

SHOSTAKOVICH

STRING QUARTETS

VOLUME 1

QUARTETTO NOÛS

BRILLIANT
CLASSICS



Dmitri Shostakovich 1906-1975

String Quartets

String Quartet No.3 in F Op.73

1. I. Allegretto	7'10
2. II. Moderato con moto	5'43
3. III. Allegro non troppo	4'12
4. IV. Adagio	5'46
5. V. Moderato	10'25

String Quartet No.5 in B-flat Op.92

6. I. Allegro non troppo	11'28
7. II. Andante	9'42
8. III. Moderato - Allegretto - Andante	11'00

String Quartet No.7 in F-sharp minor Op.108

9. I. Allegretto	3'46
10. II. Lento	3'00
11. III. Allegro - Allegretto	5'49

String Quartet No.8 in C minor Op.110

12. I. Largo	5'11
13. II. Allegro molto	2'51
14. III. Allegretto	4'34
15. IV. Largo	5'06
16. V. Largo	3'59

String Quartet No.9 in E-flat major Op.117

17. I. Moderato con moto	4'28
18. II. Adagio	4'28
19. III. Allegretto	4'06
20. IV. Adagio	3'34
21. V. Allegro	9'41

Quartetto Noûs

Tiziano Baviera · Alberto Franchin *violins*
Sara Dambruoso *viola* · Tommaso Tesini *cello*

Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich dedicated his *String Quartet No.7 Op.108*, written in 1960, to the memory of his first wife, Nina Vazar, and the *String Quartet No.9 Op.117* to his third wife, Irina Antonovna Supinskaya, whom he married in 1962. The composer's private and artistic life had been devastated by the loss of his wife, who had died in 1954 in Armenia at the early age of forty-three, leaving a void that Shostakovich rashly sought to mitigate by marrying a young Communist Party official, Margarita Kainova, after being turned down by Galina Ustvolskaja, a promising student of composition who had attended his classes. The marriage proved to be a disaster and ended in divorce in 1959. Although Shostakovich sank into depression and became extremely vulnerable, within the establishment his public profile grew apace. In 1960 his alignment with the regime culminated in support for the Communist Party, to the disbelief of his friends. During the terrible years of the Stalinist purges and the war, Shostakovich managed to resist insistent requests to become a Party member, but when he could no longer count on the moral and intellectual support of Nina, he ended up by succumbing to the demands of Khrushchev, who was in desperate need of a foothold in cultural circles following the Budapest uprising and the Pasternak affair. By 1962 the composer was evidently feeling better, not least on account of his third and happy marriage to Irina Antonovna. This upward turn actually began towards the end of 1961, when the grandiose Symphony No.4, initially withdrawn before it could be performed and thought to be lost during the siege of Leningrad, was reconstructed by the composer and conducted in Moscow by Kirill Kondrashin. The opera Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District, excluded from Soviet theatres following the Pravda attacks in 1936, was also rehabilitated and performed in a new version under the title Katerina Izmailova in Moscow in December 1962. Lastly, an even more significant artistic event coincided with the end of the composer's recovery year: the premiere of the Symphony No.13, on verse by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, an unconventional young poet considered something of a heretic. In this work Shostakovich had the courage

to address a taboo of the Great Patriotic War, the murder of the Jews at Babi Yar by the Nazis that was covered up by the Soviet authorities. Against the backdrop of these vicissitudes are the *Quartets Op.108, 110 and 117*, which reflect a delicate transition stage in Shostakovich's oeuvre. He had been attracted by the sound of the quartet since childhood, thanks to a cellist neighbour who used to get together with other amateur musicians to play music. Yet chamber music was not a focus of Shostakovich's early output, and by the time he wrote the Quartet No.1 in 1939 he had already composed five symphonies and two operas. The stress of Lady Macbeth, which only began to recede with the rehabilitation of the Symphony No.5 in 1937, probably led Shostakovich to think about chamber music as a less risky proposition, a field in which he could express himself more freely. Outstanding among the works written in this intermediate period is the *Quartet No.3 Op.73*, composed in 1946 straight after the Symphony No.9. Divided into five movements, the work reveals a desire to experiment with new forms and to develop a degree of indecipherable stylistic duality, a tendency that was to gather ground in the subsequent quartets. Sensing that the regime was likely to crack down on less orthodox artists who showed greater independence, Shostakovich initially added titles for the movements such as «Tranquil unawareness of the future cataclysm», «Unleashing the forces of war». Like that the composition could be interpreted as an integral part of the war effort, thereby avoiding the accusations of lack of patriotic spirit that had beleaguered the overly self-assured Symphony No.9. Naturally the titles disappeared as soon as this was feasible, leaving the musical language to speak for itself. The classic style of the first movement, which reveals the composer's enormous respect for the Haydn quartets, mixes with different forms such as the passacaglia and the funeral march of the fourth movement, ideas that he later developed in the grand instrumental works of the 1950s. In a similar fashion, the two caustic, violent central scherzos prepare the ground for the grotesque style typical of his post-war compositions.

The fact that the Party had accused many of the most prominent Soviet musicians of "bourgeois formalism" in 1948 was another reason for turning to chamber music.

In fact Shostakovich wrote no fewer than twelve quartets between 1949 and 1974, enjoying the greater expressive freedom that came with the abstract language of the genre, unhampered by the rhetorical implications of symphonic music. An eloquent case in point is the *Quartet No.5 Op.92*, written in 1952 but only performed after Stalin's death in 1953. The introspective character of the works is evident in the four notes of the solo viola at the opening of the theme, a permutation of the autobiographical motif that was to acquire a more structural form in the *Quartet No.8*. This is not the only personal reference in the work, which contains a number of elements relating directly to the composer: for instance, the citation of the finale of the Clarinet Trio by his erstwhile student Galina Ustvol'skaya, whom Shostakovich clearly admired, and not only as a musician. Another important feature of the *Quartet No.5* is the way the composer blends form into a unitary structure, with no division between the movements. In the early 1950s Shostakovich was totally absorbed by his studies of Bach's music, giving rise to a compositional style that is uniquely complex and inscrutable in its density and depth.

Quartet No.7 is one of Shostakovich's most enigmatic works, an eloquent example of the personal nature of his output during this period. Underpinning its formal economy, with the three movements that follow on one from another without interruption, is the crystalline perfection of the composition, where each individual note is connected to the whole with stringent musical coherence of rhythm, phrasing, thematic references and overall harmony. It is the composer's shortest quartet, a concentration of musical reflection and discourse that breaks away from the academic rhetoric of establishment aesthetics and heads towards almost abstract concision. For example, in the *Allegretto* first movement there is no development of the sonata form, which revolves around the barest thematic ideas. Shostakovich used DSCH as a musical motif to represent himself, a tetrachord based on his initials that he included in the music he wrote during the mid-1950s. Here it appears within the fabric of the composition, disguised by a series of harmonic transpositions. The melancholy melody of the following *Lento*, entirely muted, derives from the opening theme,

built on a descending tetrachord. The movement then runs into the final *Allegro* that returns to the principal ideas in altered form, both the fast, rhythmic opening element in reverse and the descending tetrachord. The diaphanous hue of the mutes invests the two movements with congruity until the violent, unmuted fugue bursts into the quartet like a shriek of pain. The despair of this devastating page is then mitigated by the return to the initial theme, which flows into a ghostly, otherworldly waltz, again with mutes, that ultimately dies on an bizarre F-sharp major chord. Memories of his dead wife in the year she would have turned fifty fill Shostakovich with bitter pessimism, with a finale fully in keeping with the Theatre of the Absurd.

The premiere of *Quartet No. 7* took place in Leningrad on 15 May 1960, played by the faithful Beethoven Quartet. In a burst of creativity, a couple of months later Shostakovich wrote a new quartet. He was staying near Dresden at the time to work on a film by his friend Lev Arnstam, *Five Days, Five Nights*, which begins with an astounding overview of the city of Dresden reduced to ruins in the terrible air raids of the last days of the war. «When I die, no one is likely to write a quartet dedicated to my memory», Shostakovich confessed to his friend Isaak Glikman. «so I've decided to write one myself. The title page could read: "Dedicated to the author of this quartet". The main theme is the DSCH monogram which corresponds to my initials». In actual fact the score bears a dedication that is far from personal: «To the memory of the victims of fascism and war». The quartet is cyclical in form, with five movements that are connected in a macabre chain and conspicuous recourse to self-citation. Although it was written shortly after the previous work, stylistically it is very different. First and foremost, the personal motif features in all the movements like an *idée fixe*, becoming a sort of *dramatis persona* within the quartet. This is evident from the expressive canon of the initial *Largo* through to the furthest development that underpins the final *Largo*. Between these two extremities, Shostakovich's musical avatar traverses the bruised and brutal violence of the savage *Allegro molto* in G sharp minor, conjures up a grotesquely macabre waltz in G minor in the *Allegretto*, and finally dissolves into a satanic sneer in the apocalyptic *Largo* in C sharp minor.

The handling of sound in the score is highly original and inventive. For instance, in the centre of the *Allegretto*, a sort of trio belonging to the traditional scherzo, the cello intones a strident melody, while the violins oscillate in absurd parallel fifths. In a similar fashion, and to astounding effect, the first violin insists on a fixed note, while the other instruments carve out an echo of Siegfried's funeral march.

Quartet No. 8 is a powerful expression of the sense of tragedy typical of Shostakovich's music. Like the earlier work, it probes the depths of the heart following the horrors of war. The *dance macabre* is a metaphor for the existential void that engulfed the psyche in those years, when all trace of humanity seemed to be erased by the fetish of technology, as exemplified by the terrible image of the atomic mushroom cloud rising over Hiroshima. Despite the pessimism of the quartet, however, there is still a glimmer of hope: beyond the devastation of the Apocalypse, the composer still has the strength to give voice to his autobiographical motto.

The question is how to return to light after such a journey into darkness. It took Shostakovich all of four years before he could write a new quartet. Following countless abortive attempts, he finally finished it in 1964. In the meantime, however, his marriage to Irina Antonovna had helped him work out a new narration for his music. There is a perceptible difference right from the exposition of the initial sonata form, *Moderato con moto*. Played by the first violin, the main theme reclines on a soft cushion in E-flat, while the cheerful second theme in B minor leaps from one string to the next of the cello. The composition gives voice to the beloved viola, revealing the perfect formal elegance typical of the composer's work. The five movements are linked, and the following *Adagio* in F-sharp minor arises from a natural A played by the viola, the most characteristic note of the main theme. The intense lyricism of the *Adagio* derives from a reminiscence of Maria's lullaby from Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, accentuating the pervasive chromaticism that shifts, a few bars before the *Allegretto*, into the pungent rhythmic style of the following movement. This is the *Scherzo*, an ironic parody of military life featuring topsy-turvy marches that are harmonically all wrong. Unlike the central section, the start is muted and the coda breaks down into

pizzicati, suggesting a parade of tin soldiers in the foreground that dissolves into the distance. The second *Adagio*, on the other hand, is considerably less expressive and totally static, almost informal in the disintegration of elements floating in the void. The semitone interval, which acted as the germinal cell of the previous movements, becomes the focus of the final *Allegro*, the most important part of the whole quartet. By means of an elaborately cogent sonata form, it acts as the final synthesis of the entire spiritual journey. While *Quartet No.8* is epically static, the finale of *Quartet No.9* communicates a vitality sustained by various different forms of expression. The narration develops through continual permutations of divergent themes: contrasts that regard not only mood and genre - the waltz and the folk song – but also meter, melodic profile, harmonic treatment and free or contrapuntal composition. Instead of being the monologue of a survivor, *Quartet No.9* is a polyphonic chorus of living voices that provides the narration of history with a path towards the future.

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Translated by Kate Singleton



Noûs (nûs) is a Greek word whose meaning is ‘mind’, and thence ‘rationality’, but also ‘inspiration’ and ‘creativity’.

Quartetto Noûs, formed in 2011, has established itself in a short time as one of the most interesting chamber music ensembles of its generation. Its immersive performances are the fruit of a professional training that embraces both the Italian tradition and the most influential European schools.

The quartet studied with the Quartetto di Cremona at the Accademia Walter Stauffer in Cremona, at the Basel Musik Akademie with Rainer Schmidt (Hagen Quartet), at the Escuela Superior de Música 'Reina Sofia' in Madrid and at the Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Siena with Günter Pichler (Alban Berg Quartet) and at the Lübeck Musikhochschule with Heime Müller (Artemis Quartet).

In 2014 Quartetto Noûs was selected to take part in the project 'Le Dimore del Quartetto' thanks to which it won a scholarship. During the same year it was awarded another important scholarship offered by the Fundación Albeniz of Madrid.

In 2015 the quartet was awarded the Piero Farulli Prize for the best emerging chamber music group of that year, as part of the XXXIV Franco Abbiati Award, the most prestigious Italian music critics' award.

In 2015 it also received the Arthur Rubinstein – Una Vita nella Musica Award from La Fenice Theatre in Venice.

The versatility and the interpretative originality of the ensemble are evident in its repertoire, which includes attention to new compositional languages and involvement in innovative concert formats, such as performing by heart in complete darkness.

The quartet has worked with several contemporary composers and taken part in many cross-cutting projects with renowned theatre and dance companies. The many famous artists with which it has been involved include Tommaso Lonquich, Andrea Lucchesini, Alain Meunier, Giampaolo Bandini, Giovanni Scaglione, Sonig Tchakerian, Bruno Canino and Boris Petrushansky, Alessandro Taverna, Gloria Campaner and Enrico Bronzi.

Quartetto Noûs has performed for important Italian concert seasons such as Società del Quartetto in Milan, Unione Musicale in Turin, Amici della Musica in Florence, Bologna Festival and Musica Insieme in Bologna, Società del Quartetto in Bergamo, Società Veneziana dei Concerti, Associazione Chamber Music in Trieste, Associazione Musicale Lucchese, Associazione Scarlatti in Naples, I Concerti del Quirinale in Rome, Stradivari Festival in Cremona, Ravenna Festival and Settimane Musicali in Stresa.

The quartet is regularly invited to perform in Germany, Switzerland, England, France, Spain, Canada, United States, South Korea and China.

Its performances have been broadcast on various radio stations, including Venice Classic Radio, Radio Clásica, RSI and Radio 3.

In 2013 and 2017 the ensemble was quartet in residence at Festival Ticino Musica in Lugano.

In July 2019 it released a new album with works by Puccini, Boccherini, Verdi and Respighi recorded for the "Warner Classics" label.

In 2020 the quartet realised for Brilliant Classics a recording project entirely dedicated to the quartets of the Italian composer Silvia Colasanti (1911-1998).

In 2021, for the same label, it starts a new project that consists in recording all the Shostakovich' String Quartets.

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