

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 29 April 2024
7.30pm

Quatuor Danel

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

Mieczysław Weinberg (1919-1996)

String Quartet No. 5 Op. 27 (1945)

*I. Melodia. Andante sostenuto • II. Humoreska.
Andantino • III. Scherzo. Allegro molto •
IV. Improvisation. Lento • V. Serenata. Moderato
con moto*

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

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

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

Interval

Mieczysław Weinberg

String Quartet No. 6 Op. 35 (1946)

*I. Allegro semplice • II. Presto agitato •
III. Allegro con fuoco • IV. Adagio •
V. Moderato commodo • VII. Andante maestoso*

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Weinberg's Fifth String Quartet was completed almost straight after its predecessor; where the Fourth had shown influence of Bartók, the Fifth moves into more neo-classical territory with extended soloistic lines. For the first time in his cycle, melodic invention takes the focus, including extended melodic lines that far outstrip the confines of established classical forms.

The work takes five movements, confirming a pattern across quartets 3-6 where they increase in number of movements according to quartet number. The opening starts with an extended violin melody that moves between major and minor, setting the ruminative tone for the rest of the movement. The second movement, titled 'humoresque', has a sprightly dance-like character, with the lower voices providing oom-pah accompaniment as the first violin gives a scotch-snap-inflected melody above. The central *Scherzo* is the high-octane highlight of the work, presenting a hectic parade through three different themes in a Bartók-influenced arch structure, made all the more frantic by the fast tempo and the G-flat tonality (a challenge for string players). The *Improvisation* fourth movement is the emotional heart, with a searching line in the first violin. The final movement, *Serenata*, sees the cello initially taking a soloist role, only for this position to be shared across the ensemble as the movement progresses. The Fifth Quartet was dedicated to the Beethoven Quartet, who premièred several of Weinberg's quartets and who enjoyed a special relationship with Shostakovich in particular. Weinberg thought highly enough of the Fifth Quartet to rework it in his Third Chamber Symphony in 1991, recasting the material for string orchestra.

Shostakovich's Sixth Quartet is often held as the enigma of his quartet cycle. It is easily the most 'light-hearted', 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 deceptive first movement with Haydn-like innocence, 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 ghostly 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 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 unsettling 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 works in Shostakovich's cycle.

Weinberg finished his mini-cycle of increasingly-ambitious quartets with his Sixth, written in July-August of 1946. It represents a culmination of all that Weinberg had achieved in the genre thus far, and it lays reasonable claim to being his finest quartet of all (though other candidates later in the cycle clamour for the same honour). All of his previous work in balancing forms, textural variations and his overall command of the medium was condensed into this six-movement work, lasting over half an hour in performance.

The work opens with a subdued sonata form, with a complex interplay between the contrasting themes. There soon develops a sense that Weinberg has returned to his previous interest in structural clarity, but now combined with the melodic invention that he had honed in the Fifth Quartet. The second movement shifts to the almost opposite end of the expressive structure, with a rapid Bartók-like *Presto agitato*. The third movement is a short bridging passage with cadenza-like material for the first violin that will resurface later. The fourth movement takes an expanded fugato texture, as the voices take turns entering with the uneven melody heard from the outset. Intriguingly, it concludes with the first violin's cadenza-like material from the previous movement, becoming a persistent ending. The fifth movement is a subdued rondo, with playful invention around the opening motif that alternates between major and minor tonalities. The ambitious finale provides a neat summary of the whole work, as well as incorporating several elements that pervade Weinberg's quartets from the Third onwards. The third movement cadenza material reappears in the coda, now played by the cello: the cyclic repetition gives a sense of coming to the end of a weary journey.

The power of Weinberg's Sixth Quartet was partly recognised by the Soviet authorities: it was named as one of the works banned from performance in the next state crackdown on the arts in 1948. It was not performed during Weinberg's lifetime, and Weinberg would not return to the genre for eleven years. The Quatuor Danel gave the world première of this extraordinary piece in 2007.

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