



Dmitri Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Vol. I

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[American Record Guide](#) (Keaton - 2006.11.01)

Dmitri Shostakovich has been called the 20th Century's greatest composer on the pages of this journal, and his canon of 15 quartets must be recognized as one of the most significant bodies of chamber music of this or any century. For an excellent overview of the quartets, see Stratton Rawson's review of the Emerson Quartet's complete set (M/J 2000).

These two recordings illustrate two different approaches to the composer's music. The Mandelring Quartet is a German group, and their Audite recording is marked Complete Quartets, Vol. 1. It is a hybrid SACD recording, and sounds wonderful on my conventional equipment. The group plays with magnificent technical finish and superb control, but I find their interpretation lacking. Shostakovich's music is deeply emotional, sardonic, angry, tragic. It is a response to a life out of control. The strongest interpretations may lack finish and control, but will explore the darker side of existence. This region may be troubling, disturbing, but it is what Shostakovich's creative and human life was like.

The First Quartet is not really a harbinger of what was to come. The composer set it in the innocent key of C and called it "quartettino". It reminds me of the simplicity and purity of the first of the 24 Preludes and Fugues in the same key. But even this work has a hint of the unsettled that is somehow missing here.

The Fourth Quartet is somewhat similar in its more reserved, classical balance. Yet it was composed in the wake of Shostakovich's public humiliation by Zhdanov's accusation of formalism (Soviet code for music Stalin could not understand). It hardly seems challenging to ears used to Bartok and Schoenberg, but Shostakovich would not allow a public presentation until weeks after Stalin's death. We now know that there were several private performances of the work.

Again, the Mandelring's performance is technically assured, even moving. But compare the last movement here with the Fitzwilliam (London), where slashing chords and pizzicatos are more intense, melodies soar in more pain and defiance, and passages of devastation are emptier, darker.

The St Lawrence Quartet in 3, 7, and 8 is another story entirely. They are every bit as technically accomplished as the Mandelring, but this youngish group takes us on a wild ride, a trip through a troubled psyche, a troubled society, a troubled world, but a world where beauty of spirit finally can overcome.

No. 3 was written in 1946. Stalin had made it clear to Soviet artists that the triumphal conclusion of the war would not lead to any relaxing of state control over their work. Shostakovich's response was to create a work of violence, anger, sarcasm, and pessimism. He originally gave the five movements titles: Rumblyings of Unrest and Anticipation; Calm Unawareness of the Future Cataclysm; The Forces of War

Unleashes; Homage to the Dead; and The Eternal Question: Why? And for what? He withdrew these before publication.

No. 7 was composed in 1960, to the memory of the composer's first wife, Nina. It is also his first quartet in a minor key. The work is remarkable in its concision. It is the shortest of all of his quartets, lasting barely 14 minutes. The spare textures of the II are fascinating. It consists mainly of solos, duos, trios; only for six bars are all four instruments playing.

No. 8 also dates from 1960, composed after a visit to Dresden to witness that city's devastation from the War. It is officially dedicated To the Memory of the Victims of Fascism but is secretly autobiographical. The opening movement is based on the motto D-E-flat-C-B — in German DSCH, for Dmitri Shostakovich. Quotations are heard from the First Cello Concerto and Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk, and IV has a familiar prisoner's song, 'Tormented by the Lack of Freedom', which must have been especially poignant for Shostakovich.

The St. Lawrence's tempos tend to be slower than the Fitzwilliam in slow movements, faster in fast movements, but not extremely so. Their tempos are generally slower than the Emerson's (but whose aren't?). Each of the three performances was enthralling, and emotionally exhausting. I look forward to further Shostakovich performances by the ensemble.