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Shostakovich Quartet #14

Beginning in stark bleakness with the eleventh quartet, Shostakovich's tetralogy of quartets, dedicated to each of the members of the Beethoven Quartet in turn, finds its peroration with the fourteenth, open to the fragile possibility of light. The Beethoven Quartet premiered each of Shostakovich's quartets starting from the second and thus served as the mouthpiece for some of the composer's most vulnerable and intimate utterances. The eleventh had been dedicated to Vasily Shirinsky, the second violinist of the quartet, who had passed away. The Beethoven Quartet considered disbanding at the time and it was in part at Shostakovich's urging that they continued. The dedicatee of the fourteenth is Sergei Shirinsky, brother of Vasily and the 'cellist of the quartet, still playing when the fourteenth quartet was written (1972 - 73). A genial and enthusiastic man, he had known Shostakovich for nearly fifty years at the time. So this grouping of four quartets begins in absence and finds its way toward a sense of presence, continuity and the perpetuation of a musical voice.

Shostakovich has always seemed to me to have a sort of spiritual link with Schubert in his depiction of forces that are fateful and inhuman, his lyrical gift, and in his recognition of states of radiance that are clearly seen from without, at a distance. Some of this is in evidence at the start of the F-sharp Major quartet. A group of three repeated notes is an often used Shostakovich motif: a series of knocks, a brutal insistence, a rupture in time. Here are six intoned notes, the idea doubled, a set-up for a serious reckoning with the forces that be. However, as it recedes it reveals an innocent, insouciant theme, good-natured and scarcely recognizable as the Shostakovich of the previous quartets. As it progresses we are thrown a few cheeky notes as if the composer peeks out from behind to assure us it is still him. What is going on here?

In *Giovanni's Room* James Baldwin writes "Perhaps everybody has a garden of Eden, I don't know, but they have scarcely seen their garden before they see the flaming sword. Then, perhaps, life only offers the choice of remembering the garden or forgetting it. Either, or; it takes strength to remember, it takes another kind of strength to forget, it takes a hero to do both. People who remember court madness through pain, the pain of the perpetually recurring death of their innocence; people who forget court another kind of madness, the madness of the denial of pain and the hatred of innocence; and the world is mostly divided between madmen who remember and madmen who forget. Heroes are rare." Shostakovich was often criticized for what many considered to be a cowardly stance in the nearly impossible political climate of the mid-twentieth century USSR. His truer nature, that of an artist, however, evinced

heroism in his ability to live as a witness in his world without extinguishing an ember of hope, belief and goodness. And here in the fourteenth quartet we find some writing that is utterly guileless, as if Shostakovich is holding on to some part of himself protected as one would protect a child from the harshnesses of the outer world. It is an uneasy amalgam of Edenic purity and the depiction of struggle, toggling between them and bringing them into confrontation without resolution. (Again, a Schubertian state of affairs.)

This quartet marks the end of a nearly year-long fallow period that caused the composer much anxiety. His compositional voice was his truth; lack of access to that voice left him bereft. At the same time as he was writing the quartet Shostakovich was planning a one

act opera based on Chekhov's short story *The Black Monk*, a project that was ultimately to go unrealized. But themes in this story may illuminate some of the characteristics of the fourteenth quartet. In the story a glorious, fertile garden, a sort of Eden, plays a large role, and there is much concern about the garden becoming barren and unkempt. Chekhov describes as well an apparition, the eponymous Black Monk, who appears to the protagonist to tell him that he is a genius writer, that he is divinely chosen to be the bearer of eternal truth, the rational and the beautiful, in service of eternal life, the object of which, he claims, is enjoyment. Kovrin, the writer, frets that he is mad, that the monk is not real, to which the apparition replies "I exist in your imagination, and your imagination is part of nature, so I exist in nature." Later in the tale Kovrin's wife spies him talking to what seems to be an empty chair (speaking of joy as the normal state of man) and declares him mad. Doctors are called on to "cure" him of his madness. Parted from his hallucination he grows weary, heavy, ordinary and unhappy. The garden is in ruins. His marriage is in ruins. At his deathbed, the Black Monk appears to him one last time and says to him "Why did you not believe me? If you had believed me then, that you were a genius, you would not have spent these two years so gloomily and so wretchedly." Upon his death, Kovrin is found in a puddle of blood with a "blissful smile" on his face.

Analogies with Shostakovich's own fraught life and the radiance of his gift are easily made. The tale speaks of joy that is perpetually available, even when it looks to all the wretched world to be madness. And it may be that Shostakovich wanted to make a connection between this story and the fourteenth quartet. There is a reference to Braga's "Angel's Serenade" in the story, sung by Kovrin's wife with the accompaniment of a violin, about "a maiden, ... , who heard one night in her garden mysterious sounds, so strange and lovely that she was obliged to recognize them as a holy harmony which is unintelligible to us mortals, and so flies back to heaven." Shostakovich arranged the Serenade in the same year as he wrote this quartet (surely in preparation for the opera), and

the climax of the second movement of this quartet may very well refer to it (an idea put forward by Laurel Fay). Shostakovich called this his “Italian bit” and it gave him much pleasure. The second movement begins with a first violin line that is a pre-echo of the confessional song of the ‘cello, the main protagonist of this work, to follow. It is a sort of empathy offered before the fact, and when the climax is reached with the ‘cello singing up high with parallel support from the first violin (the two remaining original players of the Beethoven Quartet) there is a sense of a partnership that enables a reaching beyond.

There is a possibility that Shostakovich at one point contemplated suicide and intended the eighth quartet to be his final work in 1960. In that work the motif of three repeated notes is used often to chilling and disturbing effect. Here the last movement of the fourteenth quartet starts with the same repeated notes (used already at the start of the piece), here, however, cautiously impish, and Shostakovich uses them to spell out in musical notes ‘cellist Sergei Shirinsky’s nickname, Seryozha, There is a powerful sort of alchemy here, a return to a childlike state of play, an ability to see without being overtaken. (César Aira: “Children have a very special attachment to the incomprehensible; there’s so much they don’t understand at that age, they have no

choice but to love it, blindly, like an enigma, but also like a world. It teaches them what love is.”) The movement deals in memory and the holding of memories, some intense and painful, without being consumed. The music wanders and drifts and finally vanishes, despite everything, with a blissful smile on its face.

Note by Mark Steinberg