

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 17 September 2021 7.30pm

Belcea Quartet

Corina Belcea violin

Axel Schacher violin

Krzysztof Chorzelski viola

Antoine Lederlin cello

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

String Quartet No. 23 in F K590 'Prussian' (1790)

I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante • III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Allegro

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

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

I. Allegretto • II. Adagio • III. Allegretto

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

String Quartet in D minor D810 'Death and the Maiden' (1824)

I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto • III. Scherzo. Allegro molto – Trio • IV. Presto – Prestissimo

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The string quartet as perfected by Haydn – and emulated by Mozart – is a musical democracy. But what if one of the four players was literally a King? King Frederick William II of Prussia was a very capable amateur cellist. That was the principal reason why, in April 1789, a cash-strapped **Mozart** travelled to Berlin to pay court to the King, and why, after returning to Vienna that July (possibly even *en route*) he began work on a set of six string quartets intended to be dedicated to the cellist-King.

The task, clearly, was to flatter one specific member of the ensemble, and from the courtly opening *tutti* of the first *Allegro moderato*, to the shapely passagework for the cello in its high tenor register, this is writing designed to satisfy an ambitious performer without ever distorting the musical argument. In the *Andante*, the cello moves between the bass line and elegant embroidery of the melody. The *Menuetto* is a game of light and shade; a contest that's played out, with Haydn-like humour, in a finale where the cello's virtuosity never feels less than natural - because all four players are equally upon their mettle.

Mozart lifts every player to the level of the King – who never, as far as we know, saw or heard this work. 'I have now been obliged to give away my quartets (such a troublesome task) simply in order to have cash in hand', wrote Mozart to his friend Michael Puchberg on 12 June 1790. He didn't live to see the three completed quartets advertised, barely a month after his death, as displaying 'art, beauty and taste which must awaken pleasure and admiration not only in the amateur, but in the true connoisseur also'. That pleasure was left to us.

Shostakovich completed his 14th String Quartet on 23 April 1973, his first completed work in nearly 18 months. When he took it to be tried out by the Beethoven Quartet, he was in good spirits; and since the second violinist was ill, he picked out that part on the piano. 'When the rehearsal was over, Dmitri Dmitriyevich was visibly excited', remembered Fyodor Druzhinin, the viola player:

He got up and addressed us: 'My dear friends, this has been for me one of the happiest moments of my life: first of all, because I think the Quartet has turned out well, Sergei, and secondly I have had the good fortune to play in the Beethoven Quartet - even if I only played with one finger!'

'Sergei' was the Beethoven Quartet's cellist Sergei Shirinsky, and the quartet was the fourth (and last) of the 'quartet of quartets' that Shostakovich had dedicated to the individual members of the group. Naturally, the cello shapes the character of the music. But the quartet's outward liveliness and lyricism, its bright outlandish key, and its

concise three-movement form all suggest Shostakovich's own joy that his creativity was flowing once more.

That's not the whole story of course. The score is threaded with cryptic quotes – a salon piece by the 19th century composer Gaetano Braga (Shostakovich called it 'my Italian bit') and the aria 'Seryozha, my darling' from his ill-fated opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*: a playful greeting to Shirinsky, but also a reminiscence of past sorrows. The happiness in the 14th Quartet is real, but always provisional; prone to disintegration or interruption. And coming after an impassioned, interrupted solo cello meditation, the quartet's final fade to silence is never wholly untroubled – though it's as close to a resolution as anything in Shostakovich's haunted late works.

On 31 March 1824 **Schubert** wrote to his friend Leo Kupelweiser: 'I have composed two quartets...and want to write another *quartetto*, really wanting in this manner to pave the way to a big symphony'. The quartets were those in A minor (D804), and a larger, even more ambitious work in D minor containing a set of variations based on his 1817 song *Der Tod und das Mädchen*. But doubts and depression intervened; the D minor quartet was not played until 1 February 1826, when the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh is reported to have observed, 'My dear fellow, this is really no good at all; leave well alone and stick to your songs'.

To be fair, Schuppanzigh had heard a read-through of a work unlike anything else in Schubert's – or any other composer's – output, grand in scale and forceful in its gestures. The rhythm heard in the first bar recurs to an almost obsessive extent, allowing the music no repose even in the places – such as the second group of the first *Allegro* – where classical form permitted some relaxation. It propels both that movement, and the final *Presto*: a relentless 6/8 *tarantella* that some commentators have chosen to hear as a dance of death. The *Scherzo*, too, has a startling severity. Only in the *Andante con moto* - variations on a theme crafted from elements of *Der Tod und das Mädchen* - is there a real sense of consolation. The quiet theme and five subtly-coloured variations culminate in a radiantly peaceful sixth variation and *coda*.

To hear all this for the first time, with four musicians who'd only heard it for the first time themselves a week previously – well, we don't have to agree with Schuppanzigh's snap judgement, but we can feel for ourselves the force of the creative personality that produced it.

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