Recitals from the World Stage
Streaming from Wednesday, August 5, at 8pm through Tuesday, August 11

DANISH STRING QUARTET
from Copenhagen, Denmark

SHOSTAKOVICH String Quartet No. 10 in A-flat, Opus 118
Andante
Allegretto furioso
Adagio
Allegretto—Andante

Folk Song, arranged by the Danish String Quartet (to be announced from the stage)

ARTISTS

DANISH STRING QUARTET
Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, violins; Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola; Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, cello

The Danish String Quartet brings a rare musical spontaneity to music ranging from Haydn to Shostakovich to contemporary scores. Since its debut in 2002, the quartet has also demonstrated a special affinity for Scandinavian composers including Nielsen, Hans Abrahamsen, Bent Sørensen, and traditional Nordic folk music. The recipient of many awards and prestigious appointments, including the Borletti Buitoni Trust, the Danish String Quartet was named in 2013 as BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artists and appointed to the The Bowers Program (formerly CMS Two) at New York’s Lincoln Center. In 2007, they established the DSQ Festival, which takes place in an intimate and informal setting in Copenhagen. Highlights of recent seasons include six-concert series of the complete Beethoven cycle of sixteen string quartets, a recital with violinist Augustin Hadelich, and a world premiere of Bent Sørensen’s Dancers and Disappearance for string quartet and accordion. For their Series of Four concerts they both perform and invite colleagues—the Ebène Quartet and mandolin player Chris Thile, among others—to appear at the venerable Danish Radio Concert Hall. The Danish String Quartet has received numerous citations and prizes including the 2011 Carl Nielsen Prize, the highest cultural honor in Denmark. Most recently, the Quartet received its first Grammy nomination in 2019, for the first release of its five-disc recording project “PRISM” for ECM New Series. In addition to that ongoing recording project, they performed the full PRISM cycle at La Jolla Music Society in five concerts in November 2019. They performed the complete Beethoven cycle at Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in February 2020. Violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard met as children at a music summer camp where they played soccer and made music together. As teenagers, they began the study of classical chamber music and were mentored by Tim Frederiksen of Copenhagen’s Royal Danish Academy of Music. In 2008, the three Danes were joined by Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin. Please visit www.danishquartet.com.

Notes on the Program

The fifteen string quartets of DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975) make up one of the most remarkable and personal contributions to that genre in the 20th century. After running into repeated political difficulties with Soviet officiahdom over such large “public” works as his symphonies (which were accused of not following the official party artistic lines), Shostakovich gave up symphonic composition for a number of years. The Ninth Symphony was written immediately after the end of World War II. The Tenth, however, did not come until after Stalin’s death in 1953. In those interim years, string quartet composition predominated. The personal and private expressive qualities of the string quartet medium meant that party hacks were less likely to attempt second-guessing the “meaning” that the composer was expressing in his music. In short, quartets were simply less dangerous to write.

Shostakovich had written a Ninth Quartet in 1961 but decided not long after to burn the manuscript. Not for three years did he return to string quartet writing, but when he did, he quickly turned out three sibling pieces. The Tenth Quartet was composed between July 11 and 20, 1964, while Shostakovich was on a holiday at the Composers’ Retreat in Dilizhan, Armenia; it is dedicated to a composer friend, Moishei Vainberg. As with all but his First and
Fifteenth quartets, the premiere was given by the Beethoven Quartet (the new Ninth was also on the program), in Moscow on November 20 and in Leningrad the next day.

The quartet consists of the “normal” four movements, though in fact their character has little to do with standard quartet practice. The opening Andante is of such simplicity and apparent lack of guile that it seems to serve as an extended upbeat to the Allegretto furioso, one of the most violent string quartet movements ever composed. This “scherzo” strongly resembles in character the similar movement of Shostakovich’s Tenth Symphony, composed soon after the death of Stalin, where the similar material was reputed to represent a demonic picture of the late dictator.

The third movement, Adagio, employs one of the composer’s favorite devices—a slow passacaglia, working out its variations on a bass line of sober cut. Usually composers use this device to build toward a climactic and intense statement late in the structure, but Shostakovich inverts the normal procedure, starting with a powerful statement of the theme and gradually seeming to run out of steam. The final Allegretto picks up from the collapse of the passacaglia and eventually reworks the passacaglia material as a counterpoint to the faster main subject. The quartet ends, however, in a slow tempo (this became more and more typical of Shostakovich in his late quartets), with references to the opening movement.

STEVEN LEDBETTER

*Steven Ledbetter was program annotator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1979 to 1998.*

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