

Dmitri Shostakovich

1906-1975

String Quartet No. 15 in E-flat minor,
Op. 144, 1974

For many, the fifteen string quartets by Dmitri Shostakovich represent a cycle of artistic devotion and intense, intimate expression second only to the sixteen quartets by Beethoven. For Shostakovich, the quartets provided a refuge from the more public and highly scrutinized genres of opera, symphony, ballet or film score where a negative judgment by totalitarian authorities threatened real and serious danger. The wordless “absolute” musical meaning of instrumental chamber music provided a safe haven even when such “domestic” music of friends was performed in public. Here, he could express himself more naturally and honestly and as with late Beethoven, the music is often deeply personal, introspective, and vividly autobiographical. Shostakovich was also a great classicist, drawn to the preludes and fugues of Bach and the transcendent quartets of Beethoven and he strove to make his contribution in these august musical traditions. He planned to compose a set of twenty-four string quartets, one in each major and minor key, but he ran out of time. Dying of an aggressive cancer and frequently hospitalized, Shostakovich completed his 15th and last string quartet at the age of 68 in 1974, less than a year before he died.

The 15th String Quartet is one of the most intense quartets in the history of the genre, unique in its construction and dramatic affect. While it shares many qualities with other Shostakovich quartets and does not represent any necessarily radical departure, it is nonetheless singular for its unrelenting darkness. The quartet comprises six adagios all in the key of e-flat minor, played without pause in a seamless continuum of profound gloom. With such movement titles as *Elegy* and *Funeral March*, it is bleakly clear what Shostakovich seeks to express.

The first movement *Elegy* is more than twice as long as any of the remaining five movements. It features a dirge or chant-like melody of stark simplicity intoned by each player in a staggered, fugal entrance that Shostakovich labels “solo” as if to emphasize a condition of lonely isolation. A second theme based on a simple arpeggiated chord in C Major brings a more hopeful lightness, but it is subsumed by the prevailing dark and slow processional whispered in single and double pianissimos. The sorrow is broken suddenly by shrieks (or zaps) from a disturbing sonic effect where single notes swiftly grow from ppp to sfff in a harsh rasp, each beginning where the other left off and thereby launching the second movement *Serenade*. Pizzicato, dissonant chords, sparse textures and haunted solos eventually limp into a ghostly waltz, disembodied, eerie and supremely unsettling. The final notes of a cello solo create a deep, sustained pedal point as the 1st violin suddenly explodes in a violent, soaring recitative and a brief, wild 3rd movement *Intermezzo* ensues.

While the titles “*Serenade*” and “*Intermezzo*” seem ironic at best, the 4th movement *Nocturne* is true to its title, languorous, beautiful, seductive in a way that a

rare, fragrant night blooming flower might be, lurid and deadly at its core. Spacious arpeggios, mutes, exotic harmonies and an almost sickly sweet melody enthralls until the sharp, plucked rhythm of the imminent funeral march intrudes leading seamlessly again into the next tableaux. While the quartet unites for a few intermittent chords of unmistakable effect, the death march is, like so much of the entire quartet, a series of solos as a spare melody somewhat like the barren "Taps" in a minor key passes from viola to violin to cello, from the sinewy bow to the dry bones of pizzicato, ending again in lonely isolation with the reedy viola.

What comes after death? For Shostakovich, the finale is an Epilogue of indescribable affect. The retrospective is dominated by icy trills, dissonant pizzicato and spectral visitations of the previous movements, particularly the Elegy and the Funeral march. The chilling trills fluttering above the morbid cello has suggested to some the sounds of wind whistling through a graveyard, an uncanny conclusion to what must be considered one of the most musically profound evocations of death in a uniquely vivid 20th century vocabulary.