

## **Shostakovich Quartet No. 2**

Dmitri Shostakovich was 31 years old when he wrote his first quartet, having already written five symphonies and two major operas. While his orchestral works are politically driven and outwardly (and perhaps ironically?) celebratory, it is within the more intimate setting of a string quartet in which he divulges his private, deep-seated thoughts.

Composed six years after his first quartet, the second is much larger in scope, both in feeling and length. Shostakovich draws a great deal from the world of opera in this work - unsurprisingly given his seasoned experience with the genre with *The Nose* and *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. The opening movement is a grand overture in sonata form that sets up the scene, while the second movement - a recitative and romance - begins with an extended soliloquy by the first violin quietly accompanied by the rest of the quartet. The soliloquy makes way for a romance that starts sweetly and innocently before morphing into something much more pained. The recitative then returns, somewhat unaware of the anguish that had just taken over. The third movement is a Waltz, perhaps a dance interlude within this hypothetical opera. Heard often in Shostakovich's music, it is a dance of death - twisted, ferocious, macabre - that works itself into a frenzy in the middle.

After all these operatic numbers come a final movement that structurally does not draw from the vocal arts. It is a theme and variations, an abstract form most associated with Bach and Beethoven - yet Shostakovich refuses to fully abandon opera. The movement opens with a back-and-forth between the first violinist's lead role and the chorus (recalling the second movement recitative) before Shostakovich starts to manipulate the song-like theme into multiple variations. What begins solemnly becomes in turn defiant, confrontational, saccharine, and yearning, before ending on a darkly grand note.

## **Turina *Serenata***

Joaquin Turina, along with Isaac Albéniz, Enrique Granados, and Manuel de Falla, represents a revival of Spanish art music after an extended period of governmental instability brought on by civil wars and coup d'états. This volatile political climate prevented the development of an indigenous musical identity, which led Turina and his contemporaries to seek bringing back the folk idioms of Spain.

In *Serenata*, Turina deftly combines the seductive atmospherics of the Impressionists (Debussy is a clear influence) with the folksy language of his native land of Andalusia. The work opens with hushed tremolos against the guitar-like plucking in the cello. This opening section is repeated throughout the piece, interspersed with two contrasting episodes of overarching lyricism and luscious harmonies.

## **Whitehead *No stars, not even clouds...***

Born in 1941, Dame Gillian Whitehead is one of New Zealand's most prominent composers. She studied with Peter Maxwell Davies in England after working with Peter Sculthorpe at the University of Sydney. Just as Turina combined his influences from the French Impressionists with his own Andalusian background, Whitehead incorporates her own Maori heritage with her European training.

Whitehead wrote *No stars, not even clouds* for the Ensō String Quartet, and it was premiered by the quartet in 2012. According to Souz, the Centre for New Zealand Music:

*No stars, not even clouds* was written in memory of the composer's friend, the writer and oral historian Juanita Ketchel. It draws on traditional quartet forms, she says, as well as "the Otago accent of the korimako, or bellbirds, that seem to sing vociferously every time I sit down to write."

### **Sibelius** String Quartet, "Voces Intimae"

A violin, solitary and pensive, sings inwardly into the empty air, only to be met with an equally lonesome response by the cello... and so begins Sibelius's Quartet in d minor. Just as for Shostakovich, the quartet medium allows Sibelius to inscribe his innermost thoughts in contrast to the more public, extroverted symphonies (like his grandiose Second Symphony). Along with its subtitle, "Intimate Voices," it is fitting that the work begins with this quiet conversation.

After a few exchanges of dialogue, the first movement shifts into a faster gear, but the momentum never fully takes off. There is an understated sense of ebb and flow throughout, and any forward impetus is constantly alleviated before another onward attempt. The movement keeps cresting and troughing like waves, cyclically but irregularly, before it falls into occasional bouts of silence. It then transitions seamlessly into the second movement, which seems to finally establish a sense of propulsion before it, too, succumbs to silence. The movement threatens to become fragmentary before regaining its traction, somehow never losing its speed and sparkle.

The soul of the whole piece is revealed in the central *Adagio di molto*. It is in this movement in which Sibelius labels three hushed chords with the words "voces intimae." They occur right after an interruptive silence halts a subtly heated exchange, but the chords themselves are of another air - chilling and quietly intrusive. The exchange from before eventually returns, now meditatively meandering through various iterations. The three unearthly chords reappear, this time marking the movement's epilogue.

A rustic dance follows the *Adagio*. Within the architecture of the entire quartet the fourth movement mirrors the second movement, but instead of a light, fanciful intermezzo, the *Allegretto* is heavy-footed and ponderous. It reintroduces wave-like motion in the middle voices; pitches rise and fall constantly while the outer parts continue their call and response. The

*Finale*, unlike the earlier movements, is finally able to build on its cumulative momentum: a nervous fiddle-like tune progressively becomes more confident, gaining speed until the very end.

Throughout "Voces Intimae," Sibelius intentionally creates a thin texture by merging two parts into one, thus only two layers are heard in spite of all four members playing. The cognitive dissonance of four players producing only two aural layers results in a markedly stark atmosphere. By doing so, Sibelius manages to transform the quartet - an introspective genre to begin with - into something even more private and personal: a dialogue between two close people, that simplest yet purest form of conversation. Perhaps the recurring silences in the quartet are not so halting after all, but are signs of a bond already intimate.

--Notes by Ken Hamao