Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–75)

Quartet No. 8 in C minor, Opus 110

Largo
Allegro molto
Allegretto
Largo
Largo

Bayla Keyes, Daniel Chong – violins
Jessica Bodner – viola
Jonathan Miller – cello

Shostakovich remains the archetype of the embattled, striving composer under Soviet bureaucratic repression, and he was a formative influence upon Schnittke and many others of his countrymen. Shostakovich's career was a harrowing fencing match between the forces of creation and criticism, but he persevered through decades of prolific composition and agonizing public life. In 1936 the party newspaper Pravda denounced his opera Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District, two years after a rapturously received premiere. From then on he was kept in a state of limbo by the cultural authorities, with 1937's apologetic/sarcastic Fifth Symphony setting the tone for his future tightrope walk. Between 1938 and 1974 Shostakovich composed fifteen string quartets, a more quietly subversive genre. The Eighth, however, which became his best-known quartet by far, is an emotionally intense work of ambiguous meaning. He composed it in 1960, the year that he capitulated to demands to join the Communist Party, while on an official assignment to Dresden to score the film "Five Days—Five Nights" about the devastating Allied firebombing of that city in 1945. Shostakovich dedicated the quartet “In memory of victims of fascism and war”—ostensibly a devoted Soviet artist's salute to a tragic chapter of history.

Yet it's also easy to read the work's numerous self-references, including the pervasiveness of Shostakovich's musical signature D-S-C-H and quotes from Lady Macbeth and his First and Fifth Symphonies, as coded expressions of personal agony. After his death an apocryphal collection of memoirs entitled Testimony was published by the Russian journalist Solomon Volkov, who claimed to have been Shostakovich's confidant. In it, the composer is quoted as saying "you have to be blind and deaf" to not hear the Eighth Quartet as an autobiographical chronicle. It is entirely possible that Shostakovich used the Eighth Quartet to rail simultaneously against the savagery of war and his own circumscribed life. He veiled his true thoughts out of necessity, and we'll never know for certain precisely what the embedded message was.

Whatever its inspiration, the Quartet is a searing work made up of five movements performed without pause. The Largo opens with overlapping iterations of the D-S-C-H motive (formed by the pitches D, E-flat, C, and B-natural in their German nomenclature), ending with a clear cadence in the home key of C minor. Quotes from the beginning of the First Symphony work themselves in, and the movement progresses in this manner, with the layering and alternation of themes within a barren landscape of pedal tones, stark counterpoint, and minor harmonies. The Allegro molto bursts forth in a barrage of perpetual motion with a barking rhythmic accompaniment. Midway through, the violins transition to a theme influenced by Jewish folk music—long one of Shostakovich's sources of inspiration and possibly a memorial to those slaughtered in the concentration camps. The first violin segues into and out of the third movement, an unhinged waltz that quotes the composer's Cello Concerto No. 1 in its clockwork middle section. The fourth movement brings a brutal motive of three repeated notes, thought to represent anti-aircraft fire over the violins' bomber-like drone. It evolves into moving melodies, however: a Russian funeral anthem, the revolutionary song “Exhausted by the Hardships of Prison,” and a quote (in the cello's high register) from Lady Macbeth's opera aria. The first violin again returns to D-S-C-H to introduce the final movement, which returns to the multilayered, anthemic world of the first.

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