



D. Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Vol. V

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The Mandelring Quartett completes its cycle of the Shostakovich string quartets with the late intensely dark visions of impending loss and death.

With the issue of Quartets Nos. 11, 13, and 15, the Mandelring Quartet completes its cycle of the Shostakovich string quartets, the recording made as recently as 27-29 May 2009. The late opera of Shostakovich present us a disturbing amalgam, a synthesis of vaporized or ashen energy tied to a biting, if not scathing, series of ironies. If there exists an analogy for these pieces it lies in the spirit of the Requiem Mass, for Shostakovich himself, his friends, and his ever-suffering country's humanity.

Quartet No. 11 (1966) ostensibly remembers Vassily Shirinsky, second violin of the Beethoven String quartet, who died in 1965. If a contrapuntal gloom persists in the writing, so do moments of rebellion, sarcasm, and caustic desperation. The seven movements would point to the late Beethoven Op. 131 as filtered through the grotesqueries of Bela Bartók. The attacca movements themselves pass quickly, but not before they astound us with dirges, drones, furious repetitions – especially in thirds – recitatives and elegies. The first violin (Sebastian Schmidt) breaks out into a mad Etude, to which the other instruments respond with a variation on the opening cello motif from movement one, Andantino. The strident fury of the ensuing Humoreske exacerbates the grim humor of the piece. The Elegy provides the longest movement, wherein cello and the two violins invest a dark bitter pathos into the mix. A feeling of solitary confinement permeates the music, as though Shostakovich were communing with Captain Alfred Dreyfus on Devil's Island. The last movement, introspective in the manner of Bartók, recapitulates earlier themes and proceeds to a ghostly note C in the violin's highest register over whimpers in the other strings. As T.S. Eliot prophesized, this is the way the world ends.

The Thirteenth Quartet (1970) speaks of impending death, especially as Shostakovich suffered a heart condition that flared up first in 1966 and then later in 1970. In one movement marked Adagio – Doppio movimento – Tempo primo, the five-section piece is dedicated to the viola player Vadim Borissovsky of the Beethoven Quartet, and it features an opening viola part whose themes refer to the incidental music for the movie King Lear. The music constitutes a huge lament in which serial techniques play an organic role. Chorales and fierce stretti mark the procession, the landscape bleak and forlorn, like a scene from Kubrick's Vietnam in Full Metal Jacket. The music literally throbs with modal agony, especially as the SACD stereo acoustic throws every buzzing, percussive, and rasping effect into our skulls. The Doppio movimento evolves into a weird fox-trot, with col legno effects and shrill pipings from the strings, a cabaret version of a Totentanz. The fourth section initiates the ever-present process of decay that obsesses Shostakovich, a pale rider,

indeed. The viola (Roland Glassl) has a solo, though at the end the two violins collaborate in the high B-flat and shrieking crescendo that dissipates into some nameless pit in Purgatory.

The Fifteenth Quartet (1974) reverts to the late Beethoven model of Op. 131, a suite sequence in six unbroken movements, but this time all adagios, as though Shostakovich were duplicating the Dvorak Stabat Mater in his own terms. No fewer debts recall Mahler, as though Shostakovich were grinning at that composer's Ninth Symphony. The opening Elegy section has a ponderous E-flat Minor tune whose rhythm reminds us of Schubert's Death and the Maiden or the second movement of the Beethoven 7th Symphony. Church doxology – and Bartók's Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta – appears just as influential, and the music transfigures into a melody in C Major. The coda, rife with rests, achieves an unearthly, grudging quietude.

The Serenade hardly deserves the epithet: screeching, explosive, its guitar effects and surly cello (Bernhard Schmidt) slash at us until the first violin plays a listless waltz that winds up in a cruel graveyard. The first violin, an inflamed Paganini, enters the Intermezzo with a manic cadenza that receives cries and groans from the chorus of strings. Suddenly, a Nocturne emerges, Bartók's "night music" with a sad viola and whispered accompaniment. Shostakovich calls movement five Trauermarsch, a clear call to fellow cardiac patient Mahler, whose fluttering heart we can hear in the last movement as well. The viola seems to intone a version of "Taps", perhaps a burial tune for all humanity. The collective sound breaks up into solo sighs, cello pizzicati, and laments. The E-flat Minor Epilogue – which opens with a tormented violin and moves into cries of protest – finally invokes the favored viola, morendo (dying away), until we hear references to Shostakovich's own bete noir, Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk, that eternal sore spot between the composer and an oppressive political system. Perhaps each had committed the Unpardonable Sin.