

Shostakovich: Life, Letters & Friendship

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate running time: 120 minutes including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Programme

Dmitri Shostakovich Allegretto (Polka) for String Quartet

I. 'Moderato' from String Quartet No 1 in C major

I. 'Overture: Moderato con moto' from String Quartet No 2 in A major

I. 'Allegretto' & II. 'Andantino' from String Quartet No 4 in D major

I. 'Allegretto' from String Quartet No 7 in F-sharp minor

I. 'Largo' and II. 'Allegro Molto' from String Quartet No 8 in C minor

III. 'Adagio' from String Quartet No 10 in A-flat major

IV. 'Etude: Allegro' & V. 'Humouresque Allegro' from String Quartet No 11 in F minor

String Quartet No 13 in B-flat minor

IV. 'Epilogue' from String Quartet No 15 in E-flat minor

Interspersed with readings of historical sources and Shostakovich's letters

Dmitri Shostakovich's music enjoys universal appeal, writes Leon Bosch.

The depth and originality of his contribution to the genres of the symphony and the string quartet in particular rank alongside Haydn and Beethoven. Every note he wrote is inextricably linked to the history of the 20th Century, but it is the analysis of its significance and meaning that divides opinion.

Shostakovich's life and work is frequently interpreted solely through the prism of the Cold War, but his music has triumphed despite the shackles of history.

His fifteen string quartets, composed between 1938 and 1974, are cornerstones of the repertoire, and the Carducci String Quartet know them intimately, having performed and recorded them many times.

Shostakovich has a special significance for the quartet's cellist Emma Denton, who has devised tonight's exploration of Shostakovich's life.

It was a teenage encounter that led Emma to devote her life to performing in a string quartet. She recalls performing Shostakovich 8 alongside her now husband, Matthew, after winning a string quartet competition. 'We were on stage in the Albert Hall, surrounded by thousands of people. We felt so small, but it was that experience that made me feel that this is what I wanted to be doing.'

She is convinced that in contrast to Shostakovich's symphonies, that were composed overwhelmingly for public consumption and scrutiny, 'you do get more of that intimate side of his outpourings coming through his string quartets'.

Sensitive to Shostakovich's social and political roots, Emma articulates the story of his life as expressed through Shostakovich's own correspondence with his close friend Isaac Glickman, various decrees from the Soviet bureaucracy, the recollections of trusted friends, and his string quartets.

Tonight's narrator, Samuel West, sets proceedings in motion with the poignant words of violinist David Oistrakh, dedicatee of both Shostakovich's violin concertos, describing the terror of life in Moscow during 1937 when everyone feared the secret police's knock on the door.

The musical journey then begins with the brief and at times dissonant polka that predates all Shostakovich's quartets. It exemplifies his already distinctive musical voice and is, in Emma's words, 'quite shocking'. It encompasses sentiments that range from the exuberant, through the tragic, to the sardonic.

In 1938 Shostakovich composed his first string quartet, which Emma justifiably describes as 'beautiful, melodic, innocent, and so far removed from the thirteenth quartet, which inhabits a completely different sound world'.

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The tumultuous journey through the string quartets is punctuated by a range of texts: an exchange of letters between Shostakovich and Glikman – the Zhdanov Decree that reprimanded selected Soviet composers, including Shostakovich, for their supposed departure from natural and healthy standards in music – Dubinsky's account of the première of the Fourth Quartet – the telephone conversation with Stalin in which Shostakovich is invited to travel to the USA for the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace – Stalin's death in 1953 – Krushchev's declaration on music in Soviet Society – and the death of Shostakovich's first wife, Nina Vasilievna in 1954. The seventh quartet, of which we shall hear the first movement, was composed in her memory.

Then we arrive at Shostakovich's most widely known quartet, No 8 in C minor, which is dedicated to 'the victims of fascism and war'. Its popularity has been enhanced by Rudolf Barshai's arrangement for string orchestra that Shostakovich himself endorsed. But controversy still rages about the quartet's true meaning.

After the interval follows a series of sometimes cheerful, sometimes grim letters from Shostakovich to his friend Isaak Glikman: one from his hospital bed in 1962 excitedly tells Glikman about his new and youthful wife, Irina Anotonovna, whilst another, two years later in 1964, speaks mischievously of having completed his tenth quartet, dedicated to fellow composer Moysey Vainberg, with whom he pursued a good-natured rivalry in respect of the number of quartets they had each written.

Quartet number thirteen, from which we will hear the jazz pizzicato section, is a tour de force for the viola – it was dedicated to Vadim Borisovsky, then violist of the Beethoven String Quartet – and in addition to the generous use of pizzicato, it also experiments with 12-tone serialism, and percussive effects.

Meanwhile, despite the challenging political climate and his failing health, Shostakovich continued to compose, and in 1974 he completed his fifteenth and final string quartet – some way short of the cycle of twenty-four that he'd apparently intended.

The Carducci Quartet bring their portrait of Shostakovich to a conclusion with the emotionally bleak and wrenching 'Epilogue' from this fifteenth quartet. Kurt Sanderling, a friend of the composer, speculated that Shostakovich meant the work as an epitaph for himself, 'perhaps because it was so unfathomably terrifying that he could not dedicate it to anyone'.

Shostakovich died an embittered man on 9th August 1975. He had been scarred by official denunciations, and the compromises he felt obliged to make with Stalinism, but this demoralisation and disorientation notwithstanding, he was still able to distil powerful emotions into his music, emotions that resonate with all of humanity.

This powerful portrait is a stark reminder that music is fundamentally the expression of human life in sound.

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Performers

Carducci Quartet

Matthew Denton violin

Michelle Fleming violin

Eoin Schmidt-Martin viola

Emma Denton cello

Samuel West narrator

Produced by the Barbican



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