

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Emerson String Quartet: Shostakovich Cycle – Part 5

Wednesday 9 November 2022, 7.30pm
Queen Elizabeth Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2022/23. This new edition, the first under my curatorship since arriving as Head of Classical Music, celebrates classical music in all its forms with artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

Having spent the majority of my life immersed in classical music, it is a tremendous honour to be leading the programme at the Southbank Centre, and flying the flag for this incredible art form.

We look forward to welcoming you to our spaces.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Dmitri Shostakovich

String Quartet No.13 in B flat minor, Op.138	20'
String Quartet No.14 in F sharp, Op.142	27'

Interval

Dmitri Shostakovich

String Quartet No.15 in E flat minor, Op.144	40'
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Performers

Emerson String Quartet:

Eugene Drucker *violin*
Philip Setzer *violin*
Lawrence Dutton *viola*
Paul Watkins *cello*

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–75)

String Quartet No.13 in B flat minor, Op.138

1 *Adagio – Doppio movimento – Tempo primo*

Shortly after the premiere of his String Quartet No.11 in 1966, Dmitri Shostakovich had been hospitalised following a heart attack. Chronic poliomyelitis was increasingly disabling his right hand, resulting in several months in a specialist orthopedic clinic in Kurgan, east of the Urals, in 1970. The following year, he suffered a second heart attack, and in 1972 he returned to hospital to undergo radiation therapy for renal colic and lung cancer.

Shostakovich's unrelentingly poor health in the final years of his life impacted all of his activities, not least his composing. By the time he came to write his String Quartet No.13 in 1970, the terror that Shostakovich had experienced earlier in his

career of persecution by the Soviet state had arguably been replaced by a far more primal fear: of death itself. And it was the composer's inevitable and, it seemed, fast-approaching demise, though viewed from quite different perspectives, that provided the stimulus for the composer's dark final trilogy of string quartets.

Like its two predecessors, No.13 is dedicated to one of the original members of the Beethoven Quartet, which premiered all but two of Shostakovich's quartets – in this case, viola player Vadim Borisovsky. A solemn viola theme accordingly launches the single-movement work, whose intense, slow-moving opening section draws on the lamenting score that Shostakovich had written for Grigori Kozintsev's 1971 film *King Lear*. With its perky violin theme, the Quartet's central section is brisker and brighter, and at first seems more positive, with a jazzy walking bassline from the cello, but soon transforms itself into a relentlessly dissonant 'dance of death', even incorporating physical violence as the composer instructs his players to strike their instrument bodies with their bows. When its opening music returns to close the Quartet, it is grotesquely transfigured, abandoning any calm acceptance it earlier conveyed.

String Quartet No.14 in F sharp, Op.142

1 *Allegretto*
2 *Adagio –*
3 *Allegretto*

If the String Quartet No.13 represents Shostakovich staring at his own mortality with fear and fury, in No.14 he seems to step back from the brink, gazing backwards with a certain degree of affection to his earlier life and his previous musical styles, even to specific works.

He began No.14 while visiting the home of fellow composer Benjamin Britten in Aldeburgh in the summer of 1972,

and completed it the following year in Copenhagen, where he received the Léonie Sonning Music Prize. It's the last of his four quartets to be dedicated to members of the Beethoven Quartet: this time the dedicatee is cellist Sergei Shirinsky, and each of its three movements features the cello prominently. A cheerful, almost child-like theme low in the cello's range opens the Quartet's first movement, though the melody becomes increasingly agitated and fragmented when it's taken up by the rest of the players. After establishing the second movement's sombre, winding theme, the first violin later hands it to the cello, and the movement runs without pause into Shostakovich's finale. Here, Shostakovich weaves musical references to the Quartet's dedicatee Shirinsky into the musical fabric, first translating Shirinsky's name into musical notes, and later adding a quotation from his much-criticised opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, in the form of the aria 'Seryozha, khoroshiy moy' (Seryozha, my darling), Seryozha being an affectionate diminutive of Sergei. Though the cello here seems to want to take refuge in the relative comfort of the first movement's music, it's answered by some of the Quartet's most strident dissonances. The piece ends, however, in a mood of unexpected simplicity and radiance.

String Quartet No.15 in E flat minor, Op.144

- 1 *Elegy: Adagio* –
- 2 *Serenade: Adagio* –
- 3 *Intermezzo: Adagio* –
- 4 *Nocturne: Adagio* –
- 5 *Funeral March: Adagio molto* –
- 6 *Epilogue: Adagio*

No.15 is the longest and arguably the most personal of all Shostakovich's string quartets, and indeed one of the most moving, if not harrowing works in all string quartet literature. There's an unavoidable sense that the composer knew full well it would be his last quartet: a sense of finality is written deeply into its very music. Its six slow movements run together without a pause, each of them in the same remote and difficult key of E flat minor. This unbroken chain of laments poses substantial challenges for listeners and performers alike – which was surely Shostakovich's intention.

He began the piece in February 1974, completing it on 17 May that year while again hospitalised in Moscow. Its premiere – on 15 November 1974 at the Leningrad Composers' Club – was

planned for the Beethoven Quartet, but the sudden death of cellist Sergei Shirinsky (dedicatee of the Quartet No.14) prevented Shostakovich's closest musical colleagues from unveiling it, and it was premiered instead by the Taneyev Quartet. The Beethoven players gave the work its Moscow premiere the following January, and in August 1975, after several more periods in hospital, Shostakovich died.

The Quartet No.15 is the work in which Shostakovich addressed his own mortality most directly, but, unlike the terror and anger he expressed in No.13, it's with a mixture of resignation, restraint, even acceptance. Its sonorous opening *Elegy* is the work's longest movement, and seems intended to project a sense of timelessness, even monotony. The composer's curious instruction for the premiere performance was: 'Play the first movement so that flies drop dead in mid-air and the audience leaves the hall out of sheer boredom.' While we might expect the mood to lighten somewhat in the ensuing *Serenade*, what Shostakovich offers us instead are piercing screams, 12 of them, let out by all four players, and which return to interrupt the movement's ghostly waltz.

The *Intermezzo* offers not a break from the intensity but an impassioned, violent solo violin cadenza. Shostakovich's languorous, heavily perfumed *Nocturne* lives up to its name, and generates martial rhythms that prefigure the *Funeral March* – though, if we were anticipating music of grandeur and closure here, the composer instead provides a series of solos, barren, spare and empty. In his closing *Epilogue*, Shostakovich seems intent on obscuring the fleeting memories of the work's earlier movements with incessant, chilling trills, and his final Quartet stops, rather than concludes, with a bleak viola solo.

Programme note © David Kettle

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