

West Cork Chamber Music Festival 2021
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presents

Bantry and Beyond

Russian Pictures

5. From Beethoven to Weinberg

Filmed at the Abbaye Royaumont, Paris

Quatuor Danel

Marc Danel, Gilles Millet [violins]

Vlad Bogdanas [viola]

Yovan Markovitch [cello]

Weinberg

Improvisation and Romance

Beethoven

String Quartet No.2 in G major Op.18/2

Weinberg

String Quartet No.5 Op.27

Mieczysław Weinberg [1919–1996]

Improvisation and Romance

The second ever performance of this miniature was at the Bantry Festival in July 2018 played by Quatuor Danel as an encore in an afternoon recital. It had been premiered at the Zaubersee Festival the previous month. We must take our hats off to Marc Danel and musicologist David Fanning for their dedication to rediscovering and returning to light the works and biographical history of Mieczysław Weinberg, whose own preoccupation lay in making the music and not so much in claiming recognition. Weinberg shares in an interview later in his life: *I believe that every moment in the real life of a real artist consists in some sense of work. Interesting, persistent, endless work. Work not only at the writing desk but also work in observation, in the absorption of sounds, colours, motion and the rhythms of reality into oneself. I am always working.*

Just as in the Fifth Quartet a solitary violin begins, here introducing the lyrical melody before being joined in beautiful harmony, supported in its romantic endeavours and grounded as it is momentarily snatched up by the cello. Where 'Improvisation' flirts stylistically more with classical era composition, 'Romance' beautifully bends to a more pop cultural mode, theatrical and expressive we are tempted to sing along. This brief romance ends in a dream like mist.

Deirdre Humphrys

Ludwig van Beethoven [1770–1827]

String Quartet No.2 in G major Op.18/2 [1798-1800]

1. *Allegro*
2. *Adagio cantabile*
3. *Scherzo: Allegro*
4. *Allegro molto quasi Presto*

Beethoven's first six String Quartets were published in two volumes by Mollo & Co. in Vienna in 1801, dedicated to Prince Lobkowitz. They had been written between 1798 and 1800 but not in the order in which they appeared in print. Beethoven was unhappy with the second movement and replaced it with a totally fresh piece. The original version was in five parts with two contrasting episodes, which he transformed to a simple ternary design with a scherzo-like *Allegro* suddenly appearing unannounced and unexplained in the middle of a profound *Adagio*. Sketches for the original five-part movement survive and were edited and reconstructed for a performance in Manchester University by the ever-adventurous Quatuor Danel.

The Second Quartet seems to have been the fifth to be composed. In Teutonic lands it is called the *Komplimentier Quartett*, perhaps referring to the gracefulness of much of the music, as though the instruments were paying each other charming compliments; indeed the whole Quartet looks back to the classical period of Haydn (his teacher) and Mozart.

The first movement certainly lives up to the title. The music is graceful and witty, even though one of the opening phrases was to re-emerge in the late C sharp minor Quartet. The slow movement is solemn and elegant, again the influences of his predecessors are clearly heard throughout. Then, with typical Beethoven cheekiness, he inserts his lively new central *Allegro* section that just as suddenly halts and the solemn lines of the opening return to complete the movement.

The first violin introduces the witty theme of the Scherzo. This is the most advanced of the Quartet's movements and could easily have turned up in a much later work. There is a lightness of touch and a tongue-in-cheek sparkle which is quite captivating. The central Trio is rather more solemn, its theme in staccato chords but after a short development of the idea the opening section bounces back. The cello presents the intoxicating theme of the finale in simple, staccato notes. This innocent opening is soon expanded into some vigorous passages, showing how a small idea can be turned into a major movement. The mood is light and airy with strong contrasts between the varied sequences, leading to an upbeat closure.

Ian Fox

Mieczysław Weinberg [1919–1996]

String Quartet No.5 Op.27 [1945]

1. *Melody*
2. *Humoresque*
3. *Scherzo*
4. *Improvisation*
5. *Serenade*

Mieczysław Weinberg was born into a secular Jewish family. He first fled the Nazi invasion of his native Warsaw in September 1939, then again only two years later from Minsk, where the Germans in violation of its treaties of friendship attacked the Soviet Union in June of 1941. His Fifth Quartet was written two years after he finally settled in Moscow in 1943 and was premiered in 1947. His family did not survive the Nazi occupation of Warsaw. Throughout these deeply transformative years of flight and unsettlement Weinberg worked constantly.

It is the balance between his multiple identities, rather than adherence to any one of them, that defines his uniqueness. Nowhere did Weinberg more clearly delineate the development of his craft than in his seventeen string quartets. David Fanning

The five movement titles give us more information than the customary tempo – 'Melody', 'Humoresque', 'Scherzo', 'Improvisation' and 'Serenade' - generously state the obvious and one suspects that this naming was borrowed from Shostakovich, who had in the previous year titled the movements of his Second Quartet 'Overture', 'Recitative and Romance', 'Waltz', and 'Theme and Variations'. These titles allow the listeners to recognise the assigned quality or mood so as to explore or give way to the music more readily.

Weinberg shared a vital artistic friendship and creative dialogue with Russian composer Dimitri Shostakovich. Discovering their creative affinity is deeply moving, as it is friendship that underlies challenging creative professions, with the joy and excitement necessary to persevere when in doubt as to one's relevance or substance, to be known and seen by your peer in mutual respect, and of course not without enough convivial competition.

Weinberg is at this point still developing and experimenting with his string quartet form and language. His aptitude for melody is pronounced in the opening movement as the first violin achieves an intimate solitude – alone but not lonely, utterly singular and yet collective. Initially the melody's kaleidoscopic, sparkling mutations remain open and difficult to decipher, the cello joins in lilting support before all strings resound together in a seriousness impossible to ignore. A consequence of this structural withholding is a revealing of content, the feeling of an instant removed from the layering of texture. This will become a trait in many of Weinberg's slow movements in all his chamber music and we hear this innovation unfolding in Shostakovich's Quartets but not until the slow movement of his Fifth Quartet, composed some seven years later.

This sparseness of texture reappears in 'Improvisation' with the first violin playing solo for over a minute and again in 'Serenade' where the second violin does not make an appearance in the first 107 bars. 'Humoresque' might allow your shoulders to pronounce the notes and move along with the tune a little, you cannot but embody the fun – elbows, hands, hips. As the movement develops the humour dissipates for moments, at a time coming apart only to be cheerfully re-iterated before the bracing the central 'Scherzo'. Here we find a compelling two and a half minutes of theatrical drama, and not without a hint of humour.

Weinberg's childhood playground was the Jewish theatre where his father was composer and violinist, it is here he taught himself to play the piano and began his first pursuits in composition. Listening to, then playing with and sometimes leading the ensemble instead of his father, Weinberg's own recollections express best an early imagination encouraged to realisation:

...Life was my first music teacher since I was born into a family where my father has devoted himself to music since childhood... from the age of six I tagged along behind him; I went to listen to all those less than top-quality, but always very sincere melodies...

...What does writing music mean to a child? I simply took one of my father's music sheets and scribbled down something or other: some clefs, some notes, without any intelligent meaning. But in this way I studied music right from my birth, as it were. And when I wrote these 'operettas' I probably imagined myself to be a composer.

'Mieczyslaw Weinberg In Search of Freedom' by David Fanning

It is an absolute privilege to be immersed in the live performances of a full cycle of Quartets by *any* composer performed by a Quartet fanatically dedicated to the music. I can tell you from first-ear experience that we are in for a particular treat at next year's Festival with Quatuor Danel, who along with musicologist David Fanning are responsible for the re-

discovery of these Quartets over the last twenty years. It is important to have something to look forward to, and in the meantime we will imagine proximity and savour these collective aural encounters to discuss in person next summer between concerts and over coffee.

Lastly I will share a short passage from another member of the Jewish Diaspora. One year Weinberg's junior, born *Chaya* Clarice Lispector in Chechelnyk, Podolia, a shtetl in what is today Ukraine, survived the flight with her family, first to Romania and then immigration to Brazil. Lispector was in contrast to Weinberg's twenty only one year of age at her exile.

My story is of a calm darkness, of the root asleep in its strength, of the smell which has no scent. And in none of this does the abstract exist. It is the figurative of the unnameable. There is almost no flesh in this quartet of mine. A shame that the word "nerves" is linked to painful vibrations, otherwise it would be a quartet of nerves. Dark strings that, when plucked, do not speak of "other things", they don't change the topic — they are in and of themselves, they surrender just as they are, without lie or fantasy.

From 'Água Viva' by Clarice Lispector, translation by Stefan Tobler.

Deirdre Humphrys