

dmitri

SHOSTAKOVICH

string quartet no. 4, opus 83

THE JANACEK QUARTET • EVA BERNATHOVA, piano

piano quintet in G minor, opus 57

a supraphon ramco production

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SHOSTAKOVICH Quintet for Piano and Strings, Op. 57 (1940)

THE JANACEK QUARTET EVA BERNATHOVA, pianist

String Quartet No. 4, Op. 83 (1949)

"By more or less general consent," writes Gerald Abraham, "Dmitri Shostakovich . . . is acknowledged the most significant composer yet produced by the Soviet Union." This remarkable and prolific musician — at this writing he has just completed his Twelfth Symphony — was born in St. Petersburg, now Leningrad, in 1906 into a musical family. His mother, an accomplished pianist, gave the young Dmitri his first lessons on the instrument. At an early age, he entered the Glasser School of Music to further his piano studies. There, according to Ivan Martynov, "not content to play the compositions of others only, (Shostakovich) tried his hand at music making."

At the age of thirteen, Shostakovich entered the Conservatory of his native city, where he studied piano under Leonid Nikolayev and composition under Maximilian Steinberg. Although he was not as yet known as a composer, the impression made at a recital he gave at the Conservatory brought forth the following review from a local journal: "A tremendous impression was created by the concert given by D. Shostakovich, the young (age 17) composer and pianist. He played Bach . . . Beethoven (*Appassionata*), and then his own works; he played with a confidence and an artistic endeavor of great fluency that reveal in him a musician who has a profound feeling for and understanding of his art." Before long, this gifted pianist would also be proclaimed one of the brightest composing talents of the time. His reputation as a pianist was permanently secured in 1927 upon being awarded one of the highest prizes at the first International Chopin Competition in Warsaw. But he soon abandoned the concert stage. "After finishing the Conservatory I was confronted with the problem: should I become a pianist or a composer?" wrote Shostakovich. The impetus to give up the concert stage was provided by the enormous success of his First Symphony, written as his Conservatory diploma work. This initial major effort by the nineteen-year-old Shostakovich was given its first performance by the Leningrad Philharmonic under Nikolai Malko in 1926 and brought his name before the Soviet public overnight, while penetrating to the major musical centers of Europe and the United States before long.

Of the many works which followed the First Symphony, the Piano Quintet and the Fifth Symphony rank among the most universally admired and frequently performed. The Quintet was introduced at the Moscow Festival of Soviet Music on November 23, 1940, with the composer making one of his rare appearances as soloist, and the Beethoven Quartet. *Pravda* immediately hailed it as "music created in the full maturity of power, a work that opens new vistas to the art". D. Rabinovich, the composer's biographer, informs us that the Quintet's performance came at the end of a long evening of new quartets by Soviet composers. "The audience was growing tired," he writes, "but when the . . . Quartet . . . appeared on stage led by Shostakovich himself, and the first strains of the Quintet resounded, all workaday . . . sensations disappeared without leaving a trace. Obviously something important was happening in the hall, something that was outside the scope of 'current' musical events." Critics and audience were unanimous in their praise of the Quintet as one of the outstanding chamber music works to have come out of Soviet Russia, and without question Shostakovich's masterpiece in the genre. It should be added that audience response at the premiere was so enthusiastic that portions of the work had to be encoed. From this sprang the waggish comment, "Shostakovich's Quintet is a piece in five movements of which there are seven." It has become a tradition in the U.S.S.R. to enco the scherzo and finale.

The first two movements, *Prelude* and *Fugue* are played without pause. The style could be called "Neo-Bach", but there can be no question that Shostakovich's is the dominant personality. The pattern of these movements follows that established in the opening movements of the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, i.e., the tempo is slow and the mood one of deep contemplation. The effect is one of somber strength until the middle section of the *Prelude* when the colors become brighter and a charming, light-hearted melody emerges. This atmosphere is soon dispelled by what Rabinovich refers to as "The sudden invasion of a swelling music still more majestic and emotional" which gradually leads to the end of the *Prelude*. The

Fugue continues the mood of severity established at the outset of the *Prelude*. "This is music that has many different sources," Rabinovich continues, . . . "Bach's name comes to mind not only because of the frequent obvious similarities. It is in Bach's music and in the slower movements of some of the later Beethoven sonatas that we encounter 'contemplative' music of such volume that it tries to embrace the whole world and confront man with everything that is going on in it."

The whirlwind *Scherzo* is one of Shostakovich's most brilliant, astringent creations. Here we are reminded somewhat of Prokofiev's macabre jests. The movement has a "motoric" drive and exquisite clarity. This is the movement which will immediately impress itself upon the listener's memory, for rarely has the composer written with greater fire and more masterful clarity. Its placement after the demanding *Prelude and Fugue* is a masterstroke of dramatic planning.

The *Intermezzo* is a broad melodic outpouring, nocturnal rather than somber. The movement begins with a warm melody played by the first violin over pizzicato cello. This section grows more rapturous and songful as it progresses, working its way toward a passionate climax, after which the music dies away gradually and leads, *attacca*, into the finale, a *Pastorale*, which — for most of its duration — expresses peace and fulfillment. The music is, once more, fairly subdued, but brighter in color than what has preceded, and toward the end, the composer bursts briefly into a mischievously humorous mood.

While the Piano Quintet has become a staple of the modern chamber music repertory, the Fourth String Quartet has yet to become a familiar work. It is one of the composer's finest accomplishments in the form and one which deserves a kinder fate than that which it has been accorded. The Quartet, completed in 1949, is a passionate statement, more concise and more direct than the Quintet. While the Quintet begins in the familiar Shostakovich mood of contemplation, the Op. 83 Quartet starts off with a seemingly frivolous theme which quickly loses its cheerfulness. There is a feeling of nostalgia about the entire first movement, but the air is never oppressive.

In the slow movement, Shostakovich settles down, so to speak, to tell us what is on his mind. Here we find none of the emotional ambiguity of the preceding *Allegretto*. The *Andantino* is flowingly lyrical, with the melody first assigned to the solo violin playing over a repeated figure in second violin and viola, after which the cello joins in with a melody of its own. The atmosphere becomes momentarily intense as the opening theme is repeated, but the section ends even more gently than it began.

The following *Allegretto*, which is technically two movements in one virtually continuous section, opens with a wonderful scherzo for the muted strings. This portion is filled with an endless variety of color and subtle harmonic play, with the composer displaying every facet of his skill in writing for the stringed instruments. The mutes are eventually removed to make way for a theme of folklike exuberance, first pizzicato, then strummed by violins and cello, over which the viola sings a tune of distinctly Oriental quality. The final *Allegretto* becomes increasingly agitated until the solo violin leads the Quartet to a soft, reflective conclusion.

— notes by HERBERT GLASS

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