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Shostakovich Quartet #12

Dmitri Shostakovich had a favorite chamber group: the Beethoven Quartet, whom he considered dear friends, and who premiered nearly all 15 of his string quartets. When the second violinist, Vasily Shirinsky, passed away in 1965, Shostakovich composed his Eleventh Quartet in his memory. It was almost inevitable that he would follow that with three more quartets, one in honor of each of the other three members. The Twelfth Quartet, written in 1968, is dedicated to the first violinist, Dmitri Tsyganov, who was noted for his vigorous style of playing.

The Twelfth Quartet is a work of physical extremes, demanding of its performers the most rapid brilliance as well as the most patient, long bows, the most monumental fortes and the most hushed pianissimi, the greatest intensity in some passages and a nearly lifeless resignation in others. These oppositions are not unusual in Shostakovich's music, but there is one other which is: in this quartet the composer explored for the first time the atonal system of twelve-tone harmony, invented by Arnold Schoenberg, and opposed it to the tonal center of D-flat major, the home key of the work. The underlying principle of the twelve-tone system is that the twelve chromatic pitches of Western music should be placed in a strict order - a "row" of pitches - and the composer must use them in that order, that is, the first note may not be repeated until all eleven other notes have been played. Part of the aim of this system was to liberate music from the tyranny of any one pitch, or key, and thereby usher in a new, freer mode of harmonic expression.

As might be expected, a composer as famous as Shostakovich, who had never used this system in his writing before, came in for plenty of interrogation when it appeared in this quartet. Was he "going over" to the other side? Had he been converted in some sense? To this he made the excellent reply: "Everything in good measure. If, let's say, a composer sets himself the obligatory task of writing dodecaphonic music, then he artificially limits his possibilities, his ideas. The use of elements from these complex systems is fully justified if it is dictated by the idea of the composition". It is hard to imagine a clearer mark of artistic maturity than this affirmation, that the creative idea must be served by the technique and not vice versa.

This begs the question: what idea is served by the juxtaposition of D-flat major tonality with (often 12-tone) atonality in this piece? One might imagine that

Shostakovich would use D-flat major as his terra firma, a source of comfort or reassurance, versus atonal writing that depicts chaos, turbulence or menace. However, this is not really the case, and often the opposite seems to be true: the atonal writing expresses a searching uncertainty at some points and a desperate kind of striving at many others, and the D-flat major presence, while sometimes quite beautiful, often carries with it a feeling of great oppressiveness, inescapable gravitational pull, or brutal finality.

This contrast appears right away at the opening of the first movement. A wandering figure in the cello, which is in fact a 12-tone row, settles on a low D-flat. In response to this tentative question, the first violin sings a D-flat major melody which is crushing in its sorrow, played in the lowest register, expressing pain without consolation. The wandering 12-tone figure appears several times in the movement, each time seeming to search for a way out of this black state of D-flat, but not succeeding. As a contrast to this mood, the music moves at times into a faster, almost waltz-like tempo; but this waltz has a wooden, lifeless quality, as of a grieving person who is commanded to dance, but is barely able to go through the motions.

The second and final movement of the work feels less like a single movement than an amalgamation of several contrasting ones. First there is an extended, energetic section — almost a stand-in for a Scherzo — which features a rapid assertion of falling pitches in the cello, punctuated by savage trills from the other voices. Essentially atonal in its harmony, this section moves through several textures, including vehement pizzicato chords, steady tattoos of quieter repeated notes, and headlong passages of whirling slurred figures. The falling motif appears in other guises, one quiet and considered, one intense and enlarged with double-stops. This energetic section ultimately dissolves into a declaration by the cello alone, which introduces the next section, a “slow movement”. Here the cello explores an intense and heartfelt version of the falling figure, to which the other three voices respond in hushed tones as a single, three-voice chorus, masked celebrants attending a moonlit scene. This section reaches an agonized climax of its own, with the first violin inheriting the cello’s melody; then it gives way to a bridge where the first violin plays an extended pizzicato solo with figures from the very opening of the piece. This is the signal that we are coming to the final section of the work, a patchwork which revisits and reconsiders all three earlier sections. There is a conflicted alternation of figures and textures from the scherzo and the slow movement, and at one point the lower three instruments play monstrous pizzicato chords which contain all twelve chromatic pitches — the densest sonority imaginable. Then, finally, in a sorrowful release, the opening music of the first movement reappears, and we imagine for a moment that the quartet will end where it began, coming full circle, a relenting of sorts. But this is not to be: the

energetic rhythms and tempo of the scherzo-like opening of the second movement sneak in, first teasingly, then gradually growing to full strength. This time, however, the key of D-flat major asserts a stranglehold on the harmony from which there is no escaping. Exciting, brutal, horrifying after a fashion, these harmonic and rhythmic elements sweep up all the human concerns that appeared before, and frog-march them uncompromisingly to a stony-faced conclusion.

Note by Misha Amory