

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 5 November 2023  
7.30pm

## Silesian String Quartet

Szymon Krzeszowiec violin

Arkadiusz Kubica violin

Łukasz Syrnicki viola

Piotr Janosik cello

Piotr Sałajczyk piano

Aleksander Lason (b.1951)

String Quartet No. 4 'Tarnogórski' (2000)

*I. Misterioso • II. Deciso e energico*

Władysław Żeleński (1837-1921)

Piano Quartet Op. 61 (c.1907)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Romanza. Andante sostenuto •  
III. Intermezzo. Allegretto • IV. Finale. Allegro  
appassionato*

*Interval*

Mieczysław Weinberg (1919-1996)

Piano Quintet Op. 18 (1944)

*I. Moderato con moto • II. Allegretto •  
III. Presto • IV. Largo • V. Allegro agitato*

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This evening's concert begins with a work by a composer who hails from the same part of southern Poland as most of the performers and whose music the Silesian String Quartet has worked tirelessly to promote. **Aleksander Lasoń** was born near Katowice, the Silesian regional capital, and studied at the city's Academy of Music. In his youth he revealed a talent for piano improvisation, but by his early 20s was devoting himself more to conducting and composition, and in the decades since then has notched up an impressive catalogue of orchestral and chamber works, including (to date) eight string quartets.

Lasoń was commissioned to write his String Quartet No. 4 by the Tarnowskie Góry Association, a society set up to preserve the heritage of this historic city in the Silesian Highlands to the north-west of Katowice. The work was composed in 2000 and first performed towards the end of that year by the Silesian String Quartet.

Echoes of Polish folk music can be heard in the String Quartet No. 4, especially in the many passages characterised by a spontaneous, passionate manner of expression that evokes the sound of folk fiddling. The quartet consists of two movements that are roughly equal in length. The atmosphere of the first is reminiscent of Bartók's 'night music' pieces: the regular use of glissandos and the elaborate ornamentation of the melodic line give the music a rapt, improvisatory quality that conveys the impression of time standing still. The second movement provides a marked contrast: its outer sections are rhythmically emphatic and feature much frenzied repetition of a single note, though a more reflective mood prevails in the calmer central section.

Like Lasoń, **Władysław Żeleński** was born in southern Poland – in his case in the region now known as Lesser Poland, which lies to the east of Silesia and whose capital is Kraków. At the time of the composer's birth, this was part of the Austrian province of Galicia – perhaps the poorest and least developed outpost of the Austrian Empire – and his childhood was marked by the 1846 Galician peasants' revolt known as the *rabacja*: his father, a landowner, was one of the many members of the local Polish nobility and gentry who were killed during this violent uprising against serfdom. Music appears to have offered the young Żeleński a refuge from the turbulence of his surroundings, and he wrote several pieces of chamber music while still at school. He continued his musical studies in Prague and Paris, returning to his homeland in 1870 to take up teaching posts first in Warsaw and then in Kraków.

Żeleński's Piano Quartet is a late work, written when the composer was around 70, and reinforces his reputation as one of the main representatives of neo-Romanticism in Polish music. The composers he admired the most from the 1880s onwards were Brahms, Dvořák and Tchaikovsky, and the influence of the last two can be felt in the Slavic melancholy that

pervades the Piano Quartet. Żeleński's use of the sharpened fourth degree of the scale, in both the opening theme of the first movement and the *Intermezzo*, gives a specifically Polish colouring to the music.

The darkly brooding first movement is followed by a *Romanza* that is effectively a song without words. The *Intermezzo* is a somewhat quirky take on the mazurka – a typically Polish dance, which Żeleński imbues with a delightfully whimsical character. The *Finale* returns to the emotional intensity of the first movement, adding to it a driven quality that gives the music even more of an edge.

**Mieczysław Weinberg** was born into a Jewish family that had ended up in Warsaw after fleeing anti-semitic pogroms in Tsarist Russia in the early years of the 20th Century. The young Weinberg's earliest musical experiences were gained in various Yiddish theatres in Warsaw, in which his father worked as a violinist and conductor. At the age of 12 he entered the Warsaw Conservatoire, and spent most of his teens preparing for a career as a virtuoso pianist.

Weinberg's promising career was cut short by the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. He fled to the Soviet Union, leaving behind his parents and younger sister, all of whom later died in the Holocaust. For a while he settled in Tashkent, until Dmitry Shostakovich – who had become acquainted with some of Weinberg's earlier pieces and recognised his talent – arranged for him to receive an official invitation to move to Moscow. Weinberg arrived in the Soviet capital in 1943 and remained there for the rest of his life.

The Piano Quintet was written the year after the composer made Moscow his home and is one of the first works in which he found his own individual voice. There can be no doubt that it owes its predominantly anguished tone to the terrible losses Weinberg had sustained between his flight from Warsaw and his arrival in Moscow – not least the loss of his entire family. Ghosts of the past seem to flit across its pages, notably in the central *Presto*, where the strains of a bitterly sardonic waltz and a drunkenly lurching tango conjure up the Yiddish theatre world of the composer's youth. (During the interwar period, the Jewish theatres of Warsaw gave birth to a fascinating sub-genre: the klezmer-tinged Yiddish tango.) It's tempting to speculate that with the *Largo* fourth movement – a searing lament – Weinberg was saying a final farewell to his loved ones, of whom he had heard nothing since his escape from Poland. After this heart-rending movement, the eruption of an Irish jig melody into the finale seems almost grotesque. But before long, the ebullient jig theme has run its course and the work ends with a thoroughly sinister-sounding coda.

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