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Shostakovich Quartet #15

Common perception of Shostakovich's music is deeply rooted in the external, in the relationship of his art to the asphyxiating political climate in which he had to survive. Without a doubt, irony and bitterness in response to the repression of Stalinist Russia inform the music. Yet so much of the response to calamity and pain winds up being an external reflection of internal states common to all mankind: anger, fear, mistrust, caution, alienation. Because of this we find that a great artist such as Shostakovich, even if he may write in response to his immediate personal situation, creates music which is also universal, which touches and moves us through an empathy born of our common knowledge of suffering.

The Fifteenth Quartet, Shostakovich's final work in this form, comes from the end of his life and takes on the quality of a personal requiem. A glance at the movement titles (including, among others, an Elegy and a Funeral March) immediately suggests such an idea. The composer's final period postdates Stalin's death and thus the music is in a sense freed to focus inward at long last. The work is in six connected slow movements, reminiscent of Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ*, which is similarly meditative in spirit. However, whereas the Haydn work deals with suffering as a source of eventual redemption, this bleaker work offers only a blossoming of doubt as it nears its conclusion.

The opening Elegy has the severity of an etching rather than the opulence of a painting. Spare and cold, one hears here the traditional chanting of the Russian Orthodox church, intoned more than sung. This is mourning without self-pity, a sense of loss that is ancient and eternal. The length and monotony of the movement oppress us with a Chekhovian ennui.

When the music progresses at long last to the Serenade we may expect the change to bring with it a sense of relief, of lightening. Yet whatever more casual song may be yearning to be heard, it is utterly obscured by twelve throat-tearing screams, such as might escape the mouths of figures in Picasso's *Guernica*. When a waltz-tune does arrive, its accompaniment is mechanistic and inhuman; so often in Shostakovich we are made aware of the brutality of an uncaring response to heartfelt wishes.

The following Intermezzo picks up on the idea of a painful dichotomy between utterance and response and takes it to its extreme. A wild cadenza for the first violin, almost rent asunder by its own turbulence, is met by frigid indifference in the cello. It is a powerful juxtaposition, perhaps the sense of the individual not understood by society, perhaps the extreme tension between what is felt and what it is safe to express. The well-known words of Dylan Thomas come to

mind here: “Do not go gentle into that good night / Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

The ensuing Nocturne gives a relative sense of crepuscular serenity, featuring a haunting viola theme adorned with glistening spider-web-like arpeggios. Still, there is unease beneath the surface, an inability to release into the potential calm. Perhaps this is a nocturnal rest such as is invoked in Chekhov’s story *Sleepy*, where a sleep-deprived nanny finally experiences restorative slumber after strangling the screaming infant in her care.

Announcing a movement together for the first time in the piece, all four instruments proclaim a heavy dotted rhythm at the start of the Funeral March. These statements alternate with individual recitatives which build toward a sense of wailing. If this were a film, these interspersed meditations might be portrayed as internal emotional experiences of the pallbearers, alternating and contrasting with the solemn, inevitable procession.

The Epilogue bursts out with a passage which is an expansion, even an explosion of a trill. This trill becomes the major player in this final movement, used as an obfuscating veil. There are many glances backward, reminiscences of the Elegy and the Funeral March, yet they are enshrouded in a fog of trills. This is an anti-cathartic piece. Whatever solace, whatever certainty may have been felt in the chanting of the Elegy and in the inexorable tread of the Funeral March is now infected with doubt and trembling.

Among Shostakovich’s never-to-be-fulfilled projects were plans for an opera on Gogol’s tale *The Portrait*. At the conclusion of this story a man reveals to the crowd gathered at an auction that he must destroy the painting on display. It is a diabolical portrait painted by his father, bringing torment and misery to all who own it; his father has exhorted him to eradicate the painting at all costs. As the man, nearing the conclusion of his tale, turns to gaze upon the painting again he sees that it has been stolen. Here, too, in Shostakovich’s final quartet we are left feeling our chance to face the mysteries revealed has been thwarted. Any hope of resolution is stolen away; all is emptiness.

Note by Mark Steinberg