

Carducci Quartet

SHOSTAKOVICH15

"a once-in-a-lifetime event, and next to it everyone else's Shostakovich anniversary programming seems merely dutiful."

August 10, 2015

THE GUARDIAN/ ERICA JEAL

Carducci Quartet/Shostakovich15 review – truly extraordinary stamina in a musical marathon

Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, London

The Carduccis maintained astonishing intensity throughout the complete cycle of Shostakovich's 15 string quartets – performed in a single day

Matthew Denton, violin, Michelle Fleming, violin, Eoin Schmidt-Martin, viola, Emma Denton, cello

Most ensembles gung-ho enough to attempt a complete cycle of the 15 Shostakovich quartets – including, on other occasions, the Carducci Quartet – might spread them across a weekend, and still call it intensive. But that's for wimps. Here, on the 40th anniversary of the composer's death, the Carduccis put the quartets end to end in a single day: nearly seven hours of music, in four concerts with barely an hour between each. It demanded unusual focus from the audience, several changes of the Playhouse candles – and truly extraordinary stamina from the players. Between the later quartets it was as if the audience was cheering them around the last laps of a marathon.

Of course, Shostakovich never envisaged his works presented like this. In the exuberant earliest quartets the peaks of intensity became relentless, the players making no concessions to the long haul ahead. Indeed, perhaps the first four quartets could have been approached more as one single score, the Carduccis grading the fierceness of their playing accordingly rather than gunning for each climax. There were few moments of truly soft playing early on – but lots of crisp little dance passages that bounced off the coiled spring of Emma

Denton's cello, lots of yearning, finely judged melodies and deft mood swings. And the loudest episodes could be thrilling: the start of the Quartet No 4 made the Playhouse's balconies ring like the body of a supersized stringed instrument.

Violinist Matthew Denton's occasional explanatory chats hit a false note once or twice thanks to the audience's seeming determination to find jokes in them. But hearing these quartets all together revealed not only that none of them is a weak link, but that there is a surprising amount of sunlight amid the gloom, especially in the mellower pair of works that followed the coruscating Eighth.

The Carduccis maintained astonishing intensity, right through to the focused stillness of No 15. This was, as advertised, perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime event, and next to it everyone else's Shostakovich anniversary programming seems merely dutiful.

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/aug/10/carducci-quartet-shostakovich-15-review>