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Mieczysław Weinberg (1919-1996) String Quartet No. 6 in E minor Op 35 (1946)

Allegro semplice

Presto agitato

(attacca) Allegro con fuoco

Adagio

Moderato commodo

Andante maestoso

Born in Warsaw to Jewish parents, Weinberg had a precocious musical talent; he composed from early childhood and aged 10 played the piano in the theatre where his father worked in the orchestra. Plans for him to study piano in America were shattered by the outbreak of World War II and he fled to the Soviet Union. The rest of his family stayed and died in the Warsaw ghetto. He studied composition seriously at the Minsk Conservatoire from 1939 to 1941 and then settled for a while in Tashkent. There he met Shostakovich, who had a profound effect on him: *'It was as if I had been born anew Although I took no lessons from him, Dmitri Shostakovich was the first person to whom I would show each of my new works'* .

Weinberg resisted Stalinist pressure on how he should compose. In early 1953, he was jailed partly as a result of continuous attacks in the soviet press and partly because his wife's uncle, the Kremlin physician Miron Vovsi, had been implicated in the fictitious "Doctors' plot" and labelled an enemy of the people. A letter in Weinberg's defence from Shostakovich very probably saved his life. Their friendship lasted until Shostakovich's death.

Weinberg's output is very substantial and includes 7 operas, 25 symphonies, 17 string quartets as well as numerous concertos and sonatas for a variety of instruments. Lyudmilla Nikitina writes in Grove of Weinberg's musical style: *"The imagery of many of his works is connected with his memories of his childhood and of World War II, and consequently themes relating to the destruction of childhood (and, by extension, purity, serenity and stability) are central to his aesthetic and are frequently symbolized by the musical material. Despite this, Weinberg strove for a reflection of a philosophy of universal harmony and unity by means of neo-classical, rationalist clarity and proportion."*

The Sixth Quartet is a large-scale work (lasting over half-an-hour) that demonstrates how much Weinberg had mastered in quartet writing by 1946. After this quartet he did not compose another for eleven years. Although published in 1948 shortly after being written, the work was banned by the Soviet Composers' Union from actually being performed. Its world premier was not until 2007 in Manchester. It is now recognised as a masterpiece comparable to the quartets of Shostakovich.

The first movement is in traditional sonata form based on a melancholic theme of slow minims contrasted with rapid flurries. This material returns in the development in a much more aggressive form – a contrast reminiscent of Shostakovich. The movement, and indeed the work as a whole, uses modes, including the unusual Locrian mode (*illustrated*), rather than just the conventional major/minor scales.



The *Presto Agitato* second movement turns the preceding aggression into full violence. Its arch-like structure lacks the expected recapitulation of the opening material, but that is provided immediately (*attacca*) by the brief third movement which is almost a continuation of the second. It links to the fourth movement as it comments on what has gone before and anticipates what is coming up.

The texture lightens as the fourth movement (*Moderato commodo*) opens with a slow fugato - the instruments entering obediently in turn. The music darkens recalling the first movement and then recalls the third movement.

The fifth movement *Moderato* evokes Schubert with its alternation of major and minor as broadly tonal passages are linked by chromatically complex ones. Here is Daniel Elfick taking us through to the end:

"The most distinctive motif in this movement can be heard in the middle section, where the cello takes the limelight, with a line full of dotted minims, bridged with links dominated by semiquavers. Above this, the accompanying parts give a frantic accompaniment, providing the harmony above the cello. Each of these gestures finishes with a violent sforzando pizzicato chord in the viola, providing a hint of violence in what is otherwise an ethereal and tender movement.

"The final movement *Andante maestoso* can be read as a neat summary of the whole quartet, as well as incorporating several techniques that pervade Weinberg's quartets from the Third onwards. These include violent pizzicato chords as accompaniment, melodies harmonised in thirds across parts, chromatic 'slips' in melodic lines to give a suggestion of cheekiness, and flattened modality.

"The Locrian mode, as mentioned above, here provides a main focus, before several cyclical passages recall the previous movements of the quartet. ... The combination of recalled themes brings the movement, and the quartet to a gentle close."

Much of this programme note is based on an excellent blog on Weinberg and another on his Sixth Quartet by Daniel Elphick:

http://linesthathaveescapeddestruction.blogspot.com/2013/07/work-focus-string-quartet-no-6-op-35_4.html