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CLASSICS

STRING QUARTET IN A MINOR

WALTON SHOSTAKOVICH

STRING QUARTET NO. 3 IN F MAJOR, OP. 73

A L B I O N Q U A R T E T



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STRING QUARTET IN A MINOR

SHOSTAKOVICH

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String Quartet in A minor

William Walton (1902-1983)

- | | | |
|---|-------------------|---------|
| 1 | I. Allegro | [10.35] |
| 2 | II. Presto | [4.31] |
| 3 | III. Lento | [8.29] |
| 4 | IV. Allegro molto | [4.32] |

String Quartet No. 3 in F major, Op. 73

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------|---------|
| 5 | I. Allegretto | [6.46] |
| 6 | II. Moderato con moto | [5.23] |
| 7 | III. Allegro non troppo | [4.09] |
| 8 | IV. Adagio | [5.40] |
| 9 | V. Moderato | [10.41] |
| | Total times | [60.48] |

What's in a year? Both of these string quartets were completed in 1946, and thus in the immediate aftermath of World War II. What is more, both composers were of approximately the same age (around 40), and at the time had relatively little experience in the string quartet medium. Although their social and political backgrounds were sharply different, the global backdrop against which they wrote their quartets was the same. How to sum up this backdrop is not easy, but we might think of 1946 as a time of conflicting emotions. There was, of course, immense relief at the end of hostilities: hostilities that had been looming for many years before their alarming escalation. And there was, of course, prolonged mourning for those unprecedented numbers of soldiers and civilians who had been killed. But 1946 was also suffused by new and intense anxieties. The Allies' use of atomic bombs and the huge civilian deaths in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were awesome testimony to the power of human technology, and in July 1946 the US's series of nuclear tests in Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean made the continuing presence of such weapons abundantly clear to all. What is more, political tensions between the former Allies became immediately obvious, with Soviet Russia seeking to establish a cordon of "buffer" states between its borders and those of Western Europe, causing (in Winston Churchill's famous phrase, made during a speech in early 1946) an "iron curtain" to be drawn between Eastern and Western Europe.

The age-old question is to what extent music can be understood as a reaction to (or commentary on) such momentous events, and perhaps the question applies to the classical string quartet in particular, which has long had the reputation of being in some way "autonomous", removed from the everyday. But in the

case of both Walton and Shostakovich, it is surely difficult not to see these particular quartets as in some powerful ways connected to the spirit of the times, and in this sense also – albeit obliquely – connected to each other.

William Walton (1902-1983)

String Quartet in A minor

William Walton had come to quartet writing early. His first quartet (premiered in 1922) was an ambitious teenage work, full of the modernist influences (Schoenberg and Bartók in particular) that he was consuming avidly as an Oxford undergraduate. Later on, though, he repudiated this youthful extravagance, and by 1939 was planning a work in the genre more representative of his mature personality. However, like so many creative artists of the period, Walton found the circumstances of the War inimical to “serious” composition, which halted with the Violin Concerto in 1939. Bombed out of his London home in 1941, he spent the War years on “occasional” pieces and, in particular, on writing the soundtracks for a series of propaganda-drenched films, the most famous of which was Laurence Olivier’s *Henry V* in 1944. The fact that Walton’s arch-rival, Benjamin Britten, had showed no such imaginative attenuation during this period (famously, Britten’s opera *Peter Grimes* was premiered in 1945) was perhaps a spur to renewed creativity. Walton began talking of a “magnum opus” quartet as early as 1944, but then took nearly two (by all accounts agonizing) years to write it. Letters to friends chronicle the compositional labour in graphic, war-inflected terms: “a suicidal struggle with four strings ... I’m afraid I’ve done film music

for too long”; later stages in the composition were described as having “captured a trench” or even “overcome barbed wire entanglements”. The first performance, by the Blech Quartet (Harry Blech and Lionel Bentley, violins, Keith Cummings, viola, and Douglas Cameron, cello), was given in May 1947 on the BBC Third Programme (founded as recently as September 1946).

I. Allegro

The sonata-form first movement immediately announces the ambition and complexity of the work as a whole. A winding, modal melody on the viola (that instrument being the progenitor of so much of the quartet’s material) is from the start wrapped around with busy counterpoint from the second violin, counterpoint that is then taken up by all the instruments. There are moments in which the “home” key of A minor seems to be approached, but such gestures to conventional tonality are rare. The second subject area is in extreme contrast: while the opening was all about a busy continuity, the second theme is stuttering and febrile, full of nervous energy, stops and starts, questioning exchanges between pairs of instruments amid almost constant metre changes. The development section’s prominent use of fugato (again launched by the viola, followed by the second violin) if anything attempts to intensify the thematic working, and again makes clear the aspirations of the movement (to late Beethoven, no less). After an occluded recapitulation, the last bars of the movement strive to find some sense of tonal repose, with sustained notes in the first and then second violin; but the restless energy of the second theme makes its presence felt even at the last, with a spiky pizzicato chord from viola and cello.

II. Presto

The mood of the first movement's second theme dominates this virtuosic display, best described as a Bartókian scherzo. A continuous, driving rhythm is present almost throughout, the sense of obsession enhanced by the fact that the first half of the movement is repeated literally (a repeat that Walton insisted was to be observed). Often the driving rhythm settles on a single note (usually E, the dominant of the first movement), a drone bass that only enhances the evident debt to Bartók at his most ferocious.

III. Lento

With its sustained chordal shapes, muted instruments and clear (if modally-inflected) F major tonality, the slow movement marks an unmistakable change of mood, perhaps again gesturing to late Beethoven. From amid the wash of sound, with constantly changing time signatures obscuring any sense of regular rhythm, a low viola melody emerges, again marking that instrument as the quartet's chief announcer. The movement unfolds in a broad ABA form, with the "B" section announced by a syncopated cello pizzicato and (yet again) a viola solo. After some remarkably adventurous tonal wanderings, the final moments return to F major; in a beautiful coda, shards of the opening's viola melody reappear; but perhaps peace is found at the last.

IV. Allegro molto

The fourth movement is a Rondo (again an evident gesture to tradition) and relaunches the scherzo-like energy of the second movement. In this sense its most obvious debt is once more to Bartók, but there are also further Beethovenian

reminiscences (not least the sudden octave descents announced at the start and often repeated). A brief moment of lyricism emerges at approximately the movement's mid-point, with a sustained melody for the second violin over repetitive accompaniment patterns in the other instruments. But this is soon interrupted by the return of the main Rondo material. Towards the end the insistence on repeated rhythms becomes ever more intense; finally there is nothing but the single note A, savagely reiterated.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

String Quartet No. 3 in F major, Op. 73

Shostakovich was 40 years old when he wrote his Third String Quartet, and at the start of what would prove to be one of the most perilous times of his career. While he had famously fallen foul of Soviet officialdom in the mid 1930s (over his opera *Lady Macbeth*) the wartime period had been one of relative freedom. His Seventh Symphony, the "Leningrad" (1942), much of it written while that city was under siege, with the composer working there as a volunteer fireman, was overtly patriotic and officially praised as such; the Eighth (1943) was suitably grim and also greeted positively. The end of the war was then marked by his Ninth Symphony, written in the summer of 1945. However, this work was very far from the choral celebration à la Beethoven that Shostakovich had originally planned. Instead the Ninth was, at least on the surface, slight and cynical, and received official criticism for its disconcerting mood.

It was in this atmosphere, with Party Chairman Andrey Zhdanov initiating a series of conferences on literature (1946), film (1947) and music (1948), the last of which would see Shostakovich openly humiliated, that the Third Quartet was written. It was premiered on 16 December (probably to coincide with the date of Beethoven's birthday) 1946 in Moscow, by the aptly named "Beethoven" String Quartet. Shostakovich repeatedly stated that he was proud of his new Quartet, but the piece was withdrawn shortly after the first performance, possibly because of its similarity – both in mood and in five-movement structure – to his much-criticised Ninth Symphony. It is possible that at one early point Shostakovich strengthened the connections to the Ninth by appending to each movement a subtitle, clearly in reference to the War; but – if indeed the titles originated from the composer, the evidence for this being only circumstantial – this "programme" was soon withdrawn. We include the subtitles here as they do indeed seem powerfully evocative of the period of composition.

I. Allegretto

"Calm unawareness of the future cataclysm"

The sonata-form exterior might suggest seriousness of purpose, but the opening theme, announced on the first violin, has more than a hint of Prokofiev-like neo-classicism (with the key of F major possibly an ironic reference to pastoral simplicity). The faintest hints of trouble to come are perhaps heard in the sometimes intense chromaticism at phrase endings, but overall the atmosphere is playful and even improvisatory. The development is dominated by counterpoint (indeed, by a complex double fugue), with obvious Beethovenian aspirations.

"Calm unawareness" is restored at the recapitulation, but the increasing alternation of time signatures and obsessive repetition of motives towards the end of the movement make it seem almost as if the music is driving the players. The insouciant pizzicato and harmonics of the final cadence, another ironic gesture, are surely not sufficient to close off the sense of unease hiding within the movement as a whole.

II. Moderato con moto

"Rumblings of unrest and anticipation"

The viola's driving accompaniment figure, which begins this E-minor scherzo, might seem to echo the neo-classicism of the first movement; but now a sense of relentlessness emerges, particularly as the first violin's emerging melody seems to have little relationship to such a dogged accompaniment. This opening section gives way to an extraordinary passage of wide-spaced, pianissimo staccato chords, with wisps of melody high on the first violin (mostly "sighing" figures of a descending third). Eventually the opening melody returns, but soon its energy seems to drain away. The movement comes to a rest on a series of dark, low-spaced chords, with shards of the "sighing" figure the only punctuation.

III. Allegro non troppo

"The forces of war unleashed"

A second scherzo, this time in G-sharp minor, takes up the thematic material of the preceding Moderato, but now the atmosphere has changed fundamentally. The Moderato's quiet pizzicato chords are now articulated with furious downbows and are rhythmically unpredictable (a constant alternation of 3/4 and 2/4);

over this, a driving melody in the first violin unfolds. There are frequent ostinato figures, brutal unisons and the “sighing”, descending-third motive of the previous movement reappears, this time as an angry reproach.

IV. Adagio

“Homage to the dead”

This “homage” is in the form of a C-sharp minor passacaglia, one of so many in Shostakovich’s work. At the start, the main theme is announced twice in the lower three instruments, each time followed by desolate commentary from the first violin. The theme is then taken up by the cello, followed by the first violin. Another repetition by the cello leads to an impressive climax, with all the strings at their highest register. The movement ends with the viola sounding the passacaglia theme, the cello punctuating the melody with low repeated notes. This section leads directly (“attacca”) to the final movement.

5. Moderato

“The eternal question: why and for what purpose?”

Perhaps the title of the movement makes a gesture towards the famous questions in the final movement of Beethoven’s last Quartet, Op. 135 (“Muss es sein? Es muss sein!”). The 6/8 metre and the F-major tonality might suggest a return to the edgy pastoral of the first movement, but here the tone of the winding melody is darker. A contrasting, A-major section more obviously recalls the jaunty optimism of the first movement; but soon the winding 6/8 returns, this time leading to a climax of frantic intensity, out of which emerges the passacaglia theme of the fourth movement and an impassioned climax involving lacerating ostinati.

The ending of the movement is extraordinary: questioning fragments of melody sound in the first violin, ever higher, over a long-held pedal chord of F major in the lower instruments. As the pedal chord dies away (the marking is “morendo”) the first violin signals closure with three pizzicato F-major chords. The message seems clear: “The Eternal Question” may have been posed in this last movement, but triumphant conclusions are impossible.

Even on brief comparison, one can see that these two pieces make an interesting pairing. In both cases, the evident prestige and “seriousness” of the string quartet drew the composers to the medium at an important moment: a moment at which, with some deliberation, both felt a work to mark the War’s ending was needed. Both works have elements of neo-classicism but also look plainly to Beethoven as the ultimate model: the first-movement sonata form, the scherzi, the fugato textures, and so on. The differences between them are, though, equally obvious, not least because the experience of World War II had been so dissimilar. (One is reminded of a memorable summing-up attributed to Stalin: during the prosecution of war the British gave time, the Americans gave money, and the Russians gave blood.) While not denying the evident dangers of London during the Blitz, Shostakovich’s experiences in the siege of Leningrad, and his sense of personal danger more generally, were bleaker by far than anything experienced by Walton, and perhaps these quartets bear witness to that circumstance. Equally striking, though, is a difference in what we might call density. Walton’s quartet, which cost him immense compositional efforts, is much more studied and complex in its demands on the listener. By contrast, Shostakovich’s work is almost poster-like in its relative simplicity and directness

of utterance. However, and in spite of such considerable dissimilarity, what these works undoubtedly share is a sense in the background of the uneasy peace that had settled on Europe. Yes, the War was over and celebrations (as well as mourning) were due; but as East and West grew ever more divided by that “iron curtain”, a prevailing uncertainty about what was to come, and the secure knowledge that it might be more terrible even than what had just taken place, is palpable in both these “1946” quartets.

Roger Parker



A L B I O N Q U A R T E T

Tamsin Waley-Cohen and **Emma Parker** violin

Ann Beilby viola

Nathaniel Boyd cello

Formed in 2016, the Albion Quartet brings together four of the UK's exceptional young string players who are establishing themselves rapidly on the international stage.

Recent debuts include the Concertgebouw Amsterdam, the Auditorium du Louvre in Paris, the Wigmore Hall and Town Hall/Symphony Hall Birmingham.

Recent and future engagements include appearances at the Wigmore Hall Livestream Series, at the Two Moors Festival in South-West England, on tour in Sweden, and in numerous chamber music series around England and Europe. Before the pandemic they performed at several festivals, including BBC Belfast International Arts Festival, Presteigne, Stratford, as well as returns to Oxford Lieder Festival and Kettle's Yard Cambridge. The Albion Quartet also appeared at Wigmore Hall to perform the world premiere of a new string trio by Freya Waley-Cohen, commissioned by the Wigmore Hall.

Over the past seasons they have held a number of residencies, including King's Place, Snape Maltings, Ryedale and Honeymead Festivals and the Sainte-Mère Festival in France. They also appeared at BBC Radio 3's Hay

Festival, Roland Pöntinen's Båstad Chamber Music Festival in Sweden and at the Chapelle Musicale Reine Elisabeth in Brussels.

The ensemble's creative curiosity has already led to collaborations with several composers: in spring 2019, they premiered a new work for soprano and string quartet by Kate Whitley at THSH Birmingham, and in June 2019 the world premiere of a new full-length quartet *Dust* by Freya Waley-Cohen at the Aldeburgh Festival. The Albion Quartet has also collaborated with renowned artists such as bass Matthew Rose at the Aldeburgh Festival 2016, violist Douglas Paterson of the Schubert Ensemble, Miguel da Silva, formerly the violist of the Ysaÿe Quartet and pianist Roland Pöntinen. In September 2018 they performed Whitacre's *Five Hebrew Melodies* with the Martinů Voices at Kloster Corvey in Germany.

Passionate about education, the quartet held a residency at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama for several years, where they regularly gave masterclasses and performances in the Dora Stoutzker Hall. They were Quartet-in-Residence at Gresham's School in the 2017/18 season, where they opened the new Britten Concert Hall in 2017. As a Cavatina Chamber Music Trust ensemble, they also give workshops at primary schools.

The quartet is recording a series of albums for Signum Records, including the string quartets of Antonin Dvořák. They have also recorded Richard Blackford's *Kalon* for string quartet and orchestra with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra.

The members of the quartet play on a fine collection of instruments, including a Stradivarius and Guarnerius.

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"Anyone who thinks that the new generation of super-quartets are merely about virtuoso brilliance should hear the myriad shades of russet and gold that the Albion Quartet find in these two enchanting works" Gramophone

"The playing, by the excellent Albion, is masterly in its vividness, freedom and sensitivity." The Sunday Times