

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 3 June 2025  
7.30pm

This concert is supported by The Marchus Trust

## Jerusalem Quartet

Alexander Pavlovsky violin

Sergei Bresler violin

Ori Kam viola

Kyril Zlotnikov cello

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 13 in B flat minor Op. 138 (1970)

*Adagio – Doppio movimento – Tempo primo*

String Quartet No. 14 in F sharp Op. 142 (1973)

*I. Allegretto • II. Adagio • III. Allegretto*

## Interval

String Quartet No. 15 in E flat minor Op. 144 (1974)

*I. Elegy. Adagio • II. Serenade. Adagio •*

*III. Intermezzo. Adagio • IV. Nocturne. Adagio •*

*V. Funeral march. Adagio molto • VI. Epilogue. Adagio*



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Shostakovich's **Thirteenth Quartet** features a prominent viola part, and is a tribute to Vadim Borisovsky, violist of the Beethoven Quartet (continuing the 'quartet of quartets' dedicated to Beethoven Quartet members). The quartet was written while Shostakovich was in and out of hospitals in 1969-70, seeking treatment for the weakening of his right hand – later identified as a form of motor neurone disease. During this time, he also composed the score for Grigori Kozintsev's film adaptation of *King Lear*, from which he borrowed a mournful 'lamentation' theme that opens and closes the quartet.

The piece begins with an *Adagio* built around a 12-note motif – a cryptic musical play on the letters of Borisovsky's name – leading directly into the 'lamentation'. The middle section of the quartet is striking for its stark contrasts and extreme dynamics, some of the most dramatic in Shostakovich's entire quartet cycle. There are moments of pointillistic writing, marked by jagged, spiky rhythms and his trademark anapaest motif (short-short-long).

The heart of the movement opens with a dancing viola line, underscored by a haunting percussive effect – tapping the instrument's body with the end of the bow. As the dance evolves into a jazz-like walking bass line, the mood darkens and intensifies, culminating in raw, aggressive energy. Eugene Drucker of the Emerson Quartet described this section as 'a jam session from hell'.

The piece ends with a return to the opening *Adagio* and lamentation, now shaded with deeper darkness – perhaps in response to the earlier violence. The viola takes on an even more commanding role, almost as if cast as a concerto soloist. In a final, extraordinary gesture, the viola ascends to a high B flat at the edge of its range, joined by both violins at a ferocious *ffff* dynamic – only to be cut off in an abrupt silence. A remarkable rehearsal diary survives from this quartet's preparation, attended by Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears in Moscow; Pears dubbed it a work of 'great intensity and touching beauty [...] we were deeply moved'.

Shostakovich began composing his **Fourteenth Quartet** during a visit to Britten's home in Aldeburgh in 1972. Remarkably rich in musical quotations – second only to the Eighth Quartet – it draws on a range of sources, including Shostakovich's own earlier works and Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Uncharacteristically for his late style, the quartet carries a notably lighter tone, with little of the bleakness found in the surrounding works and only one use of a 12-note row. Some critics have even called it the most 'accessible' of all his quartets.

The first movement marks a surprising return to Shostakovich's earlier musical language, even down to what might be interpreted as a 'failed' sonata form – a structural ambiguity reminiscent of Mahler's Fourth Symphony. Compared to the more abrasive 12-note language of his recent quartets, the movement's relative ease is unexpected. The second movement begins as a slow passacaglia but soon evolves into something different, incorporating a reprise of material from the first movement. Its centrepiece is a lyrical duet between cello and first violin, which includes a quotation from Gaetano

Braga's *Angel Serenade*. The accompaniment figure from this section seamlessly transitions into the main theme of the final movement.

The closing movement takes the form of a modified sonata-rondo, featuring motifs from *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* – specifically the 'Seryozha' theme, in honour of the quartet's dedicatee, cellist Sergei Shirinsky. The opening motif even spells out Shirinsky's name in musical notation. Throughout the finale, there are echoes of earlier quartets, particularly the Twelfth and Thirteenth. The quartet concludes with a quiet *morendo*, led by the cello.

With the Fourteenth Quartet, Shostakovich completed the cycle of quartets dedicated to members of the Beethoven Quartet. By this time, only two original members remained – Shirinsky and violinist Dmitri Tsiganov – a fact reflected in the extended passages written exclusively for cello and first violin. Shostakovich's musical meditations on loss and remembrance were deepening, soon to reach their culmination in the stark finality of his Fifteenth Quartet.

Shostakovich's **Fifteenth Quartet** is a remarkable piece, even just considering its overall form: six slow movements, all in E flat minor. As an essay on mortality and existence itself, it is near relentless in its intensity.

Shostakovich told the Beethoven Quartet to play the first movement, *Elegy*, 'so that flies drop in mid-air, and the audience start leaving the hall from sheer boredom'. The movement begins with a slow, fugato-like texture, with an air of oppressive stillness, lacking any real sense of forward momentum. That mood is abruptly disrupted by the ironically titled second movement, *Serenade*, which erupts with scream-like gestures that quickly give way to jarring tone clusters swelling in volume. After 12 of these 'screams', the music slips into a grotesque waltz. This segues into the third movement, *Intermezzo* – again, ironically named. A low pedal tone underpins a virtuosic violin solo that weaves in quotations from both Bach and Shostakovich's opera *The Nose*.

The fourth movement, *Nocturne*, is built on a heavily drawn-out dotted rhythm, a recurring motif throughout the quartet cycle. The fifth movement, *Funeral March*, is the slowest of all. Here, the viola carries the emotional weight of the piece. There's little in the way of climax or build-up; instead, the energy gradually dissipates, leading gently into the final movement. The *Epilogue* draws primarily from the last eight bars of the first movement, now reimagined within the funeral march context and interlaced with themes from earlier movements. The work ends in a haunting fade, with a final, solitary viola solo.

Shostakovich's Fifteenth Quartet stands as one of the most harrowing yet profound statements in the string quartet repertoire. Fyodor Druzhinin, violist of the Beethoven Quartet, remarked that it had a 'shattering effect on all who heard it' – a sentiment that still resonates today.

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