

DANISH STRING QUARTET

October 28, 2016

SHOSTAKOVICH String Quartet No. 15 in E-flat Minor, Opus 144

Elegy (Adagio)

Serenade (Adagio)

Intermezzo (Adagio)

Nocturne (Adagio)

Funeral March (Adagio molto)

Epilogue (Adagio)

INTERMISSION

SCHUBERT String Quintet in C Major, D.956

Allegro ma non troppo

Adagio

Scherzo: Presto

Allegretto

String Quartet No. 15 in E-flat Minor, Opus 144

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg

Died August 9, 1975, Moscow

It has become a cliché with certain critics that all the music of Shostakovich's final years is haunted by the thought of death. That is not always true—some of his late music speaks very firmly of life—but in the case of the *Fifteenth Quartet* that cliché appears only too true.

Shostakovich's final years were miserable: he died of lung cancer but also suffered from a degenerative muscular disease that denied him the use of his right hand, and his final string quartet seems to speak directly from that agony.

Shostakovich composed the quartet early in 1974, completing it on May 17. The parts were copied, and that fall he began rehearsals with his favorite quartet, the Beethoven Quartet. That quartet, founded in 1923 by four students at the Moscow Conservatory, had given the premieres of thirteen of the composer's first fourteen quartets, and Shostakovich commemorated a half-century friendship by dedicating each of his *Quartets Nos. 11 through 14* to a different member of the Beethoven Quartet. They quartet had begun rehearsals of his *Fifteenth Quartet* when cellist Sergei Shirinsky died suddenly on October 18. The devastated composer dedicated the quartet to Shirinsky's memory, but transferred the premiere to the young Taneyev Quartet, and that group gave the first performance on November 15, 1974, in Leningrad. The Beethoven Quartet, with a replacement cellist, was able to perform the quartet on January 11, 1975. Seven months later, Shostakovich died in a Moscow hospital.

His final string quartet is a somber work, to say the least. Nearly forty minutes long, it consists of six adagios played without pause. A work made up entirely of slow movements poses particular problems for a composer, for the performers, and for the audience. Nearly two centuries earlier, Joseph Haydn had faced exactly this problem in his *Seven Last Words of Christ*, also written for string quartet. Haydn noted that it is “no easy task to compose seven adagios, lasting approximately ten minutes each, and to succeed one another without fatiguing the listener,” and he solved that problem by varying the mood, tonality, and texture of his successive slow movements. But where Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ* is fired by his religious faith, Shostakovich's *Fifteenth Quartet* speaks from the despair of his final years. The dark E-flat minor tonality remains constant across the six movements (often under considerable chromatic tension), textures are often thin, and the music seems to proceed numbly across its long span.

Despite an occasional flash of sunlight, the landscape of Shostakovich's final quartet is dark and bleak, and the names of some of the movements—*Elegy*, *Nocturne*, *Funeral March*—make clear its content.

Like another late multi-movement quartet—Beethoven's *Quartet in C-sharp Minor*—Shostakovich's *Fifteenth* opens with a slow and expressive fugue. Though Shostakovich does not ask that it be played without vibrato, there is nevertheless an icy stillness to the string sound he generates in this long movement, which is relieved only by a brief excursion into C major. Here, and throughout the quartet, Shostakovich's voicing is unusual, with the lower strings sometimes set high above the violins.

The *Serenade* feels like an experiment in sound as one-note crescendos are snapped between the instruments. A wistful waltz runs through this movement, and this proceeds directly into the very brief *Intermezzo*, in which the first violin races ahead on a flurry of 32nd-notes; beneath this rush Shostakovich recalls some of the material from the *Serenade*.

The *Nocturne* is one of the most appealing movements of the quartet: all four instruments are muted, and the viola sings its long somber song within a filigree of interlocking eighths from the other voices. Fierce dotted chords open the *Funeral March*, and solo instruments rise above these outbursts with long, lonely melodies. The *Epilogue* recalls material from the early movements, particularly the fugal idea of the opening *Elegy*. These are set off from one another by episodes of furious 32nd-notes from the first violin (the faster pulse of these sections defeats somewhat the notion that this is a slow movement). Shostakovich makes his way to the end of his last quartet on a final bleak E-flat minor chord that is itself unsettled by the viola's trill.

String Quintet in C Major, D.956

FRANZ SCHUBERT

Born January 31, 1797, Vienna

Died November 19, 1828, Vienna

Schubert's *String Quintet in C Major*, universally acknowledged as one of the finest creations in all chamber music, dates from the miraculous final year of that composer's brief life, 1828. That year saw the revision of the "Great" *Symphony in C Major* and the composition of the three final piano sonatas, the songs of the *Schwanengesang* collection, this quintet, and the song "Der Hirt auf Dem Felsen," completed in the weeks just prior to Schubert's death on November 19. The date of the *Quintet* is difficult to pin down, but it was probably composed at

the end of the summer—on October 2 Schubert wrote to one of his publishers that he had “finally turned out a Quintet for 2 violins, 1 viola, and 2 violoncellos.”

Many have been quick to hear premonitions of death in this quintet, as if this music—Schubert’s last instrumental work—must represent a summing-up of his life. But it is dangerous to read intimations of mortality into music written shortly before any composer’s death, and there is little basis for such a conclusion here—although he was ill during the summer, Schubert did not know that he was fatally ill. Rather than being death-haunted, the *Quintet in C Major* is music of great richness, music that suffuses a golden glow. Some of this is due to its unusual sonority: the additional cello brings weight to the instrumental texture and allows one cello to become a full partner in the thematic material, a freedom Schubert fully exploits. Of unusual length (over 50 minutes long), the *Quintet* also shows great harmonic freedom—some have commented that this music seems to change keys every two bars.

The opening *Allegro ma non troppo* is built on three theme groups: the quiet violin theme heard at the very beginning, an extended duet for the two cellos, and a little march figure for all five instruments. The cello duet is unbelievably beautiful, so beautiful that many musicians (certainly many cellists!) have said that they would like nothing on their tombstone except the music for this passage. But it is the march tune that dominates the development section; the recapitulation is a fairly literal repeat of the opening section, and a brief coda brings the movement to its close.

Longest of the four movements, the *Adagio* is in ABA form. The opening is remarkable. The three middle voices—second violin, viola, and first cello—sing a gentle melody that stretches easily over 28 bars; the second cello accompanies them with pizzicato notes, while high above the first violin decorates the melody with quiet interjections of its own. The middle section, in F minor, feels agitated and dark; a trill leads back to the opening material, but now the two outer voices accompany the melody with runs and swirls that have suddenly grown complex.

The third movement is a scherzo-and-trio, marked *Presto*. The bounding scherzo, with its hunting horn calls, is fairly straightforward, but the trio is quite unusual, in some surprising ways the emotional center of the entire *Quintet*. One normally expects a trio section to be gentle in mood, sometimes even a thematic extension of the scherzo. But this trio, marked *Andante sostenuto* and in the unexpected key of D-flat major, is spare, grave, haunting. Schubert sets it in 4/4 instead of the expected 3/4, and its lean lines and harmonic surprises give it a grieving

quality quite different from the scherzo. The lament concludes, and the music plunges back into sunlight as the scherzo resumes.

Many have heard Hungarian folk music in the opening of the *Allegretto*, with its evocation of wild gypsy fiddling. The second theme is one of those graceful little tunes that only Schubert could write; both themes figure throughout the movement, until finally another cello duet leads to a fiery coda ingeniously employing both main themes.

The *Quintet in C Major* is one of the glories of the chamber music repertory and one of Schubert's finest works. Yet he never heard a note of it. It lay in manuscript for years and was not performed until 1850, twenty-two years after his death.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger