

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 27 February 2023
1.00pm

Vision String Quartet

Florian Willeitner violin
Daniel Stoll violin
Sander Stuart viola
Leonard Disselhorst cello

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 8 in C minor Op. 110 (1960)
*I. Largo • II. Allegro molto • III. Allegretto •
IV. Largo • V. Largo*

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*

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Shostakovich's Eighth String Quartet Op. 110 was the product of sorrow. While it was officially, and no doubt sincerely, dedicated 'to the victims of fascism and war', quotations from the composer's other works point to more personal concerns. The piece dates from 1960, when Shostakovich, suffering from a form of polio, was beginning his long and gruelling battle with ill health. But it was also a year in which he had been put under immense pressure to join the Party, after Nikita Khrushchev made Shostakovich head of the newly formed Union of Composers of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

While the appointment was an honour, the composer's membership was anything but, prompting a great deal of shame, even thoughts of suicide. In the event of such a tragedy, the Eighth Quartet was to provide Shostakovich's musical epitaph. 'I reflected that when I die it's not likely anyone will write a quartet dedicated to my memory', he told the musicologist Lev Lebedinsky. 'So I decided to write it myself. You could even mark on the cover: "Dedicated to the memory of the composer of this quartet".'

Sombre in tone, it was, therefore, conceived to be a summatory composition, as Shostakovich went on to explain:

When I wrote the Eighth Quartet, it was also assigned to the department of 'exposing fascism'. You must be blind to do that, because everything in the Quartet is as clear as a primer. I quote *Lady Macbeth*, the First and Fifth Symphonies. What does fascism have to do with these? The Eighth is an autobiographical quartet, it quotes a song known to all Russians: 'Tormented by Grievous Bondage'.

There are other clues too, not least the prominent 'DSch' (D–E flat–C–B natural) motif of Shostakovich's name, and the score's allusions to Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* and Tchaikovsky's 'Pathétique' Symphony. Significant too is the key of C minor, freighted with Beethovenian associations – it was, after all, the Beethoven Quartet, Shostakovich's regular collaborators, who gave the work's première.

Yet for all the suggestions of a wider context, the Quartet is often introspective, with the composer's cipher threading its way through the slow fugato with which it begins. Consolation may emerge in the ensuing violin duet, underpinned by the cello at the bottom of its range, but it is only the barest suggestion. And it will be refuted entirely by the brutal *Allegro molto*, with its obsessive, self-destructive iterations of that initial motif.

Continuing *attaca*, the waltzing *Allegretto* also features the composer's initials, as the violence of the second movement gives way to a more caustic brand of irony, including the allusion to Lenin's favourite revolutionary anthem, 'Tormented by Grievous Bondage'. While this may have appeased the Party at the time, a more personal, satirical interpretation of its inclusion is surely evident today, as is its juxtaposition

with one of Katerina's arias from *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, in which she describes longing for her lover.

The fourth movement is most closely aligned with the work's official dedication, as an eerie drone evokes the sound of bombers overheard. There is also stuttering anti-aircraft fire, described in repeated, jolting chords. This doubtless reflected Shostakovich's time in Dresden, the location of the work's composition, over three days in July 1960, where he was working on the soundtrack for *Five Days, Five Nights*, a collaboration between Soviet and East German filmmakers about the Allied bombing of the city. The visit left him in no doubt as to the worst effects of war. In response, and mirroring the opening movement, the finale offers an intense threnody. But while it certainly relates to world events, it is also thoroughly imbued with more personal concerns – the joint catalysts of Shostakovich's creativity.

Mendelssohn's Second String Quartet Op. 13 was written in October 1827, when the prodigious composer was just 18 years old. Numbered second, it was, in fact, the composer's first mature contribution to the genre, preceding 'No. 1' in E flat Op. 12 by two years. Similarly misleading is the idea that it is 'in' A minor, at least at first, with the beginning of the work reversing those expected tonal relationships: the introductory *Adagio* is in A major.

Mendelssohn explained on his autograph manuscript that this was a Quartet 'sopra il tema' and provided an incipit from 'Frage', the first song from his *12 Lieder* Op. 9, penned earlier in 1827. The text, concerning fidelity and likewise written by the composer, asks 'Ist es wahr?' ('Is it true?'). Framing the song, this questioning motif similarly bookends the Quartet, with dotted gestures spurring the trill that will lead into the hectic energy of the first movement proper, dominated by those inquisitive rhythms.

The ensuing *Adagio* begins in the same mood as at the start of the work, though again belies the argument at the movement's core, here told in fugal form. Only during the *Intermezzo* does the sense of tenacity relent, with Mendelssohn contrasting a lilting theme with the kind of scurrying music more readily associated with his score for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The turbulent drama then returns in the finale, announced by a cadenza-like passage for the first violinist. This is followed by an even more charged rondo, with Mendelssohn drawing his model from Beethoven's String Quartet No. 15 in A minor Op. 132 – the Bonn-born composer had only recently died. Occasionally, and as if marking the great man's death, Mendelssohn provides some more reflective passages, though these also help prepare for the conclusion, with the searching motifs of 'Frage' bringing us full circle.

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