

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 24 February 2025  
7.30pm

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## Jerusalem Quartet

Alexander Pavlovsky violin

Sergei Bresler violin

Ori Kam viola

Kyril Zlotnikov cello

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

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

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

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

*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Andante • III. Moderato*

*Interval*

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

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



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A major government crackdown in Soviet music began in 1948 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 Weinberg.

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 emotive 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; Shostakovich had rekindled his love for Bartók during a recent trip to the US. 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. In this dynamic finale, a tragic dancing motif is ruptured 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.

Shostakovich's Fifth Quartet marks a turning point in the cycle as he focused on more personal expression, most obviously 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 Ustvol'skaya, a pupil who he held intense romantic feelings for. Even 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 Ustvol'skaya quote, an intense dance begins. The two themes appear in multiple combinations, sometimes in dance-like textures, and then in aggressive, biting opposition. 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, as if in suspended animation. 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 dark.

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.

Shostakovich's Sixth Quartet is often viewed as the riddle of his quartet cycle. It is by far the most 'cheerful', with serenade-like melodies that make it hard to place. There are, however, notes of uneasiness that show we are still within Shostakovich's familiarly-tense world. He wrote the work in 1956 during his honeymoon after his second marriage, to the unassuming party activist Margarita Kainova. That Shostakovich should have spent his honeymoon composing (rather than more traditional honeymoon activities) indicates something of the relationship: they quietly divorced in 1959.

The work begins with a playfully deceptive first movement, though it is still considerably darkened as it goes on. At the end of the movement, we are introduced to perhaps the strangest feature of the Sixth Quartet – that every movement ends with the same ethereal cadence, often seeming out-of-context and unexplained. The second movement takes the form of a (by now familiar) 'Shostakovich-style' waltz, formed of a double-scherzo. In contrast to previous waltzes, this movement features long passages of exact repetition, something that Shostakovich generally avoided doing in his music. It also continues the opposition first heard in the first movement between the keys of D and E flat (which can generously be read as Shostakovich's initials rendered in notes: in German notation, D and S, respectively). The third movement presents the only sustained representation of tragedy, with a slow passacaglia that sees the instruments join a slow procession, again concluding with the repeated ghostly cadence. The finale returns to the light-hearted character of the first movement, though now with more extended passages of darkened tone; by the ending, and the final iteration of the cadence, there are few answers to the disquieting questions raised throughout the piece. Scholars have suggested that the Sixth Quartet may be more of a commentary on 'cheerfulness' as a concept, rather than being actually cheery: whatever it is, it is certainly one of the most enigmatic of Shostakovich's quartets.

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