

Carducci Quartet

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Tonight we are hearing three Shostakovich quartets, anticipating the commemoration of 120 years since his birth on 25 September 1906 in St Petersburg. His quartets fall into three groups: nos 1-6, 7-9 and 10-15, and we are hearing one from each. In contrast to his fifteen symphonies, which were very public and closely monitored by the state, his quartets allowed for more intimate, personal expression, particularly when he writes for a single voice against an often sparse background. The quartets are essentially dramatic. “There’s an opening, the lights come up. Often things start in a Chekhovian way, without too much conflict, with people discussing inanities – innocently unfolding.” (Philip Setzer of the Emerson Quartet). But as with Chekhov, conflict subsequently breaks through: tonight in the second movements of the tenth and eighth quartets. The apparent calm of the openings may return towards the end of the quartets, but enigmatically transformed.

Motifs recur throughout Shostakovich’s quartets often in very different forms. One example is a figure of three repeated notes which tonight we first hear in the opening of the tenth quartet, as the reassuring agreement of three friends (*illustrated*). But in the eighth quartet a similar three-note figure at the opening of the *Largo* fourth movement is terrifying (*illustrated*). Another example is the famous DSCH motif, spelling his name, which recurs frequently, particularly in the 8th quartet (see *below*).

The image displays two musical excerpts. The top excerpt shows the opening of the tenth quartet for Violin II, Viola, and Cello in 2/4 time, key of B-flat major. The Violin II part begins with a half note G4, followed by a half note A4, and then a half note Bb4. The Viola and Cello parts enter with a half note Bb4, followed by a half note A4, and then a half note G4. The bottom excerpt shows the opening of the *Largo* fourth movement of the eighth quartet for Violin II, Viola, and Cello in 3/4 time, key of D major. The Violin II part begins with a half note D5, followed by a half note E5, and then a half note F#5. The Viola and Cello parts enter with a half note D5, followed by a half note E5, and then a half note F#5. The tempo is marked *Largo* and the dynamics are *ff pesante*.

String Quartet No 10 Op 118 in A-flat (1964)

Andante

Allegretto furioso

Adagio

Allegretto

The tenth quartet is dedicated to Mieczysław Weinberg (whose sixth string quartet the Arcadia quartet played here in 2023). Born in Poland to Jewish parents, Weinberg fled to the Soviet Union at the outbreak of the second world war and shortly afterwards met Shostakovich. They became very close friends, sharing compositions and political outlook. Weinberg was very important to Shostakovich and a letter from him to Beria probably saved Weinberg from being executed by the state on trumped-up charges. They had a bet as to who would complete the most quartets; until this tenth quartet they were at nine all, so the dedication to Weinberg has a touch of competitive edge to it.

The quartet is “*at once Shostakovich’s harshest string quartet and his friendliest*” (Wendy Lesser). It has the peaceful Chekov-like opening mentioned above with a solo violin being reassured after a dozen bars by three repeated notes from its friendly fellows. But the first movement introduces an *Allegretto furioso* of unequalled and unrelenting fury – the first half consistently *ff*, the second consistently *fff*. The more autobiographical eighth quartet has a similarly angry second movement but there the fury is relieved by something a little lighter. Perhaps injustice to one’s friends is harder to come to terms with than injustice to oneself.

The image displays the opening of the *Adagio* movement of the eighth quartet for Violin II in 3/4 time, key of D major. The tempo is marked *Adagio* and the dynamics are *ff espress.*. The Violin II part begins with a half note D5, followed by a half note E5, and then a half note F#5. The Viola and Cello parts enter with a half note D5, followed by a half note E5, and then a half note F#5.

There follows a Passacaglia on a 9-bar theme announced *ff* on the cello (*illustrated*). Its eight graceful and calm variations lead directly into the jaunty *rondo* viola theme of the substantial last movement. The movement's uncomplicated nature does not last as a wide range of preceding material is revisited. Finally, the work's opening theme returns in the cello, playing against the *rondo* theme as the music fades away.

String Quartet No 8 Op 110 in C min (1960)

Largo – Allegro molto – Allegretto – Largo – Largo

Shostakovich's C minor eighth quartet is his best known, and most personal. It was composed in just three days in Dresden in 1960, where he was writing the music for a Soviet / East German film "*Five Days and Five Nights*" about the World War II bombing of Dresden. His health was not good – he was suffering from the initial appearance of a rare form of polio, and he had finally yielded to pressure to join the Communist Party, a move which he associated with a moral as well as a physical death. He had recently finished his seventh quartet, dedicated to the memory of his beloved first wife, Nina, and his short-lived second marriage had just broken up. He had hinted at his intention to commit suicide. Although this eighth quartet is nominally dedicated "*to the victims of fascism and war*", his daughter Galina claims that this dedication was imposed by the authorities, indeed Shostakovich wrote:

"I've been thinking that when I die, it's hardly likely that anybody will ever write a work dedicated to my memory. So I have decided to write one myself. The dedication could be printed on the cover: 'Dedicated to the memory of the composer of this quartet'."

He saw this work as his epitaph.

Each movement of the work is dominated by Shostakovich's DSCH motif (*illustrated*). It consists of the notes *D, E flat, C, B natural*, or in German musical notation *D, Es, C, H* thus standing for the composer's initials: D.Sch. He had used variants of this motif widely in his first Cello Concerto



which was finished in October 1959. The quartet also contains copious other quotations, many from Shostakovich's own works (Symphonies 1, 8 & 10, the Piano Trio and *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*), but also a theme from Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony and from a 19th century revolutionary song (*Grievous Bondage*) and formal references to Beethoven's C# minor quartet Op 131. "*Quite something- this little miscellany*".

The five movements are played continuously. The work opens, like Beethoven's C# minor quartet, with a slow fugue, in this case with the cello giving the DSCH motif. The first violin then plays the saddest sinking figure (*illustrated*). This despairing movement leads over a held G# with no warning into the relentlessly vicious second



movement at one of Shostakovich's fastest tempo markings (semibreve = 120 !). The third movement is a sinister, sour waltz which ends with the first violin holding a long A#, which is brutally interrupted by three rapid *fortissimo* hammer blows (*illustrated above*), repeated after a reappearance of the DSCH motif. It is open season on what these three notes signify: bombs falling on Dresden? Siegfried's Funeral Music from *Götterdämmerung*? the warning signal when a KGB informer entered a room? Perhaps all of these. Later in this movement the high cello sings a theme based on Katerina's aria from *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. The movement ends with the DSCH motif on the

first violin, again holding the final note across into the inconsolable sorrow of the last movement.

String Quartet No 2 in A Op 68 (1944)

Overture: Moderato con moto

Recitative and Romance: Adagio

Valse: Allegro

Theme and Variations: Adagio – Moderato con moto – Allegretto – Più mosso – Allegro – Adagio

"I worry about the lightning speed with which I compose... It is exhausting, rather unpleasant, and at the end of the day you lack any confidence in the result." Letter from Shostakovich to Vissarion Shebalin, Director of the Moscow Conservatoire and dedicatee of the second quartet, September 1944.

Shostakovich spent the summer of 1944, well fed after the privations of besieged Leningrad, at Ivanovo, one of the Soviet government's '*Houses of Rest and Creativity*' for artists and composers. A fellow composer tells how Shostakovich would slip away for 40 minutes or so from a football game, or an evening drinking session, for a quick compose. He then disappeared for a week, after which on September 20th he surfaced, unshaven and exhausted with the just-finished score of the second quartet.

The war had brought a paradoxical release to Shostakovich - a flowering of artistic creativity. The hidden, secret sorrow for victims of Stalin's purges gave way to shared, demonstrable, public sorrow for the victims of war. Released emotion bursts out of the second quartet. He had come back into favour after the condemnation of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* in 1937: his Fifth Symphony was well received and his Piano Quintet won the Stalin prize in 1941. By the summer of 1944, the war was at last going well for Russia, and victory seemed to be at hand.

The work opens boldly over open strings with a confident figure of falling fifths (*illustrated*), the start of something grand. A more anguished, dotted second subject follows (*illustrated*) and the initial figure is developed in a minor version, only returning to the major in the last few bars. The movement ends with a reassuringly familiar final cadence.



In the second movement the simplest of sustained chords support an emotionally-charged recitative from a cantor-like first violin. Enclosed within this recitative is a *Romance*, introduced by the tenderest of phrases on the violin which is echoed by the cello and then developed by the violin. Tenderness is overwhelmed, bringing back the intensity of the recitative, but the end is a calmly reassuring cadence.

The third movement is a '*valse macabre*' – a dance of death in Rondo form. An *Adagio* introduces the Russian theme of the last movement's fifteen variations played on the solo viola. Tension gradually builds until an episode reminiscent of the climax of Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture, the return of the *Adagio*, and a hymn-like restatement of the theme.