

## Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) String Quartet No 2 in A Op 68 (1944)

Overture: *Moderato con moto*

Recitative and Romance: *Adagio*

Valse: *Allegro*

Theme and Variations: *Adagio – Moderato con moto – Allegretto – Più mosso – Allegro – Adagio*

*"I worry about the lightning speed with which I compose... It is exhausting, rather unpleasant, and at the end of the day you lack any confidence in the result."* Letter from Shostakovich to Vissarion Shebalin, Director of the Moscow Conservatoire and dedicatee of the second quartet, September 1944.

Shostakovich spent the summer of 1944, well fed after the privations of besieged Leningrad, at Ivanovo, one of the Soviet government's '*Houses of Rest and Creativity*' for artists and composers. A fellow composer tells how Shostakovich would slip away for 40 minutes or so from a football game, or an evening drinking session, for a quick compose. He then disappeared for a week, after which on September 20<sup>th</sup> he surfaced, unshaven and exhausted with the just-finished score of the second quartet.

The war had brought a paradoxical release to Shostakovich - a flowering of artistic creativity. The hidden, secret sorrow for victims of Stalin's purges gave way to shared, demonstrable, public sorrow for the victims of war. Released emotion bursts out of the second quartet. He had come back into favour after the condemnation of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* in 1937: his Fifth Symphony was well received and his Piano Quintet won the Stalin prize in 1941. By the summer of 1944, the war was at last going well for Russia, and victory seemed to be at hand.

The work opens boldly over open strings with a confident figure of falling fifths, the start of something grand. A more anguished, dotted second subject follows and the initial figure is developed in a minor version, only returning to the major in the last few bars. The movement ends with a reassuringly familiar final cadence.



In the second movement the simplest of sustained chords support an emotionally-charged recitative from a cantor-like first violin. Enclosed within this recitative is a *Romance*, introduced by the tenderest of phrases on the violin which is echoed by the cello and then developed by the violin. Tenderness is overwhelmed, bringing back the intensity of the recitative, but the end is a calmly reassuring cadence.

The third movement is a '*valse macabre*' – a dance of death in Rondo form. An *Adagio* introduces the Russian theme of the last movement's fifteen variations played on the solo viola. Tension gradually builds until an episode reminiscent of the climax of Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture, the return of the *Adagio*, and a hymn-like restatement of the theme.