

SHOSTAKOVICH'S STRING QUARTET NO. 8

Shostakovich's life, too, was deeply bound up with World War II and its Cold War aftermath. He wrote the Symphony No. 7 (*Leningrad*, 1941) during the Nazi siege of Leningrad, and composed works with Jewish themes in response to the Holocaust, including the Second Piano Trio (1944) and the Symphony No. 13 (*Babi Yar*, 1962), with texts concerning the Nazi mass murder of Ukrainian Jews at Kiev. Other works, such as the String Quartet No. 8 (1960), written as he battled serious health troubles and thoughts of suicide, delve into the traumas of these years in more personal terms (see Anthology 16).

Shostakovich composed the Eighth Quartet in three days immediately after touring the ruins of Dresden. He had traveled there to compose music for a film about the advancing Soviet Army's attempts to remove artistic treasures before Allied bombers destroyed the city in the closing months of the war. On the title

page, the quartet is dedicated “to the victims of Fascism and war,” but in a letter to a friend Shostakovich described it as a requiem to himself: “I started thinking that if some day I die, nobody is likely to write a work in memory of me, so I had better write one myself. The title page could carry the dedication: ‘To the memory of the composer of this quartet.’” He underscored this autobiographical dimension by using a motive based on his name, DSCH, which, using German note names, corresponds to D–E♭–C–B. The motive is introduced by the cello at the very beginning in a somber fugato that evokes Beethoven’s late string Quartets Opp. 131 and 132 (Ex. 9.2). It then reappears in different contexts and moods throughout the five continuous movements that comprise the work.

In much the same way that Britten’s *War Requiem* was an attempt to rebuild a musical language amid the rubble of the past, Shostakovich’s quartet is built from allusions to earlier works by other composers and from fragments of his own pieces, enumerated in the same letter to his friend:

The quartet also uses themes from some of my own compositions and the Revolutionary song *Tormented by Grievous Bondage*. The themes from my own works are as follows: from the First Symphony [1925], the Eighth Symphony [1943], the [Second Piano] Trio [1944], the Cello Concerto [1959] and *Lady Macbeth* [1932]. There are hints of Wagner (the Funeral March from *Götterdämmerung*) and Tchaikovsky (the second subject of the first movement of the Sixth Symphony). Oh yes, I forgot to mention that there is something else of mine as well, from the Tenth Symphony [1953]. Quite a nice little hodge-podge, really.

Throughout the work the quotations are distorted and broken off, just as each movement is interrupted by the unexpected beginning of the next. All five movements are in the minor mode, and three have a slow and mournful tone. The second and third movements are faster, but their character is darkly sardonic, violent, and—especially in the distorted waltz of the third-movement Scherzo—almost unhinged.

At the 1960 premiere of the String Quartet No. 8 in Leningrad the audience demanded an encore of the complete work, and the piece went on to become one of

Example 9.2: Dmitri Shostakovich, *String Quartet No. 8*, movement I, mm. 1–8

the most frequently performed and recorded twentieth-century quartets. Yet to a far greater extent than Britten, who despite his success often felt like an outsider, Shostakovich veered between the highest official honors and fears of impending arrest as he made his way within the byzantine totalitarian system of the Soviet Union. Gauging the intent of his works as compliant with or defiant to his repressive environment is the subject of intense debate by musicians and scholars today, just as it was for those who were in charge of policing him during his life.

ACCLAIM AND NOTORIETY

Shostakovich was born into a well-off musical family in St. Petersburg (the city's changing names over the years—Petrograd from 1914–24, Leningrad from 1924–91, then back to St. Petersburg—mirror the disruptions and upheavals through which Shostakovich lived.) He started studying piano and composing when he was nine, soon demonstrating enormous musical talent and virtuosic performance abilities. In 1919 he was admitted to the Petrograd Conservatory, where he encountered the latest European new music, including works by Strauss, Bartók, Hindemith, and later Stravinsky and Prokofiev.

Shostakovich's First Symphony, composed in 1925 when he was 18, brought him international attention. The score foretells his lifelong openness to a broad range of influences; for example, the unsentimental tone of the New Objectivity and Neoclassical manipulation of styles and genres can be heard in his many off-kilter polkas, waltzes, and marches. The first quotation that appears in the Eighth Quartet after the opening fugato is the playful first theme of the symphony, now transformed into a brooding lament around which the other voices circulate nervously.

In addition to performing as a pianist, Shostakovich built his early career writing music for ballet, theater, and film. The formal disjunctions in the Eighth Quartet and other works have been compared to filmic editing technique, as has his use of dramatic quotations that function like flashbacks to earlier points in a narrative. Shostakovich's works from the 1920s and early 1930s reflect the official openness to Modernist art during the early Soviet period. His two early operas, *The Nose* (1928) and *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1932), were based on bizarre and lurid subject matter, while the music shows the influence of the Futurists' noise effects, the dissonant intensity of Berg's *Wozzeck* (which made an enormous impression on Shostakovich in 1927), and allusions to jazz and popular dance styles characteristic of the topical operas (*Zeitoper*) of Hindemith and Krenek.

These and other works brought Shostakovich considerable notoriety and performances throughout Europe and the United States, but they also attracted the attention of Stalin, who after Lenin's death in 1924 sought to suppress all external intellectual and artistic influences. Scholars have argued that *Lady Macbeth* was consistent with Soviet ideology in its depiction of the main character

Katerina's murders of her merchant husband and father-in-law, who symbolized the oppressive capitalist social order. Nevertheless, the opera was publicly criticized for its dissonance, vulgarity, and "petty-bourgeois 'innovations'" in 1936 in the Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* (SR 188:1398; 7/19:128). The attack, in an article entitled "Chaos Instead of Music," signaled not only that Shostakovich's works had fallen out of favor, but also that he faced the very real possibility of being arrested or killed, the fate of several of his acquaintances and family members during Stalin's purges.

The fourth movement of the String Quartet No. 8 contains a quotation from Katerina's lovesick aria in Act 4 of *Lady Macbeth*, where, among a group of convicts on their way to Siberia, she meets her lover Sergei, not realizing that he has taken up with another woman. This melody is prefaced by a grim quotation from the Revolutionary song "Tormented by Grievous Bondage" (see p. 188). The movement ends with a return of the terrifying music with which it begins, a strained stillness interrupted by sudden, sharp, repeated chords heard by some as the ominous pounding on the door in the middle of the night, when the Soviet authorities came to take someone away.

SOCIALIST REALISM

Shostakovich and other "formalist" composers were charged in the early 1930s with having "debased the lofty social role of music and narrowed its significance, limiting it to the gratification of the perverted tastes of esthetizing egocentrics." Such was the voice of Socialist Realism, which sought to counter Western Modernist experimentation with a healthy and optimistic art "for the people." In the terminology we used in Chapter 8, Socialist Realism can be seen as a different kind of "invented tradition," one all the more potent in that adhering to it could be a matter of life and death. Paradoxically, the power of the doctrine lay in its vagueness: as defined by Andrey Alexandrovich Zhdanov, the influential Party official who oversaw the arts, Socialist Realism represented "a creative method based on the truthful, historically concrete artistic reflection of reality in its revolutionary development."

Fearing for his life, Shostakovich withdrew a scheduled performance of his vast, Mahlerian Fourth Symphony (1936) and began composing a series of works, starting with the Fifth Symphony (1937), characterized by a simplified style and a more traditional approach to harmony, melody, and form—all ostensibly in the service of broad accessibility and a positive and uplifting message. Of the Fifth Symphony, another work alluded to in the Eighth Quartet, Shostakovich was quoted in official sources as saying: "I wanted to convey in the symphony how, through a series of tragic conflicts of great inner spiritual turmoil, optimism asserts itself as a world-view." Another sign of the times was his new interest in the more private world of chamber music; in 1938 he wrote the first of 15 string quartets that marked a split between his sometimes bombastic and overtly

propagandistic public works, such as the later symphonies and choral music, and deeply personal works like the Eighth Quartet.

In the context of Socialist Realism, questions about tonality versus atonality and twelve-tone composition were extremely fraught. Whereas some of Shostakovich's earlier works featured passages of emancipated dissonances, most of his works after the Fifth Symphony were in a key. The five movements of the Eighth Quartet, for example, zigzag from C minor through G \sharp minor, G minor, and C \sharp minor before finally returning to C minor. Yet while triads and cadential progressions feature prominently in Shostakovich's music, tonality is constantly subverted by modality, octatonicism, and even twelve-tone passages in the works of his last decade. That his music remains so immediately effective despite the complexity of the harmonic language can be attributed to its sharply defined rhythms, its clear and regular phrase structure, and the composer's preference for homophonic textures with memorable melodies.

COLD WAR PARADOXES

In the early years of the Cold War Soviet authorities sharply intensified their efforts to insure orthodoxy and stamp out opposition. In 1948 Shostakovich, Prokofiev (see Chapter 6), and others were again attacked for "formalism" and their music pronounced unsuitable for the Soviet people. Though Shostakovich attempted to downplay the "tragic" elements of the Eighth Symphony (another work quoted in the Eighth Quartet) by describing it as "optimistic and life-affirming," this and other recent compositions were censured at a Communist Party conference. Shostakovich abjectly accepted the criticism, promising to "try again and again to create symphonic works that are comprehensible and accessible to the people, from the standpoint of their ideological content, musical language, and form. I will work ever more diligently on the musical embodiment of images of the heroic Russian people." He lost his teaching post at the Leningrad Conservatory, took remedial instruction in Marxism-Leninism, and endured intense mockery and threats on his life. With performances of his earlier music essentially banned, he wrote a series of propagandistic works praising Stalin and the Russian victory in the "Great Patriotic War," such as the film score for *The Fall of Berlin* (1949) and the cantata *The Sun Shines over Our Motherland* (1952).

During the regime of Nikita Khrushchev (1953–64), who came to power after the death of Stalin, official control relaxed, opening up artistic expression to developments abroad. Gradually returning to official favor, Shostakovich was useful to the political authorities as the country's most important living composer and a symbol of the post-Stalin "thaw." Bans on his works were lifted and he was allowed to visit the United States and England for performances of his Cello Concerto No. 1 (1959), another piece quoted in the Eighth Quartet. Chain-smoking, drinking heavily, and often described as anxious and ill at ease, Shostakovich gave official speeches that had been written for him. While privately he showed considerable interest in

the works of composers like Britten, Boulez, and Karlheinz Stockhausen, his public statements included denunciations of new musical developments in Europe, including the twelve-tone method.

In 1960 Shostakovich yielded to the incessant pressure and took the painful step of joining the Communist Party. In his Symphony No. 12 (*The Year 1917*, 1961), dedicated to the memory of Lenin, many listeners heard a ringing affirmation of Socialist Realism. Dissidents like Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote Shostakovich off as a lost cause. Asked why he had not bothered to invite the composer to sign a petition criticizing the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the writer acidly explained, “The shackled genius Shostakovich would thrash about like a wounded thing, clasp himself with tightly folded arms so that his fingers could not hold a pen.”

Shostakovich may have been passing a similar verdict on himself in the Eighth Quartet, with its extensive quotation in the fourth movement of “Tormented by Grievous Bondage,” a patriotic song that was reputed to be a favorite of Stalin’s. It opens with the words: “Tormented by grievous bondage / You died a glorious death / In the struggle for the people’s cause / You laid down your life with honor.” Yet through the multiple layers of irony, self-mockery, and fear, Shostakovich created a work that continues to speak to audiences about the challenges of the human condition. Describing the Eighth Quartet as an “ideologically depraved quartet which is of no use to anybody,” he wrote to his friend: “It is a pseudo-tragic quartet, so much so that while I was composing it I shed the same amount of tears as I would have had to pee after half-a-dozen beers. When I got home, I tried a few times to play it through, but always ended up in tears.”

In a commentary on Shostakovich’s works written in 1976, the year after his death, the composer Alfred Schnittke (1934–1998) emphasized the strong individual voice underlying the diversity of his output over his long career. In a formulation that could be equally applied to Britten, who had died that year, Schnittke described how through the manifold borrowings and allusions in works like the Eighth Quartet “the past enters into new relations with the present, invades musical reality, like the ghost of Hamlet’s father, and shapes it.” In combining “the images of his own musical past . . . with images from the history of music,” Schnittke claims that Shostakovich was able to join “the individual with the universal” and “to influence the world through confluence with the world.”

As we will see in Chapters 10–12, for many younger composers the only adequate response to World War II and its aftermath was to banish such ghosts from the past and to question the possibility of meaningful connections to the history of music or to the music that had been embraced by the world around them.