

CONCERTS

AT THE UNIVERSITY

AUTUMN—WINTER 2014

Tuesday 23 September 2014

1.10pm

Reid Concert Hall

The Edinburgh Quartet

Tristan Gurney · violin

Gordon Bragg · violin

Catherine Marwood · guest viola

Mark Bailey · cello

Programme of works by HELEN GRIME and SHOSTAKOVICH.



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Edinburgh College of Art

String Quartet (2014)

Helen Grime (b. 1981)

When I was approached to write a piece for the Edinburgh Quartet I was delighted - I had wanted to write a string quartet for quite some time and was waiting for the right time and opportunity to do so. The string quartet has one of the richest repertoire and history behind it, so for me, one of the main challenges was letting go of all those associations and approaching it like I would for any other combination. I am not a string player, which has its advantages and disadvantages. Although I'm constantly thinking of the technical challenges and making the music playable, not actually being able to play can be freeing, leading you to take musical risks that you might not take otherwise. I came to the string quartet after writing a lot of chamber music for strings, including two piano trios (a combination which I found equally daunting) and a string sextet.

This is the first piece I have completed since having my son, Samuel, last August. This has been an emotionally rich and creative time for me and although I started the piece (about a minute or so) when pregnant, most has been written this year. I'm unsure if this has affected the piece or not, but interestingly the form of the piece (which was quite carefully planned beforehand) underwent quite a huge change when I began composing again.

The piece is in three movements, but they all run together without a break, the material of the new movement overlapping with the end of the previous one. My music tends to be very organic generally and this is very much true of the quartet. The speeds of each movement are very closely related to create seamless links between ideas and there are also very strong links between the musical material in each movement. To some extent, I imagined the piece in one long movement and I think this will come over to the listener. The first movement opens with a fast duo for violin II and viola - different pairings are a feature of the piece in general - and ends with a duo for violin I and cello. The 2nd movement is by far the longest of the three and the third movement is a sort of *moto perpetuo*, featuring virtuoso writing for each instrument.

Helen Grime

String Quartet No.4 in D Op.83

Dmitry 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.

(RBW. Feb. 2014)