

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 3 June 2024
7.30pm

Quatuor Danel

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

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 7 in F sharp minor Op. 108 (1960)
I. Allegretto • II. Lento • III. Allegro - Allegretto

Mieczysław Weinberg (1919-1996)

String Quartet No. 7 Op. 59 (1957)
I. Adagio • II. Allegretto • III. Adagio - Allegro - Adagio

Interval

Mieczysław Weinberg

String Quartet No. 8 Op. 66 (1959)

Dmitry Shostakovich

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



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Shostakovich's Seventh Quartet is his shortest at a sprightly 13 minutes. It was written after his divorce from his second wife, Margarita, but dedicated to the memory of his first, Nina, who died in 1954. That dedication would suggest a mourning tone, but the Quartet instead has a nervous energy, reflected in its astonishingly dense construction and thematic unity.

It opens with a first-violin motif that provides the melodic material for just about every other tune in the piece, along with a short-short-long rhythmic motif that is all-pervasive. The piece is in three movements, but they are played *attacca*, meaning each leads straight into the next. The first movement is an uneven adaptation of the traditional 'sonata' scheme, with key sections seemingly 'missing'. The middle movement is a slow rumination, with quotations from Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* of texts that relate to mourning. The finale is over half the full duration of the work, and it forms a fierce fugue, whereby an expanded version of the opening motif is passed across the instruments. Of the whole cycle, Shostakovich's Seventh Quartet shows some of the greatest accomplishment in terms of melodic unity and invention and it provides a remarkable springboard for the works to follow.

Weinberg's Seventh Quartet marked the end of an intermission from quartet-writing, most likely because the genre was a risky venture when Soviet authorities wanted to scrutinise the ideology of all music. It is dedicated to Yuri Levitin, composer and friend of both Weinberg and Shostakovich. The Seventh Quartet marks a change in tone from Weinberg's previous works, but there is clearly still a strong ambition in compositional aims.

The first movement has a near-fragile mood, with contemplation perhaps reflecting the turbulent years between this work and its predecessor of more than ten years earlier. An opening C major chorale-like melody will be heard several times throughout the work. The second movement features an oom-pah rhythmic accompaniment and a Jewish-inflected melody (though with a recognisable nod to the opening of Shostakovich's Third Quartet), with a secondary theme that is carried over from the first movement. Similar to Shostakovich's Seventh (though predating it by three years), it is the finale of Weinberg's that carries the most weight. It presents a theme and variations in an ambitious 'palindromic' structure: after reaching a mid-point, the variations reverse order and retreat back towards the opening theme. As a formal device, it is ambitious and far in advance of anything else in Shostakovich's quartets, though at this time, Weinberg's works were moving closer to his friend's in terms of style and influence.

Weinberg's Eighth Quartet was written in 1959 and for many years remained one of the very few Weinberg pieces performed and recorded outside the Soviet Union. Contemporary reviewers found it to be 'simple and whimsical at the same time', and this combination made it easily accessible for audiences who were otherwise unfamiliar with Weinberg's music.

For the first time in his quartet cycle, it takes a single movement with three sections. The opening sees a C major almost 'simplistic' tune, though with klezmer-tinged directions (one of the melodies here would be reused in the opera *The Idiot*, where it represents nostalgia and desire). The central section revives the oom-pah accompaniment heard in Weinberg's Seventh Quartet, now with the violins 'answering' the viola line. This quickly gives way into a fierce central whirling section, with alternating pizzicato chords across the parts that indicate clear influence from Bartók. After reaching a rushed climax, we return to the calm opening chorale, though marked by the anguish encountered since its first hearing. The ending itself is a series of strummed notes, rather than any nod to the ecstatic klezmer dancing of the central section; instead, we are left with the feeling of words left unsaid and business left unfinished. It was premièred by the Borodin Quartet and became a regular part of its touring schedules for several years.

In July 1960, Shostakovich was in Dresden, commissioned to score a new film that was partly about the Allied bombing of the city. Rather than working on the film score, he plunged into writing a new string quartet at a rapid rate, and the work was finished in just three days. The result is the most widely-performed work of chamber music written since 1950, offering a tantalising web of quotations and the infamous 'DSCH' motif of notes that spell out the composer's initials in German music notation.

The opening movement initially presents a fugue on the 'DSCH' notes, but this quickly gives way to a quotation from Shostakovich's First Symphony. This is followed by a quiet song-like interlude before the DSCH textures intrude again, alternating between the two before we plunge into the high-octane energy of the second movement. A whirling *danse macabre* leads into a quote from Shostakovich's Second Piano Trio (1944), another Jewish-inflected melody that may reflect the ongoing growing Soviet awareness of the Holocaust at the time of its writing. The third movement gives the DSCH notes in an oom-pah setting, interrupted by a quotation from Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto. The emotional fourth movement quotes from a revolutionary song, 'Tormented by Harsh Captivity', shortly followed by a passage from his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* ('Seryozha, my darling!') The finale reprises the opening movement, but now 'fixed' to be an actual fugue. Shostakovich dedicated the quartet 'to the victims of Fascism and War', but wrote to a close friend, 'If some day I die, nobody is likely to write a work in memory of me, so I had better write one myself'. The dense web of quotations is alluringly suggestive of extra-musical meaning, and yet there is no clarification given, one of the reasons why it continues to fascinate.

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