

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 3 January 2023
7.30pm

Elias String Quartet

Sara Bitlloch violin

Donald Grant violin

Simone van der Giessen viola

Marie Bitlloch cello

Steven Osborne piano

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

3 Pieces for string quartet (1914)

I. • II. • III.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 10 in E flat Op. 74 'Harp' (1809)

I. Poco adagio - Allegro • II. Adagio ma non troppo •

III. Presto - Più presto quasi prestissimo •

IV. Allegretto con variazioni

Interval

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Piano Quintet in G minor Op. 57 (1940)

I. Prelude. Lento • II. Fugue. Adagio •

III. Scherzo. Allegretto • IV. Intermezzo. Lento •

V. Finale. Allegretto



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Three short movements. Four string instruments. But decidedly not a quartet in any conventional sense. **Stravinsky** composed his *3 Pieces* for string quartet in the summer of 1914 in the alpine resort of Salvan in Switzerland. Behind him lay his three great scores for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes – *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*. Now, in the *3 Pieces*, he pioneered a more concise, enigmatic style that would give rise to his neo-classical works of the interwar period. The pieces are dedicated to Stravinsky's friend, the conductor Ernest Ansermet, who, in 1915, described them as 'absolute music in the true sense of the word... music innocent of any and all suspicion of a literary or philosophical program.' There are no titles, only stark numbers: *I, II, III*. The score bristles with intricate performance directions and indications of tempo, yet not a single suggestion of mood or emotion.

The pieces embody the kind of modernism praised by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset in his 1925 essay, *The Dehumanization of Art*. Experimental, strange, even rebarbative, such art rejected the expressive appeal of the Romantic age and embraced the abstract, mechanical world of the machine. Yet the *3 Pieces* may be more human than at first appears to be the case. According to Ansermet, the first represents 'a group of peasants singing and dancing against the monotonous setting of the steppes'. Visiting London in the summer of 1914, Stravinsky had seen a circus performer, Little Tich, and the second movement depicts him as 'an unhappy juggler, who must hide his grief while he performs his feats before the crowd.' The third movement foreshadows the hieratic beauty of Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, written in memory of Debussy. When he orchestrated the pieces in 1928, Stravinsky gave them the following titles: *Danse*, *Excentrique* and *Cantique*.

Stravinsky infamously claimed that 'music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all.' If he found the legacy of Romanticism too much to bear, he would surely still have appreciated the inventive instrumental imagination that characterises **Beethoven's** String Quartet No. 10 in E flat Op. 74. Nicknamed the 'Harp' on account of its use of pizzicato (plucked strings) in its first movement, it is full of clever sonorities and structural devices. In the finale, for instance, a series of variations explores various iterations of instrumental combinations in sequence, before the players come together in the coda. It is as if some underlying principle is governing the iteration of the instrumental voices here.

But there is, of course, more to Beethoven than form and abstraction. Written in 1809, the 'Harp' Quartet is one of the works that emerged from his so-called 'middle period.' This is often traced back to the Symphony No. 3 in 1803, and it is notable that the symphony shares its home key of E flat major with the 'Harp' Quartet. Although Beethoven would later

remove the symphony's dedication to Napoleon, he could not suppress its heroism and drama – qualities that can be discerned in the quartet too. These qualities are equally on display in the Piano Concerto No. 5, written in 1809 and also in E flat major, and even subtitled 'The Emperor' (although that nickname does not actually belong to Beethoven). The heroism of the quartet is allied, though, with moments of intimacy and even introspection. It opens with an extended and reflective *adagio* that gives little sense of the drama to come, and the second movement – marked *cantabile* – combines sweetness and pathos. After the bustling rhetoric of the scherzo and the rush of the finale's lively coda, the quartet's closing gesture is as disarmingly winsome as it is unexpectedly laconic.

The figure of Beethoven looms over **Shostakovich's** Piano Quintet, as it does over so much Soviet music of the 1930s. The centenary of Beethoven's death in 1927 had been widely celebrated in the Soviet Union, and critics routinely emphasised both his revolutionary credentials, and what they described as the optimistic humanism of his music. With the declaration of Socialist Realism as official artistic policy from 1932 onwards, composers looked back ever more self-consciously to the past, and 'learn from the classics' became a widespread slogan. Shostakovich had begun to explore chamber music in earnest in 1934, when he wrote his Cello Sonata. This was followed by his String Quartet No. 1 in 1938, premièred in Leningrad by the Glazunov Quartet that October. A month later, it received its Moscow première by the Beethoven Quartet, whose members soon clamoured for a second quartet.

Shostakovich would, in fact, go on to write a further 14 quartets, all but one of which would be entrusted to the Beethoven Quartet. But first, he wrote a work that he could play with his friends: the Piano Quintet, which they premièred in Moscow in November 1940. It made an immediate impression on audiences – and won official approval in the form of a Stalin Prize, awarded the following year. If Beethoven (who never actually wrote a piano quintet) was one source of inspiration, then another was surely Bach, whose influence can be heard above all in the opening *Prelude* and the *Fugue* that follows. Another influence was Taneyev, whose monumental piano quintet of 1910-1 was surely in Shostakovich's mind (they are both in the same key of G minor). There is a tendency to try to seek hidden narratives in Shostakovich's music, but what is most compelling about the Piano Quintet is its evident delight in the rigour and abstraction of 'pure' music and the pleasure of making music with trusted friends. As Shostakovich worked on the score, Europe had already been plunged into war. In June 1941, Germany would invade the Soviet Union.

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