

---

## CONCERTS AT THE UNIVERSITY

---

Autumn - Winter 2016

Tuesday 18 October 2016

1.10pm

City of Edinburgh Methodist Church

The Edinburgh Quartet

Rakhi Singh · violin

Gordon Bragg · violin

Morag Robertson · viola

Mark Bailey · cello

**Programme of works by ALASDAIR NICOLSON  
and SHOSTAKOVICH.**



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH  
*Edinburgh College of Art*

## String Quartet No. 3 (Slanting Rain)

Alasdair Nicolson (b. 1961)

1. *a false moon shines*
2. *the shadow ends without having been*
3. *waving trees, rising sea, eerie stillness*
4. *impossibly distant tree-lined paths*
5. *I come to the window to see who's singing*
6. *into an abyss made of time*

Like my previous quartet, some of the inspiration for this work came from a favourite writer's poetry, namely the Portuguese author Ferdinand Pessoa; the title of the quartet is also the title of a collection of Pessoa's poetry. The epigrammatic titles that appear for each short movement are lines from within this writer's poetry and, though not intended to be programmatic, are evocations of mood and hints of atmospheres without a particular narrative thread.

In constructing this quartet I was drawn to another source common to my music, that of the Gaelic song tradition and in particular here the old song *O, 's tu, 's gura tu th'air m'aire* (*Oh, it's you who are on my mind*) - a song of loss whose sentiments are close to those of the Pessoa. Much of the musical material for the work is taken from this Gaelic melody and on a few occasions it comes to the surface with its rising upturned triadic shape.

The quartet is dedicated to the memory of my mother who passed away in late 2014 and who was no stranger to slanting rain.

A.N.

## String Quartet No. 4 in D Op. 83

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Allegretto  
Andantino  
Allegretto  
Allegretto

The duality of internal experience and external formality for creative artists is a fascinating topic. There is, for instance, no doubt that the experience of visiting the German city of Dresden, which had been so comprehensively destroyed by bombing in the second World War, was a crucial influence over the composition of Shostakovich's Eighth Quartet in 1960. However, the Fourth Quartet, of 1949, is apparently a cheerful composition, but written in the most appalling circumstances.

At the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Composers in January 1948, the chair, Andrei Zhdanov, led the campaign against what was referred to as 'Formalism in Music'. Effectively this led to a serious attack on Prokofiev, Myaskovsky, Khachaturian and Shostakovich, with accusations of 'perversions'; Western artists were called 'bandits and imperialists'. But the fall-out of this Conference was particularly nasty as the whole weight of the Soviet propaganda machine, including school children, was harnessed against what were referred to as the 'mercenary Formalists', who were accused of trying to wreck the Soviet music industry. Eventually Shostakovich was sacked from his teaching posts for 'professional incompetence' - of all things - and it seems likely that he only escaped being shot by the narrowest of margins. Later that same year, in September, there was a determined anti-Semitic movement, with all Jewish institutions closed and Jewish writers rounded up, and many of them assassinated. As Shostakovich was setting texts from Jewish folk poetry at this time, several of his compositions were consigned to the proverbial bottom drawer, ready for a more propitious future. It is difficult to comprehend the physical and psychological strains of an original creative voice in those days of Stalin's Russia.

There was apparently something of a thaw in the cultural chill, as Stalin invited Shostakovich to attend the Cultural and Scientific Congress for World Peace in New York in March 1949. Some idea, however, of the awkwardness of this visit is given in Shostakovich's Memoirs, smuggled out under the raincoat of Solomon Volkov, four years after Shostakovich's death in 1979.

'People sometimes say that it must have been an interesting trip...Look at the way I am smiling in the photographs. That was the smile of a condemned man. I answered all the idiotic questions in a daze and thought: "When I get back it's all over for me."'

The composer Nikolai Nabokov wrote of Shostakovich:

'Throughout the conference, I watched his hands twist the cardboard tips of his cigarettes, his face twitch and his whole posture express intense unease...To me he seemed like a trapped man, whose only wish was to be left alone, to the peace of his own art and to the tragic destiny to which he, like most of his countrymen, had been forced to resign himself' (Quoted in MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich*.)

This, then, is the background to the Fourth Quartet. The repressive regime was to last several more years until Stalin's death 1953. It is impossible for us today to appreciate the constant terror under which all Soviet artists lived.

At a first glance, the external appearance of Shostakovich's Fourth String Quartet seems conventional. There are four movements, including a slow movement and one which is inspired by a dance. But when we look more closely, we quickly realise that there are other aspects which are not at all conventional. The opening movement, for example, opens with an extended pedal - or drone - D, which lasts for 64 bars. This exerts such a dominating influence that it seems impossible to

establish anything else, and the movement never shows any sense of harmonic freedom, particularly, as a drone returns a little later, now on E flat, and is held for 30 bars. With the final 13 bars resuming the D drone, this means that of 164 bars, two thirds of the movement are written on drones. As a counterpart to this, there is a fluidity of rhythmic pulse, with the occasional triple beat breaking up the regularity of the predominantly duple metre – that is until the second half of the movement in which the triple metre predominates.

The second movement, though first appearing as a waltz, has an uneasy two-note accompaniment which seems to undermine any sense of emotional stability. The flexible metre of the first movement is also used here as duple and triple tempos alternate, and a bleak sounding chorale passage towards the end, defies conventional expectation.

The third movement, though outwardly suggesting nostalgia, actually inhabits a bleak place, and the extended finale, following without a break from the previous movement, is built from material influenced by 'a grotesque Jewish dance'(MacDonald). This movement takes almost as much time as the other movements added together and much of the writing is thinly textured, almost skeletal - prophetic of the bleakness of the composer's final works. Especially this is true of the conclusion, which not so much ends as just peters out. Throughout the work quotations are heard from other works of Shostakovich, and include the Fifth Symphony, the Violin Concerto, and the Second and Third Quartets.

The work can be listened to for its surface qualities which show Shostakovich as a supreme craftsman. The viola player, Alan George, has described the work as of:

'Exceptional beauty and lucidity presented in a formal framework  
of perfect proportions'

The progression of the music of the Quartet is not difficult to follow and it is beautifully crafted, not only in its idiomatic string writing, but also for the directness of its structures. The textures are presented with admirable clarity and the variety of the surface events is clearly the product of a master composer. But there is an underlying unease about the work, almost a sense that its conventional appearance is somehow at odds with a deeper meaning, just below the surface of the music. The figure of the court jester perhaps comes to mind – someone who through the convention of appearing jocular is permitted licence to tell truths. The only problem with this analogy is that here is no humour, merely a composer striving to craft a composition in the name of survival. As with many other works from this composer, we lift the surface to understand, but what this action reveals is far from comfortable. Ultimately the connections between external and internal worlds are ones which we choose either to make or not to. If it is an artist's role to reveal truths about life, then Shostakovich has done his job supremely well, but it does not make for comfortable listening.

(R.B.W.)