



ENCORES/NOTES



Alexander String Quartet and Robert Greenberg, February 22

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg

Died August 9, 1975, Moscow

String Quartet No. 13 in B-flat Minor, Opus 138

Shostakovich never felt particularly bound by the traditional four-movement structure of the classical string quartet. In fact, his Fourth Quartet of 1949 was his final quartet in four movements, and some of his late quartets represent complete re-imaginings of what the string quartet might be: his Eleventh Quartet, for example, is a suite of seven movements, the Fifteenth is in six interconnected movements, the Twelfth consists of only two movements. The most experimental of all his quartets, however, may be the Thirteenth, which consists of one continuous movement that lasts about eighteen minutes. But the originality of the Thirteenth Quartet goes beyond its form. The voicing here is often quite original: Shostakovich sets the instruments in unusual registers and combines them in unexpected ways (and in fact the cello does not play at all during the final two minutes of this quartet). This quartet also gives unusual prominence to the viola, and for a very specific reason.

In 1923, four young string players at the Moscow Conservatory formed a quartet that would eventually become known as the Beethoven Quartet, and they quickly became good friends with the star composition student at the rival St. Petersburg Conservatory, Dmitri Shostakovich. The Beethoven Quartet's close relation with the composer would last for over half a century, and they gave the premieres of thirteen of his quartets (all but the first and last). By the late 1960s, however, the effect of time was becoming all too clear: Shostakovich suffered from debilitating illness over the final decade of his life, and the quartet lost two of its original members—second violinist Vasily Shirinsky died and violist Vadim Borisovsky retired. As a gesture of lifelong respect and gratitude, Shostakovich dedicated each of his String Quartets Nos. 11 through 14 to a different member of the quartet. He composed the String Quartet No.

13 in B-flat Minor during the summer of 1970, completing it on August 10, and dedicated it to violist Borisovsky on the occasion of his seventieth birthday (Borisovsky had at that point already retired from the quartet). With its new members, the Beethoven Quartet gave the quartet several private hearings before the official premiere on December 13, 1970, in Leningrad.

The Thirteenth Quartet may have been written to commemorate a birthday, but there is nothing festive about this music. Its one movement is in a broad ternary form: the opening *Adagio* gives way to a long central episode at twice that tempo before the final section returns to the opening tempo. Set in the dark key of B-flat minor, the quartet opens with a spare viola solo marked *espressivo*. Gradually the other voices enter, the music rises to a dissonant outburst, and the opening section gives way to the central section, marked *Doppio movimento* and announced by the first violin's chirping three-note patterns. These patterns of three-note attacks gradually build to a strident climax in which three-note patterns are hammered out by the entire quartet. Then the music launches into an eerie dance that skitters along triplet rhythms and is punctuated by the sound of the players tapping their bows on their instruments. This unsettled music, wild in its hard-edged energy and strange sounds, is the most Bartókian moment in the entire cycle of Shostakovich's quartets.

Gradually this dance winds down, and ominous trills and a return of the three-note patterns lead to a return of the opening tempo. But now that opening music has become even darker. In the course of this closing section, for which Shostakovich mutes all four instruments, there is a long duet, murmuring and subdued, for viola and cello, and then the cello vanishes. The final word is left to the viola, whose bleak soliloquy (sometimes set at the extreme upper limit of that instrument's range) leads to the jolting cadence: on its final note, the viola is rejoined by the (unmuted) violins, and these three instruments shriek out the concluding B-flat.

String Quartet No. 14 in F-sharp Major, Opus 142

Shostakovich dedicated String Quartet No. 14 to the cellist of the Beethoven Quartet, Sergei Shirinsky. He sketched the quartet in the summer and fall of 1972 and completed it in Copenhagen on April 23, 1973, just before boarding an ocean liner (Shostakovich hated to fly) for the United States, where Northwestern University granted him an honorary degree in June 1973.

Given the dedication to Shirinsky, it is not surprising that the cello has so prominent a role in this quartet, which is in three movements: two *Allegrettos* frame a central *Adagio*, and themes from that slow movement return at the very end of the quartet to round it off. Despite moments of jagged intensity, the Fourteenth Quartet is for the most part free of the darkness that shades so many of Shostakovich's final works, in fact, much of this music is peaceful and playful.

That sense of play is evident from the very beginning, where the cello announces the relaxed main idea, which descends and then, inverted, rises; the energetic rhythm of this theme will pulse throughout much of the movement. The second theme-group, somewhat more restrained, arrives in the first violin, and the movement drives to a climax. A long cello solo, very much like a cadenza, draws the *Allegretto* toward its close, and the music dances into silence on fragments of its opening theme.

The mood changes sharply at the Adagio, which is in a sort of ternary form. Textures are much leaner here, and the entire opening statement, bleak and somber, belongs to the first violin all by itself. The music grows to an intense climax, then returns to the lonely textures of the opening. Shostakovich proceeds without pause into the finale. The tentative three-note figures that conclude the Adagio now accelerate to become the fundamental rhythm of the last movement, which opens with a quotation from Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth*. This quotation, which in the opera sets the words "Serezha, my dear! My dear!", is a message of affection from Shostakovich to his longtime friend Sergei Shirinsky. This opening gives way to an animated sequence in which bits of theme ricochet between the instruments, the energy level is very high here, and there follows a series of episodes, some strident and harsh but others lyric and tender. As he nears the close, Shostakovich recalls themes from the Adagio, and the cello takes a leading role in their presentation; the music fades beautifully into silence.

The first performance of the Fourteenth Quartet, a private one, was given by the Beethoven Quartet before the members of the USSR Composers Union on October 30, 1973. The public premiere, again by the Beethoven Quartet, took place in Leningrad two weeks later, on November 12.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger 8 2003