

Shostakovich's chamber music and musical tradition



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To what extent does Shostakovich draw on musical tradition in his chamber music? Your answer must be supported by a discussion of two or three appropriate pieces of chamber music by Shostakovich that you have studied in the module materials.

Musical tradition has been part of our cultural heritage for as long as we can remember. Still it is not that simple to define. One can say that traditional music are songs and tunes which have been passed down orally for generations, and are often folk songs, country dance and similar, but it can also be pieces of written music from early composers etc.

We are going to look at three compositions of chamber music written by the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-75).

1. String Quartet No. 2: first movement
2. String Quartet No. 7: second movement
3. Piano Trio No. 2: last movement

The discussion is whether these are more of a traditional Classical musical structure, or an expression of a musical artist, that uses different elements to dissent from prevailing political ideologies at a time when the Communist Soviet Union restricted an artist's freedom of speech.

Originally, chamber music was written with the intention for small groups to play for private functions, and as the number of instrument were so few, there was no need of a conductor. That is one of the reasons that chamber music by its nature is so intimate. They have to learn how to communicate with each other with eye-contact and signs between themselves.

String Quartet is a genre of chamber music which originated around 1760-1820, the Classical period of western music.

The traditional ensemble is made up of two violins, a viola and a cello, sitting in a slightly curved line to be able to see each other. There are four movements in a Classical string quartet.

‘ One of the significant differences of this Shostakovich string quartet is, that in the first movement, it is actually written in a typically classical sonata form.’ (Samson Diamond, speaking in ‘ Shostakovich’, scene 5).

The first movement of String Quartet No. 2 is divided into three parts:

1. Exposition
2. Development
3. Recapitulation.

In the exposition, where the theme is, are two melodic ideas presented, traditionally played by the first violinist. Dominantly and energetic, he is accompanied by the other three. Then, the second violinist is getting more purposeful and intense with her bow strokes, following by the viola. The cello is playing contrasting and forceful in a lower pitch.

The second melody coming up, is lacking the forceful strong moves from the previous section, but expresses more intense winding.

At this point, Shostakovich decides not to follow the traditional structure, of continuing straight to the development. Instead he dissents from this by

showing a hint to repeat the exposition instead of moving on to the development, although he does not.

In the development, the melodies changes, and the first violinist becomes again more dominant, and the music becomes more intense and pulsating with a different tone colour to the exposition. Then, after the development, the sonata's recapitulation restates the theme, more intense and reversed.

Shostakovich wrote fifteen string quartets, which are highly expressive and very personal.

' many composers used chamber music to give us the truest portraits of themselves, their most intimate thoughts and feelings.' (Reading 6. 1 in Richards, 2008, p. 223).

Which explains why the quartets he decided to dedicate, were to family and close friends only, unlike his symphonies that were tributes to national events.

The String Quartet no. 7, is in F sharp minor, a musical key, which is traditionally associated with pain and suffering. This quartet was written in memory to his wife Nina, whose sudden death affected Shostakovich profoundly, which clearly mirrored the choice of key for this piece. The second movement of a quartet (Lento), is traditionally the most expressive and personal of the four movements, where the music is transmitting the meaning, and that is definitely the case here.

In a classical string quartet, there are usually four movements, but for some reason, Shostakovich breaks away from the traditional structure, and uses only three linked movements:

1. Allegretto
2. Lento
3. Allegro

The Heath Quartet, which are playing the second movement on the DVD ('Shostakovich', 2008, scene 7) opens first with the second violin playing a seductive and controlled melody, which continues throughout the movement. Then the first violinist enters, playing a pitch higher, and the effect is almost hypnotic with the winding melody from the second violin. Both of violins are muted with an object that restricts the vibrations and changes the sound. Shostakovich uses the mute quite often in his work to gain the desired intensity of the movement.

'I think it adds to the stifled expression, the kind of emotion that is under the surface, that never really shows itself in the slow movement.' (Oliver Heath, speaking in 'Shostakovich', 2008, scene 7)

Piano Trio No. 2 is another chamber work where Shostakovich expresses his grief and despair. It is a different type of chamber work to Quartet No. 7, for the reason that here there are three solo instruments: violin, cello and piano, and it is made up of four movements.

Initially, in the 17th century, the piano trio was in a three movement form, but with the early 19th century, some composers like Beethoven for example, preferred to cast in the four movement form.

‘ Shostakovich was the one composer that definitely looked back at other composers. He is very often avant-garde on certain things. But he studied the compositions of great masters like Beethoven.’ (Michael Gurevich, speaking in ‘ Shostakovich’, 2008, Scene 1).

It was both national and personal tragedy that drove him to write this piece of music. It was finished in the spring of 1944, after WWII. Russia was in a state of exhaustion and the facts of the horrifying death camps and the fate of the Jews had started to unravel. Shostakovich had also lost his closest friend and mentor, Ivan Sollertinsky, when he was composing the Piano Trio. Shortly after, when Shostakovich had finished the trio, he decided to dedicate it in memory of his friend, following in a tradition of Russian elegiac piano trios, similar to Tchaikovsky, who had dedicated his trio to Nicholas Rubinstein.

The final movement of Piano Trio No. 2 (‘ Shostakovich’, 2008, Track 19), brings together many of the various elements being used until now; the ghostly opening, the frenzy crash of chords in a furious pace. Glee and madness following the anguish in the final movement. The whole piece of the fourth movement is under shadow of death and frustration, and it evoked controversial reactions from the critiques.

‘ This movement is nothing less than a gruesome dance of death; its quiet ending is the stillness of the mass grave.’ (Huth, 2005, in Richards, 2008, in Richards, p. 220).

The Soviet Communist ideology was idealism, and therefore it expected Shostakovich finales to finish on a high spirit. However, Shostakovich chooses to express dissent by showing the truest portrait of reality through his music. The Jewishness in Shostakovich’s music was another factor that provoked dissent under the Stalin regime, because; ‘ distinctive Jewish culture was anti-Soviet, and therefore undesirable.’ (Richards, 2008, p. 195).

Nevertheless, Shostakovich kept making use of Jewish elements in his music, like Jewish folk poetry and melodies. One critique writes, after hearing Piano Trio No. 2;

‘ This is Klezmer, the wild music of Jewish celebration,...’ (Philip, 2005, in Richards, p. 221).

Shostakovich says in *Testimony*: ‘ Jews were tormented for so long that they have learned to hide their despair. They express despair in dance music.’ and he adds; ‘ Jews became a symbol for me... I tried to convey that feeling in my music’. (Reading 6. 2 in Richards, 2008, p. 224). Many of his works were forbidden because of the anti-Semitism, and his use of musical material that provoked dissent. Despite his efforts to hide the real meaning, some of his music could not be performed until long after Stalin’s death in 1953.

Much of Shostakovich’s music follows the traditional Classical musical structures, and as any musical tradition that is still alive, it is destined to become tradition. (1317 words)

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