

Programme Note by Chris Darwin: please use freely for non-commercial purposes

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) String Quartet No 4 in D Op 83 (1949)

Allegretto

Andantino

Allegretto

Allegretto

In 1948 Stalin's secretary in charge of ideological matters Andrei Zhdanov extended his critical doctrine of authors (*'The only conflict that is possible in Soviet culture is the conflict between good and best'*) to composers: Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Khatchaturian were accused of 'formalist and decadent' tendencies, 'unhealthy individualism' and 'pessimism'. Shostakovich lost his job at the Moscow Conservatory and made a living by churning out music for the state-run film industry, keeping his serious music in his desk. Anti-semitism was rife, culminating in the notorious 'Doctors plot' shortly before Stalin's death in 1953. Shostakovich identified with the Jews' ambivalent and precarious state:

'Jewish folk music ... is multifaceted, it can appear to be happy while it is tragic. It's almost always laughter through tears. This quality of Jewish folk music is close to my ideas of what music should be. There should always be two layers in music. Jews were tormented for so long that they learned to hide their despair. They express despair in dance music.' (Testimony, 1979)

The fourth quartet, which had its first public performance in 1953, expresses these two layers of meaning, the surface and the hidden, particularly in the humorous but menacingly muted Scherzo of the third movement. The quartet's melody, rhythm and texture all have a Middle-Eastern flavour: the wistful sadness of the violin's unbroken line in the second movement and the viola's incantation before the Klezmer-like last movement which unwinds to a death-like stasis.