

**TUESDAY EVENING CONCERT SERIES PRESENTS**

**Pacifica Quartet**

**20 February 2024 at UVA's Old Cabell Hall**

**Program Notes by Laurie Shulman © 2024**

**String Quartet No. 3 in F Major, Op. 73**

**Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)**

The violist Fyodor Druzhinin joined the Beethoven Quartet in 1964, succeeding his teacher Vadim Borisovsky. This esteemed quartet, one of the Soviet Union's most distinguished ensembles, had been associated with Shostakovich since 1940 and had presented the premieres of nearly every major chamber composition he wrote. In conversations about the last string quartets, Druzhinin recalled:

Only once did we see Shostakovich visibly moved by his own music. We were rehearsing his Third Quartet. He'd promised to stop us when he had any remarks to make. Dmitri Dmitriyevich sat in an armchair with the score opened out. But after each movement ended he just waved us on, saying, 'Keep playing!' so we performed the whole Quartet. When we finished playing he sat quite still in silence like a wounded bird, tears streaming down his face. This was the only time that I saw Shostakovich so open and defenseless.

Why did this comparatively early quartet, written primarily in 1946, elicit such strong emotions in the composer nearly twenty years later? We know he wrestled with the piece while he was composing, yet he was satisfied upon its completion, writing to the Beethoven Quartet's second violinist, Vasily Shirinsky:

It seems to me that I have never been so pleased with one of my works as with this quartet. Probably I am mistaken, but for the time being this is exactly how I feel.

In Shostakovich's lifetime, this quartet acquired the nickname "War Quartet." When the Beethoven Quartet played the first performance in Moscow, on 16 December 1946, the program included the following subtitles for each movement:

- I. Calm unawareness of future cataclysm
- II. Rumblyings of unrest and anticipation
- III. The forces of war unleashed
- IV. Homage to the dead
- V. The eternal question: Why? And for what?

Shostakovich subsequently abjured these subtitles; still, they give one pause.

Like so many of his more personal compositions, this one was withdrawn shortly after its premiere. Within two years, the Zhdanov purge of 1948 had disgraced Shostakovich, along with numerous other composers and prominent artistic figures in the Soviet Union. Although the Third Quartet was not officially cited on Zhdanov's list of proscribed music, it became one of Shostakovich's so-called 'unofficial' works. He had written no large-scale composition since his Ninth Symphony (1945). At nearly 33 minutes, this five-movement quartet clearly fell into the category of major work. Shostakovich treated the quartet in places as if it were a symphonic ensemble. At the climaxes, particularly those in the third and final movements, the ensemble seems to be straining the confines of the quartet medium. Elsewhere, Shostakovich's musical fabric is characteristically spare and transparent, often reducing the texture to a trio or even a duo.

The quartet opens with a sonata form movement in F Major. Two diatonic, deceptively innocent themes flirt with that underlying element of irony that so often shadows Shostakovich's music. A series of brief *ritardandi* lend a push-me-pullyu aspect to the music that subtly derails the forward momentum. The melodic emphasis is primarily in the first violin, but its part is not for the most part virtuosic in this opening movement. Shostakovich introduces elements of canonic imitation in his exposition, expanding the counterpoint to a full double fugue in his development. A truncated recapitulation leads to a surprisingly energetic and forceful coda.

Tradition has ascribed number symbolism to the Third Quartet, with the People associated with 3 and Stalin associated with 2. These links are easy to discern in the second and third movements. With its vigorous pace and spare textures, the *Moderato con moto* pairs a 3/4 waltz with the insistence of a march. Repeated patterns refuse to relinquish their hold, even in the staccato middle sections. Not until the end of the movement does an element of individuality emerge in the cello's elegiac, adagio close. The ensuing *Allegro non troppo* is a violent statement in G-sharp minor with abrupt switches between 2/4 and 3/4. In its military atmosphere, it foreshadows Stalin movement in the Tenth Symphony (which it preceded by several years). Atavistic dance rhythms are also at play here, but the overall impact of this movement is a damning indictment of the military.

Shostakovich's *Adagio* is the emotional heart of the quartet. It opens fortissimo with an extended unison passage for the lower three parts, answered by a more resigned, gentle duet for the two violins. The dichotomy between these two ideas sets up a dialogue that forms the narrative for the movement. Eventually each lower part gets a solo turn with the principal theme, in the manner of a threnody. The *Adagio* proceeds *attacca* to the finale, a *Moderato* in the home tonality of F Major. The cello introduces the extended main theme, with viola

pizzicato as accompaniment. The second theme seems straight out of a Prokofiev ballet: sweet, melodious, piquant, shadowed. As he develops the two themes, Shostakovich slides between 2/4 and 6/8, eventually building to a tremendous and agitated climax that alludes back to the grim tragedy of the slow movement. Presently he inverts the carefree principal theme of the opening movement. The Third Quartet concludes with recitative-like, anguished cries from the first violin, soaring into the sky in harmonics before ending with pizzicato.

### **String Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132 Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

This quartet, which Beethoven completed in the summer of 1825, is one of three commissioned by the Russian Prince Nikolai Galitzin. He was the third Russian nobleman to play an important role in the history of Beethoven's monumental contribution to the string quartet literature. (Prince Joseph Franz Maximilian Lobkowitz encouraged Beethoven in the late 1790s to produce the six quartets which comprise his Opus 18; the three Opus 59 quartets (1805-1806) are generally referred to by the name of their dedicatee, Count Andrei Kirillovich Rasumovsky.) As in so many of the late works, Beethoven sought in this quartet new approaches to musical form. The work is in five movements. Its second and fourth movements are noticeably shorter and less emotionally weighty; they serve to alleviate the considerable musical tension of the flanking movements. Beethoven concentrates his musical intensity in the outer movements and in the central *Adagio*.

This middle movement of Opus 132 is the centerpiece of the work on several levels. It is approximately 15 minutes long – a disproportionate one-third of the length of the entire quartet. Beethoven's emphasis on the slow movement as the psychological crux of the work is achieved in more conceptual ways. Entitled *Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart*, which translates roughly to "Holy Song of Thanksgiving from a convalescent to the divinity, in the Lydian mode," it is usually referred to simply as the *Canzona*. The form of the movement is ABABA. Beethoven employs lyrical B-sections (marked *Neue Kraft fühlend*, "feeling new strength") in A Major to contrast with the modal, chorale-like A-sections. The peculiar lack of harmonic tension in the Lydian mode teases the tonally oriented ear, which is drawn to both C Major and F Major, despite the knowledge that the pure Lydian scale belongs to neither key.

Some musical scholars have viewed the quartet as a symmetrical work, with the *Adagio* as its fulcrum. The passionate *recitativo* leading from the fourth movement march to the closing *Allegro appassionato* disrupts any sense of symmetry, however, and arrests the listener's attention with its unmistakably operatic anguish. This recitative prefaces not an aria, but an agitated finale once again in A minor, underscoring the tragedy that permeated the quartet's first movement.

Beethoven startles us with harsh dissonances in this work, contrasting with passages of

uncharacteristic lyricism. As Beethoven scholar Joseph Kerman observed, contrast is what this quartet is essentially about: "The contrasts within its movements and sections are on the face of it so wild that some effect of disparity might surely be anticipated. But in point of fact, the work has scarcely ever failed to impress listeners or critics as a convincing unity. Beethoven's unique achievement here was the creation of a psychological progress perhaps more arresting than in any other work which is nonetheless put together out of contrasts that can fairly be called dizzying."