

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1976) String Quartet No. 8 in C minor, Op. 110

- i. Largo, attacca
- ii. Allegro molto, attacca
- iii. Allegretto, attacca
- iv. Largo, attacca
- v. Largo

Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 8, the most loved of all his quartets, is the only substantial work that he composed outside Russia. It was written in 1960 while he was in the former Communist state of East Germany to write the score for the Soviet film 'Five Days - Five Nights', a film concerned with the ruin of Dresden by a senseless incendiary attack by British and American bombers on the night of 13th February, 1945. At this time, Shostakovich was suffering a bout of deep depression. He had never recovered from the loss of his first wife Nina Vasilievna Shostakovich née Varzar who had died in November 1954. He had married quickly afterwards but this second partnership proved unsuccessful and terminated in divorce in the summer of 1959. Under pressure from Khrushchev's officials, he had recently applied to join the Communist Party, which he had previously sworn he would never do, and for months he underwent periods of self-loathing for his perceived cowardice in betraying his principles.

Shostakovich composed the quartet in just three days, from the 12th to the 14th of July and gave it a dedication which firmly identified it with the tragic event: 'In Remembrance of the Victims of Fascism and War', a public statement referring to the destruction of Dresden. The music, however, is shrouded in a degree of ambiguity as, in private, Shostakovich stated the work was a memorial for its composer, a claim borne out by his use of a number of personal references and musical quotations of his own works. Indeed, the quartet is founded on a building block of four notes – D, E flat, C and B natural – which in German musical nomenclature are Shostakovich's own initials (DSCH). Each of the five connected movements refer to this motif in some form.

The quartet has five interconnected movements. It begins with the cello. Then successively, the viola, second and first violins enter giving a canonic treatment to the four-note motif. This is followed by a theme in the first violin and viola from the introduction of his First Symphony, the work that first brought him to national prominence. The two themes are part of a loose rondo-like structure that also includes a descending theme in the first violin that refers to his Fifth Symphony, the work that restored him to favor in 1937 after official attacks had endangered his career, if not his life.

In contrast to the slow lament of the first movement, the Allegro molto erupts violently with several versions of the DSCH theme, in varying note lengths. At a climactic moment mid-movement, the violins wail out a theme from Shostakovich's Second Piano Trio, which was written in 1944. Shostakovich called this a "Jewish" theme, saying: "Jewish folk music has made a most powerful impression on me... it can appear to be happy while it is tragic. It's almost always laughter through tears. This quality... is close to my ideas of what music should be. There should always be two layers in music. Jews were tormented so long that they learned to hide their despair. They express despair in dance music."

The third movement is an angst-ridden waltz-rondo built around the DSCH motif, with the key moving between the major and minor creating an unsettling feeling, very much a hallmark of Shostakovich's style. A sense of respite is reached with the introduction of a

new quote – the march-like theme from Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto, composed the previous year.

The fourth movement begins with a series of three brutal percussive quavers. It has been suggested that the banging represents gunfire, and the pianissimo droning of the first violin represents distant aircraft. Amid the episodes of this repeated figure, Shostakovich created an arrangement of the Russian revolutionary song “Tortured by Grievous Bondage” (appearing with the DSCH motif), as well as the poignant farewell aria from his opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk*, the work that precipitated his official condemnation in 1936.

The final Largo presents the DSCH fugue of the opening but now with a different countersubject derived from music from the final scene of *Lady Macbeth*, which sees prisoners being led into Siberian exile. The piece ends with the first violin voice, seemingly alone, uttering repeated dissonances until the hushed finish. The overall affect is numbness.

Even if the listener is not familiar with all the works that Shostakovich is quoting one cannot help but be struck by the powerfully resonant emotion in the work. Shostakovich voices the torment of all human agony whether it be due to fascism, war or personal bereavement. Such a compelling expression of painful universal experience is perhaps the reason that this quartet is regarded as a masterpiece of the twentieth century.

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