Lisa-Marie Mazzucco

Emerson String Quartet

Thursday 8 November 2018 7.30pm,
Milton Court Concert Hall

Britten String Quartet No 3, Op 94
Shostakovich String Quartet No 8 in C minor, Op 110

interval 20 minutes

Beethoven String Quartet No 7 in F major, Op 59 No 1, 'Razumovsky'

Emerson String Quartet
Eugene Drucker violin *(leader: Shostakovich & Beethoven)*
Philip Setzer violin *(leader: Britten)*
Lawrence Dutton viola
Paul Watkins cello

Part of Barbican Presents 2018–19

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Welcome

A warm welcome to this evening's concert given by one of the most revered of all chamber groups: the Emerson String Quartet. It was founded 42 years ago in New York City and has received many accolades and awards since that time. The ensemble is lauded particularly for its precision and unerring blend of sound, qualities that it brings to three contrasting works tonight. We begin with Britten and his last major completed work, the Third String Quartet, written just a year before he died. It draws on themes found in his final opera, *Death in Venice*, and displays a luminosity of sound that is captivating.

Shostakovich wrote his Eighth Quartet in war-ravaged Dresden, and this is another work that has a valedictory quality to it, the composer intimating that with it he was writing his own musical obituary, with quotations from a number of earlier works within the quartet. Though Shostakovich would go on to write another seven quartets, this one has a special place in the hearts of many thanks to its searing intensity.

Beethoven's three Op 59 Quartets take their name from the man who commissioned them: Vienna's music-loving Russian ambassador Count Razumovsky. Beethoven, as ever, threw away the rule-book, and the First 'Razumovsky' is striking for its daring length, ambition and innovation.

It promises to be a very memorable concert. I hope you enjoy it.

Huw Humphreys, Head of Music, Barbican

Benjamin Britten (1913–76)

String Quartet No 3, Op 94 (1975)

1 Duets
2 Ostinato
3 Solo
4 Burlesque
5 Recitative and Passacaglia, 'La Serenissima'

As the 'La Serenissima' subtitle of its finale might suggest, Britten's last string quartet is intimately bound up with his final opera, *Death in Venice*. The quartet was partly written during Britten's last Venetian visit, and its finale begins with a series of recitatives in which important themes from the opera are recalled. The main part of the movement consists of a passacaglia in E major – the key associated in the opera with the character of Aschenbach. In this valedictory finale we may imagine Aschenbach at last achieving the transcendence he so earnestly sought during the course of the opera. The piece owes its luminous quality, at least in part, to the radiance of its key – the goal towards which the remainder of the work appears to strive.

The Quartet No 3 was Britten's last important composition, written at a time when he was severely weakened and partially paralysed following a heart bypass operation, and could work only for short periods. No doubt that explains why the quartet consists of a succession of fairly brief movements, of which only the first contains elements of a sonata design. The five pieces are arranged in a symmetrical arch-like pattern, with the two outer panels sharing a similar atmosphere, and the central slow movement framed by two parody pieces. The design echoes the Fourth and Fifth Quartets of Bartók, though the 'Burlesque' title of Britten's fourth movement recalls instead the 'Burletta' from Bartók's Sixth Quartet – another work that ends with a valedictory slow movement.

One of the premises on which the 'Duets' first movement is based is that each of the six possible pairings of the four players is represented during the course of the piece. With the exception of the extended opening passage for the second violin and viola alone, the duets are not unaccompanied, though each duo is at least briefly heard on its own. The initial bars give out the sound of a major second, or whole-tone, irregularly overlapping between viola and second violin – as though to suggest the lapping of water, or perhaps the quiet pealing of bells. In this, and in the rise and fall of the melodic line that gradually unfolds, these opening bars clearly foreshadow the passacaglia finale. Eventually, the major second accelerates to form a trill, above which a new and more ardent theme emerges on the first violin. The middle section is short-lived, but dramatically intense, with urgent tremolos and full-blooded chords in rapid alternation between players. The developmental nature of the music continues through the very free recapitulation, which incorporates a distant echo of the chords, as well as a brief recall of the second subject in a passionate *fortissimo* unison between first violin and cello, before the piece sinks to an exhausted close.

The ostinato that gives the second movement its name consists of a series of forceful, striding notes in regular rhythm, though there is also a more intimate middle section in which the same notes are transmuted into a gentle pizzicato. The quartet's still centre is the slow third movement – a high-lying violin solo, accompanied only by an impassive, slowly rising single line which passes from cello to viola, and then to the second violin. The mid-point of the piece is marked by a shimmering cadenza for the full quartet, before the violin melody continues its calm progress against the background, this time, of luminous harmonics from the remaining players.

The 'Burlesque' fourth movement evokes not only Bartók, but also a piece by a composer rather closer to Britten's heart. It was Hans Keller, the dedicatee of Britten's Third Quartet, who first drew a parallel between the piece and the 'Rondo burlesque' of Mahler's Ninth Symphony. Like Mahler's piece, Britten's is in the key of A minor, and incorporates a passage in fugal style. It is true, though, that the heavily ironic tone of Britten's piece also seems to owe a debt to his friend Shostakovich. The middle section – or 'Quasi trio', as Britten labels it – is a parody of what had been ironically intended in the first place: the second violinist plays staccato and with the wood of the bow, the viola player contributes a ghostly, squeaky sound by bowing rapidly across the strings on the wrong side of the bridge, and the cellist interjects a quietly percussive accompaniment; while above all this the muted first violin continues the burlesque theme, for all the world as though nothing had changed. At the end, the forceful style of the movement's beginning returns, in an ironically titled 'Maggiore'.

The recitatives which inaugurate the finale are punctuated by short *pianissimo* passages featuring a pizzicato motif rocking between the two notes with which the concluding passacaglia theme will begin. The recitatives – recalling, as we have seen, themes from *Death in Venice* – are passed from one instrument to the next; until, at the end, a dramatic unison leads seamlessly into the concluding passacaglia itself. Britten's Second Quartet had ended with a large-scale chaconne in homage to Purcell, but the E major passacaglia which effectively brings his life's work to a close is a much more intimate affair. Its six-bar theme, given out throughout the first stage of the piece by the cello, falls into two distinct halves – the first of them rising by whole-tone steps, the second falling by the same increments and coming to rest on the 'foreign' note D. It is with this quizzical D natural that the work eventually comes to an uneasy half-close. 'Dying away', Britten writes underneath the last, sustained D on the cello; and with it, as he was only too aware, his own life was ebbing away. He managed to complete one further work – the charmingly unpretentious *Welcome Ode* for young people's chorus and orchestra – but it is the quartet that forms his true artistic testament.

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906–75)

String Quartet No 8 in C minor, Op 110 (1960)

1 Largo –
2 Allegro molto –
3 Allegretto –
4 Largo –
5 Largo

In the summer of 1960 Shostakovich travelled to East Germany in the company of the film-maker Leo Arnshtam. The two were longstanding friends, and had been fellow-students at the Leningrad Conservatoire. Arnshtam was now planning a documentary entitled *Five Days and Five Nights* about the destruction of the city of Dresden by the Allied bombing raids in February 1945, and the plan was for Shostakovich to provide the music. Shostakovich toured Dresden, and watched some harrowing newsreel footage, but in the end he felt unable to contribute to the project. Instead, he retired to the resort of Gohrisch in Saxony, where, in the space of just a few days, he composed his Eighth String Quartet. 'However much I tried to draft my obligations for the film', Shostakovich told his friend Isaak Glikman a few days after completing the quartet, 'I just couldn't do it. Instead I wrote an ideologically deficient quartet nobody needs.'

His sarcastic reference to his new quartet is intimately bound up with the troubled history of his relationship with the Communist Party. Just a month before Shostakovich's trip to Dresden, Khrushchev decided to appoint him as Chairman of the Composers' Union of the Russian Federation – a post for which Party membership was a prerequisite – and his formal induction to the Party took place on 14 September 1960. The Eighth Quartet was first performed on 2 October, with a repeat performance for the Composers' Union being given the following day.

For Isaak Glikman, the new quartet marked Shostakovich's farewell to life: the composer apparently associated his joining of the Party with a kind of moral death. Shostakovich had played the work to Glikman on the piano immediately on his return from Dresden, and had told him it was to be his last work. He had acquired a large quantity of sleeping pills, and hinted at his intention to commit suicide. Glikman claimed to have removed the pills to keep him out of harm's way. Certainly, Shostakovich seems to have planned his Eighth Quartet as his own obituary. 'When I die,' he told Glikman, 'it's hardly likely that someone will write a quartet dedicated to my memory. So I decided to write it myself. One could write on the title-page, "Dedicated to the author of this quartet". The main theme is the monogram D, Es, C, H, that is – my initials. The quartet makes use of themes from my works, and the revolutionary song *Tormented by Grievous Bondage*.'

The D–S–C–H monogram, derived from a German musical transliteration of his name (D–E flat–C–B would be the English notation), was one Shostakovich used in a number of works, but nowhere so pervasively as in the Eighth Quartet. The opening Largo begins with a broad version of the monogram on the cello, out of which a contrapuntal texture is gradually built up. Soon, a reminiscence in slow motion of the main theme from Shostakovich's First Symphony, composed some 35 years earlier, is announced by the first violin, before being passed to second violin and viola. This leads eventually to a new rocking idea – almost like some emotionless, benumbed lullaby. The same idea soon provides the accompaniment to a desolate theme whose poignancy is enhanced by the glow of C major warmth it casts over the bleak C minor proceedings. The rocking motif will be heard again during the course of the finale.

It is the same motif, in a vastly accelerated form, that forms the main subject of the ferocious scherzo-like second movement, whose dynamic level scarcely ever dips below *fortissimo*. The D–S–C–H motto also plays an important part, being given out at different speeds simultaneously. At the climax of the piece, over a sawing accompaniment from the two lower instruments, the violins forcefully interject a conspicuously Jewish-sounding theme from the finale of Shostakovich's E minor Piano Trio. The same passage makes a return in the closing bars of the movement.

The Allegretto middle movement transforms the autobiographical motto into a wry waltz whose rhythm is intermittently subverted by a sudden change to duple metre – not least at the point where the opening theme of Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto, with its 'chugging' repeated-note rhythm, is quoted. At the end of this G minor piece Shostakovich effects a seamless transition via a broad solo violin passage to the Largo that follows.

The first in the concluding pair of slow movements begins with a much more forceful and ponderous version of the Cello Concerto's theme. In the central part of the piece the biting repeated-note interjections abate; and over a desolate and long-drawn note from the viola and cello, the first violin gives out the haunting melody of the song *Tormented by Grievous Bondage*. The title clearly held deep personal significance for Shostakovich; and although in the end he dedicated the quartet not to his own memory, but to the victims of Fascism, Isaak Glikman maintained that the composer felt himself the victim of a different kind of totalitarianism. The final moments of the movement combine the song's outline with the repeated-note motif, while the violin adds the D–S–C–H motto.

The motto is taken over by the cello at the start of the final Largo. The opening bars of this concluding movement also recall the rocking motif from the first movement, and the music's contrapuntal nature serves as an additional means of bringing the work full circle. Towards the end, where the motto informs all strands of the texture, the players put on mutes, and the music fades into the distance with a last reminiscence of the rocking motif.

interval 20 minutes

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

String Quartet No 7 in F major, Op 59 No 1, 'Razumovsky' (1806)

1 Allegro
2 Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando
3 Adagio molto e mesto –
4 Thème russe: Allegro

It is to Beethoven's three String Quartets, Op 59 that Count Andreas Kirillovich Razumovsky owes his immortality. He was the Russian ambassador in Vienna, as well as one of the city's foremost musical patrons, and from 1808 until 1814, when his palace burned down, he employed a permanent string quartet led by the well-known player Ignaz Schuppanzigh. The Count was himself a competent enough violinist to take his place in the ensemble from time to time.

The 'Razumovsky' Quartets were composed in what for Beethoven was an unusually short space of time, from April to November 1806. This was altogether a remarkably prolific period, and the same year saw the composition of the Fourth Piano Concerto, the Fourth Symphony and the Violin Concerto. In addition to the six large-scale new masterpieces, Beethoven was busy with the first revision of his opera, for which he wrote one of the most thrilling of all his orchestral scores – the overture known as 'Leonore' No 3.

The unusual breadth on which the 'Razumovsky' Quartets are conceived makes itself felt from the outset of the first work, with its long cello melody unfolding beneath an obstinately unchanging and largely dissonant accompaniment which delays any firm establishing of the home key of F major for some 20 bars. Both the initial melody and its harmony revolve around the fifth degree of the scale, and Beethoven makes a return to the same dissonant harmony at the apex of the long central development section, where, without any attempt at a resolution, he simply allows the music to dissolve into the start of the recapitulation.

The scope of the opening movement is in fact reduced by the lack of the traditional exposition repeat, but Beethoven had initially intended to have the much longer second half of the piece repeated instead: six bars leading to such a repeat, plus the instruction *La seconda parte due volte* ('The second part twice'), were deleted from the manuscript. Beethoven had actually carried out an analogous plan in the finale of his 'Appassionata' Sonata, Op 57, with the identically worded instruction to the pianist, but in the string quartet it would clearly have resulted in a piece of unmanageable proportions.

The omission of the exposition repeat was an idea Beethoven had already tried in the opening movement of the 'Appassionata'; but in Op 59 No 1 the structural shortcut is highlighted through an *implied* repeat, in the form of a literal reprise of the movement's opening bars, before the music strikes out along new paths, and the development gets underway. Beethoven's deliberate deception, which he was to replicate in the finale of the Eighth Symphony and the first movement of the Ninth, exerted an influence on a host of later composers, including Mendelssohn, Brahms, Dvořák, Mahler and Schoenberg.

The strikingly original second movement, which is launched by a rhythmic motif tapped out, drum-like, on one note by the cello, presents a kaleidoscopic juxtaposition of contrasting material. But, despite its initial impression of piecemeal construction, the movement contains elements of both a highly individual sonata design, with its second subject in the minor, and an expanded scherzo and trio form. In its propensity for passing unaccompanied melodic lines rapidly from one instrument to another, it is a piece which seems to anticipate the world of Beethoven's late quartets.

The F minor slow movement is one of Beethoven's great tragic pieces, its pervasive atmosphere of grief enhanced by the retention of the minor for its second subject. Beethoven's sketches contain the curious inscription 'A weeping willow or acacia tree on my brother's grave'; and the heading of the movement includes the word *mesto* ('sad') – an indication the composer otherwise used only for the sombre slow movement of the last in his triptych of Op 10 piano sonatas.

An elaborate violin cadenza provides a link to the finale, with its Russian main theme quoted in deference to Count Razumovsky. Like the opening subject of the first movement, the theme is given out by the cello beneath a harmonically static accompaniment – in this case, no more than a violin trill – and again it is centred around the fifth degree of the scale. At the end of the exposition, Beethoven renews the transition between slow movement and finale with a reprise of the same cadenza, now scored for the full quartet, leading back to the only section of the work that is repeated. The revisiting of the join between a pair of linked movements in this manner, approaching it from a different angle, as it were, is a characteristic gesture. Shortly before the end, the Russian tune is momentarily heard in a tempo and mood more in keeping with its authentic character (the original melody is a soldier's lament on his return from the wars, and is cast appropriately enough in the minor), before Beethoven brushes it aside with a gesture of barely concealed impatience.

About the performers

Emerson String Quartet
Eugene Drucker violin
Philip Setzer violin
Lawrence Dutton viola
Paul Watkins cello

The Emerson String Quartet has maintained its stature as one of the world's leading chamber music ensembles for more than four decades. The quartet has made more than 30 acclaimed recordings, and has received nine Grammys, three *Gramophone* Awards, the Avery Fisher Prize, and *Musical America*'s 'Ensemble of the Year'. The Emerson frequently collaborates with some of today's most esteemed composers. It has also partnered the world's leading artists, including Reneé Fleming, Barbara Hannigan, Evgeny Kissin, Emanuel Ax and Yefim Bronfman.

This season the Emerson continues to perform as quartet-in-residence at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, for its 40th season and returns to perform with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. The group's North American appearances include a performance at New York's Alice Tully Hall, as well as at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, the Yale School of Music, University of Georgia and in Denver, Vancouver, Seattle, Houston, Indianapolis and Detroit, among others. The quartet also embarks on two European tours, performing at major venues in the UK, Germany, France, Italy and Spain. Next summer the Emerson will perform at the Tanglewood, Ravinia and Aspen festivals.

Other North American highlights include performances of *Shostakovich and The Black Monk: A Russian Fantasy*, the theatrical production co-created by theatre director James Glossman and the Emerson's Philip Setzer. This music/theatre hybrid, co-commissioned by the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, Princeton University and Tanglewood Music Festival, has been presented at the Ravinia Festival, Wolf Trap and in Seoul. In the spring the quartet will reprise it at Stony Brook University and the Orange County Performing Arts Center. The piece is a bold intersection of chamber music and theatre starring David Strathairn/Len Cariou and Jay O Sanders/ Sean Astin together with the Emerson Quartet; it explores Shostakovich's 40-year quest to create an opera based on Anton Chekhov's mystical tale *The Black Monk*.

The Emerson Quartet's extensive recordings range from Bach to John Harbison, including the complete string quartets of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Bartók, Webern and Shostakovich, as well as multi-CD sets of the major works of Haydn, Mozart, Schubert and Dvořák. The ensemble has also recorded music by Tchaikovsky, Smetana, Debussy, Ravel, Barber and Ives. The Emerson's latest album, *Chaconnes and Fantasias: Music of Britten and Purcell*, was released in 2017 on Decca Gold. The Quartet has commissioned new works from Thomas Adès, Kaija Saariaho,Wolfgang Rihm, Mark-Anthony Turnage and Edgar Meyer.

The Emerson Quartet was formed in 1976 in New York City and was one of the first quartets whose violinists alternated in the first chair position. The quartet, which took its name from the American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, balances busy performing careers with a commitment to teaching and serves as Quartet-in-Residence at Stony Brook University.

In 2013 cellist Paul Watkins joined the original members of the Emerson Quartet. The reconfigured group has been praised by critics and audiences alike around the world. Its many awards include honorary doctorates from Middlebury College, the College of Wooster, Bard College and the University of Hartford. In 2015 it received the Richard J Bogomolny National Service Award, Chamber Music America's highest honour.