shirinsky – the second violinist of the Beethoven Quartet – suddenly died. The **String Quartet No. 11 Op. 122** is dedicated to his memory, just as the three quartets that followed were to be dedicated to the other founding members of the ensemble – Dmitry Tsyganov (first violin), Vadim Borisovsky (viola) and Sergey Shirinsky (cello). The mood of the eleventh quartet is bleak, even inert, and its gestures are stark and concentrated. As with earlier quartets, Shostakovich links its seven individual movements, and some scholars have analysed it as an extended single-movement work in which themes from the first six sections are recapitulated in the finale. The prevailing effect is not, though, one of coherence, but of fragmentation. Indeed, Shostakovich's ironic choice of titles – *Introduction, Scherzo, Recitative, Etude, Humoresque, Elegy, Finale* – undercuts easy eloquence or transcendent consolation. Never has the by now characteristic final indication of *morendo* seemed more appropriate.

Brezhnev – who deposed Khrushchev in October 1964 – is often held to have presided over a culture of dreary stagnation. His era may have lacked the *élan* of the 'Thaw', yet it never returned to the repressive atmosphere of the Stalin years, and artistic experimentation remained possible, albeit within limits. Younger composers began to innovate more openly (as Shostakovich himself had done in the 1920s), not least with Schoenberg's serial technique, in which the 12 notes of the chromatic scale are arranged into rows that can then be manipulated in various ways. Shostakovich was clearly keen to demonstrate that he was not a relic of the past, and his **String Quartet No. 12 Op. 133** – completed in March 1968 and premièred on 14 June – is evidence of his creative engagement with new ideas. The cello's initial statement consists of each note of the scale, yet its final two notes – A flat and D flat – sketch a perfect cadence in the quartet's home key, giving rise to a fruitful equipoise between experimental atonality and traditional harmony. As before, Shostakovich challenges the expectations of classical form, although the quartet's two movements might also suggest a dialogue with Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 32. Equally, the extended second movement – almost symphonic in scope – can also be seen as the expected second, third, and final movements of a conventional quartet. A scherzo and trio,

whose motifs are developed with suitably Beethovenian vigour, segues into a ruminating *Adagio* announced by a threnody on the cello that is answered by a chorale-like theme by the other instruments.

Emerging almost imperceptibly, a short *Allegretto* brings the quartet to a conclusion with a radiance that belies the intensity of what has come before it, and its energetic reassertion of tonality feels as sly as it does satisfying.

Shostakovich first envisioned the **String Quartet No. 13 Op. 138** in 1969, although work on it did not begin until the following summer, between stays at an orthopaedic clinic in the Urals designed to restore movement to his weakened limbs. Its dedication is to the violist Vadim Borisovsky, who had retired from the Beethoven Quartet in 1964 on grounds of ill health (he was replaced by his student, Fyodor Druzhinin). Its sparse sonorities have also been attributed to Shostakovich's growing infirmity, yet its stark compression belies a vital sense of invention. In many ways, the thirteenth quartet pursues the stylistic advances of the twelfth, whether through its intricate use of serial techniques, or through its defiant deformation of conventional musical form. Although Shostakovich had often linked the individual movements that make up his quartets, this was the first – and only – time that he cast a quartet in a single movement. In terms of sonority, it features the viola prominently, often requiring it to play well outside of its normal range, and at one point, three of the players are required to tap the body of their instruments with their bows. Shostakovich described his new work as 'a short lyrical quartet with a joke middle', and some commentators have seen this as one of his characteristic attempts to provide a politically correct interpretation of a troublesome composition. His account is, in fact, entirely apposite. It is indeed one of his most hauntingly lyrical works, reminding us that his previous composition had been his Symphony No. 14 – a setting of 11 poems by Lorca, Apollinaire, Küchelbecker and Rilke for soprano, bass and chamber orchestra. The symphony ends with a short verse by Rilke:

Death is all-powerful.
It keeps watch
Even in the hour of happiness.
At the height of life, it suffers within us,
Awaits us, longing
And crying within us.

Might this be a clue to the enigmatic ending of the thirteenth quartet too? Little wonder that it was encoored at its first performance on 13 December 1970.

Sunday 23 January 2022 07:30 PM

String Quartet No. 14 in F sharp Op. 142

Interval

String Quartet No. 15 in E flat minor Op. 144

Shostakovich's late quartets certainly make for uneasy listening, yet they attest to a fertile sense of creativity, despite his ever worsening health. A second heart attack in September 1971, not long after the completion of the Symphony No. 15, was followed by nearly a year's silence. Then, a visit to Britten's home in Aldeburgh in the summer of 1972 unlocked new – if still hesitant – inspiration. Shostakovich normally wrote with extreme fluency, yet the **String Quartet No. 14 Op. 142** would not be finished until 23 April 1973 (it was premièred on 12 November). Written in three movements, the second and third of which end *morendo*, it is a surprisingly lively and vigorous work. Its home key of F sharp major is warm and often affectionate, and its moments of pathos and introspection – especially in the slow passacaglia that forms its middle movement – are offset by bursts of unfeigned lyricism, leading some commentators to interpret it as a secular response to Beethoven's Quartet No. 15, with its middle movement 'Holy Song of Thanksgiving of a Convalescent to the Deity'.

Such optimism was short-lived. In late 1972, Shostakovich was diagnosed with lung cancer, and an inescapable sense of mortality pervades his **String Quartet No. 15 Op. 144**. Begun in February 1974 and completed – in hospital – some three months later, it is the last and longest of his quartets and consists of six bleak *Adagio* movements in the alien and unsettling key of E flat minor. As in the case of the eleventh quartet, Shostakovich uses titles to give a clue to their mood: *Elegy, Serenade, Intermezzo, Nocturne, Funeral march* and *Epilogue*. As ever, the Beethoven Quartet was due to perform the new work, but on 18 October, the cellist Sergey Shirinsky unexpectedly died. Weak, in pain, and fearful of his own mortality, Shostakovich did not wait for the quartet to re-form, entrusting it instead to the Taneyev Quartet, which gave the première in Leningrad on 15 November 1974. The absence of any dedication has led some to speculate that the composer wrote it as an unofficial requiem for himself. There is a certain logic to this suggestion, as Shostakovich had taken the piano part alongside the players of the Beethoven Quartet in the première of his piano quintet back in 1940. Barely able to write, let alone play the piano, Shostakovich used the quartet form to mark his own withdrawal from the world. As is so often the case, the fifteenth quartet ends *morendo*, yet it was not quite his last word. Before his death on 9 August 1975, he completed the stark and powerful *Suite on Verses of Michelangelo Buonarroti* for bass and piano, four acerbic settings of verses from Dostoevsky's novel, *The Devils*, and his haunting, sparse, ethereal, quotation-laden Sonata for viola and piano. Shostakovich may have faced his impending death with a sense of inevitability, if not quite equanimity, yet he resisted it in his creativity until the very last.

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