

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Emerson String Quartet: Shostakovich Cycle – Part 4

Tuesday 8 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.10 in A flat, Op.118 25'

String Quartet No.11 in F minor, Op.122 17'

Interval

Dmitri Shostakovich

String Quartet No.12 in D flat, Op.133 27'

Performers

Emerson String Quartet:

Eugene Drucker *violin*

Philip Setzer *violin*

Lawrence Dutton *viola*

Paul Watkins *cello*

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–75)

String Quartet No.10 in A flat, Op.118

1 *Andante*

2 *Allegretto furioso*

3 *Adagio* –

4 *Allegretto*

Dmitri Shostakovich suffered the paradoxical fate of being not only the Soviet Union's most respected and celebrated composer, but also one of its most closely watched, criticised, shamed and threatened figures. Perhaps not surprisingly, his music has likewise endured years of scrutiny, essentially in an attempt to decide whether Shostakovich was genuinely following a socialist ideal that he believed in, or whether he was subverting and deriding Soviet orthodoxy, and conveying

his despair in the process. Inevitably, the truth probably lies somewhere between those two extremes.

His 15 string quartets – written between 1938 and 1974, the year before his death – stand arguably as a kind of private diary, almost an expression of his most intimate thoughts and concerns. Looking more closely, it's even been suggested that his final six quartets, Nos.10 to 15 – of which tonight's concert brings together the first three – form a smaller-scale cycle in themselves: Shostakovich suffered a relentless deterioration in his health during the period of their composition, reflected in music that moves increasingly towards clarity and simplicity, even austerity.

Shostakovich dashed off his String Quartet No.10 in a mere ten days in July 1964 while staying at a Soviet composers' retreat in the Armenian town of Dilizhin, and dedicated it to fellow composer Mieczysław Weinberg, a close friend and colleague. At first glance, it seems like a fairly straightforward work: it's in a conventional four-movement form, and its music feels immediate and appealing. But as so often with Shostakovich, there's a bigger question of what it all means – a question perhaps initially posed by the enigmatic, tumbling 'bugle call' figure that opens the work's first movement. It's followed quickly by winding material based around a memorable short-short-long rhythm, and later by a more soulful cello melody. But this first movement quickly comes to feel more like merely an extended introduction to the fierce, furious music of the frighteningly intense second movement. The third movement – a slow-moving, mournful *passacaglia* built around a repeating melody in the cello – stands as a complete contrast. Shostakovich's long final movement begins in an apparently lighter mood, with a jaunty theme on the viola, before revisiting material from earlier in the Quartet, dying away after a brief memory of the first movement's music – perhaps the human spirit enduring despite violence and oppression, or even a musical depiction of that inescapable oppression itself.

String Quartet No.11 in F minor, Op.122

- 1 *Introduction: Andantino* –
- 2 *Scherzo: Allegretto* –
- 3 *Recitative: Adagio* –
- 4 *Etude: Allegro* –
- 5 *Humoresque: Allegro* –
- 6 *Elegy: Adagio* –
- 7 *Finale: Moderato*

Shostakovich had worked with the Moscow-based Beethoven Quartet since 1938, and had dedicated his Third and Fifth quartets to the ensemble. When its founding second violinist, Vasily Shirinsky, died in 1965, however, the composer felt moved to dedicate his String Quartet No.11 to the memory of Shirinsky individually, going on to dedicate his three subsequent quartets to the remaining original Beethoven Quartet members.

The Quartet No.11 is a work suffused with ideas of illness and death: Shostakovich completed it in January 1966, just months after his own discharge from a neurological unit following a diagnosis of chronic poliomyelitis, and was rushed back to hospital with a serious heart attack following the piece's Leningrad premiere.

The relentless health problems that would plague Shostakovich's final years are no doubt one factor behind the 11th Quartet's pared-back textures and apparent simplicity. It's divided – unusually – into seven brief movements, though they run together in a single continuous span of music. The first violin announces the main theme of the opening Introduction, and also launches the faster, repeated-note melody of the Scherzo. With its screaming, dissonant harmonies, the brief Recitative is one of Shostakovich's most uncompromising quartet creations, while the Etude tests the first violinist's abilities with hectic, scurrying figurations. The second violinist provides an obsessive, two-note accompaniment in the grotesque Humoresque, and the sombre funeral march of the Elegy stands as the emotional heart of the Quartet. In his Finale, Shostakovich returns to music heard earlier in the Quartet, now drained of energy, and closes with the first violin lifting the work's opening theme high into the stratosphere.

String Quartet No.12 in D flat, Op.133

- 1 *Moderato*
- 2 *Allegretto*

Shostakovich dedicated his substantial String Quartet No.12 of 1968 to the Beethoven Quartet's first violinist, Dmitri Tsyganov, and, perhaps in reference to Tsyganov's famously vigorous, muscular playing, created a work that is appropriately ambitious, driven and dramatic.

Its central drama, however, is very much a musical one. It comes from the stark opposition between Schoenberg-style 12-note serialism (whereby every note of the chromatic scale – in other words all the white and black notes on a piano keyboard – is given equal prominence) and more conventional, consonant-sounding major/minor writing. If that sounds worryingly academic, it's summed up neatly in the Quartet's very opening: the cello plays a strange, twisting melodic figure (which returns again and again throughout the piece) that uses all 12 notes of the chromatic scale, only to be followed almost immediately by a longer passage in the more conventional major. Using such modernist ideas might seem shockingly audacious amid the strictures of the Soviet regime, but Shostakovich himself sought to play down the piece's apparent radicalism, saying: 'Everything in good measure. The use of elements from these complex systems is fully justified if it is dictated by the idea of the composition.'

Significantly, however, Shostakovich arguably seems to characterise his dissonant, 12-note music as lyrical, spontaneous and pioneering, while his more conventional tonal music can appear plodding, uninteresting, even banal – as in the rather mundane, scale-like music in the shorter first movement. The Quartet's longer second movement contains some of the composer's most notoriously difficult quartet writing, and moves through several contrasting sections – including a volatile 'scherzo'; and an impassioned slow 'movement' led by a long cello solo – before the Quartet's opening music returns to bring the piece to an apparently resolute conclusion, though you may find yourself wondering which of Shostakovich's two battling musical forces is really the victor.

Programme note © David Kettle

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- ▶ The secret signals in Shostakovich's symphonies
- ▶ southbankcentre.co.uk

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