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The Beethoven Quartet was formed in 1923 by four young graduates of the Moscow Conservatory, and continued without a change of personnel for more than forty years. The Quartet had the privilege of knowing and working with Dmitri Shostakovich for decades, and the four premiered almost all of his string quartets; one might say they served collectively as his muse for chamber music.

In 1965, the Quartet's second violinist, Vasily Shirinsky, passed away. Shostakovich's Eleventh String Quartet is dedicated to his memory. Not surprisingly, the music is heavily stamped with a sense of loss: reflective, brooding, austere. For many stretches of the piece, only one or two instruments are playing, a sparse use of texture that the composer will explore increasingly in his late quartets; and even when all four instruments are playing together, he overwhelmingly favors the opposition of one lone instrument against the other three in concert, almost as if to emphasize the idea of one colleague who has passed on, while three remain behind.

The work is divided into seven movements, which are played without pause, one flowing into another. In a way, they even share DNA of a sort, as important motifs in each movement are based on the same narrow intervals. It is as if the same thinker is proceeding from movement to movement, inhabiting each changing mood. The *Introduction* pits two themes against one another, an open, wending melody in the first violin and a denser, more closed response in the cello. The cello theme eventually morphs into a chant or choral idea that shuffles along in the lower three instruments as they respond to the first violin's lonely calls. The mood is eloquent and clear, but expressively restrained.

After several exchanges, the first violin turns a subtle corner and we find ourselves in the *Scherzo*, which is not as playful as the title might suggest. In a faster, lighter tempo, a fugal idea is passed numbly around the group. The texture is punctuated by incongruous slides up to glittering harmonics, clever but strangely wooden gestures. This is a scherzo of shadows, of the underworld, devoid of brightness or hope.

After the scherzo dissolves into a single viola line, which eventually settles on a long open string, the central three movements are presented in quick succession. First, the terrifying *Recitative*, where the bottom three instruments slash their way down to a giant dissonant chord, and the first violin intones a brutal, mechanistic three-note idea overhead. A Recitative in opera can be an outpouring of eloquence and communication: here Shostakovich uses the form to depict something quite opposite to that, an inarticulate bellowing, monolithic and forbidding. Following in exactly the same tempo, the *Etude* features a rapid spinning idea against a mournful chorale; but no sooner is the mood established than an enraged fortissimo response engulfs the texture. Very quickly this movement plays itself out, and gives way to the *Humoreske*, yet again in exactly the same tempo; in this tableau, the second violin has the role of crazed firebell, which jangles insistently while the other instruments exchange terse statements. This movement swiftly reaches a fever pitch, at which point the second violin retreats innocently and almost impersonally into the wings, alone.

We now find ourselves at the crux of the matter, in the *Elegy*. Here the composer seems to address the departed one directly. Weighty dotted rhythms in the lower strings establish a funereal atmosphere in C-sharp minor; the second violin responds no less seriously, but in a quieter and more personal vein. After two such exchanges, the air seems suddenly to clear,

and in the quietest tones yet, the first violin sings a wan melody, fragmentary and bereft. Later in the movement, this melody will become much stronger, reaching an anguished climax against the held bass note, which remains hushed, alien, unresponsive.

Spent, the omnipresent C-sharp of the *Elegy* sinks down a half-step to a C-natural, and we are in the *Finale*, where at first it seems as if there is barely enough energy to continue; the music flows at a kind of minimum subsistence level. This is a movement of retrospection. Melodies from the *Introduction* and *Scherzo* are revisited, mulled over; distracted, the music turns from one tempo to a slightly different one; we are inside a mind which is taken up with remembering. Ultimately the first violin is cast up on a high, rocky ground, and proceeds to ascend ever higher, as the lower voices resign themselves to a benumbed F minor fate. There is no solace here, only a desolate truth, harsh, simple, and dimly lit.

Note by Misha Amory