

Felix Bartholdy Mendelssohn (1809-1847)
String Quartet No 2 in A Minor, Op 13 (1827)

Adagio — Allegro vivace

Adagio non lento

Intermezzo (Allegretto con moto) — Allegro di molto

Presto — Adagio non lento

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)
String Quartet No. 8 in c minor, Op 110

Largo

Allegro molto

Allegretto

Largo

Largo

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
String Quartet No 7 in F, Op. 59 No. 1 “Rasumovsky” (1805-1806)

Allegro

Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando

Adagio molto e mesto

Thème Russe — Allegro

Mendelssohn. String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor, Op 13 (1827)

Mendelssohn was in the bloom of his early period (in his case, his best one) when he encountered the late quartets of Beethoven. With the sheer nerve of youth, Felix simply put on Ludwig’s shoes and wrote two brilliant quartets “in the manner” of his hero. It was 1827, Beethoven’s last year on earth, and Mendelssohn’s 18th year.

The Quartet in A Minor, which we hear tonight, was written in late summer 1827, closely modeled on the example of Beethoven’s Op. 132. The companion quartet in Eb actually was not finished until 1829 even though it is called Op. 12, and the two works were published together in 1830.

Where Beethoven’s quartet is inscribed with the unspoken words “Muss ist sein?” (Must it be?), visible only to the players or those following the score, Mendelssohn self-quotes in music from a song for voice and piano titled “Ist es wahr?” (Is it true?) This song, from a poem by Johann Gustav Droyson, had been set earlier as the young composer’s Op. 9 No. 1.

As befitting a man of tender years, the poem that he has chosen to quote in the quartet is not Beethoven’s existential scream of “Must it be?” “Is it true?” is a love poem, plain and simple, and here are the words:

“Is it true? Is it true that you walk daily on that leaf-strewn path, awaiting me beneath the grape arbor? That you consult the moonlight and all those little stars about me? Is it true? Speak!

“Only she knows what I feel — she feels it with me, faithful to me remaining, eternally faithful.”

This self-consoling song opens and closes the quartet, but rest assured that the course of true love never runs true. There are agitation and storm aplenty in the *Allegro*

vivace, once it commences, and all of Mendelssohn's Beethoven studies come into play. The first three notes of the song become a motive that plays many roles in the development of the movement, and, indeed, throughout the quartet. The viola introduces the main theme, and the cello is given the honor of presenting the second subject. The development is rich in counterpoint, and leads to a rip-roaring coda. The infectious assuredness of the music seems to say, "I am eighteen. I can do anything!"

The passionate *Adagio* opens and closes with a paraphrase of the "Is it true?" theme, framing a complex section of fugal work, showing that Mendelssohn, like Beethoven, knew his counterpoint and had studied his Bach.

Next comes the *Intermezzo*, in which the violin gets to sing out over pizzicato (plucked) accompaniment. If the middle section of the *Intermezzo* reminds listeners of the music from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, bear in mind that Mendelssohn had already written much of that music, at the ripe old age of sixteen!

The violin, over tremolo chords from the other players, runs through a cadenza-like passage to introduce the final *Presto* movement, a masterful finale with a brilliant, cyclic ending: the *Adagio* is recalled, and then the quartet ends with a return to the self-assured love song with which the quartet began. Mendelssohn wrote more quartets, but he never again achieved quite this level of inspiration. Thank the gods — Youth does not know limits.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) String Quartet No 8 in c minor, Op. 110

No work in the string quartet literature is more intense or more emotionally devastating than Shostakovich's Eighth Quartet. It was long assumed that this quartet was *about* "The Victims of Fascism and War." So says the epigraph in the published score. So said all the program notes, and some of them still say so. There is no denying the tragic sweep of this work that seems to cry out like a dirge for millions of souls extinguished.

But since the publication of Shostakovich's memoir, *Testimony*, in 1979, and moreso the publication of the 1998 volume *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, we now know that the Eighth Quartet — however nobly it has served as a tombstone of the Holocaust and World War II — was composed as a purely personal self-epitaph, a suicide note in music.

The quartet's obsessive use of the four-note "DSCH" motto which spells out Shostakovich's name (Es is Eb and H is the note B in German notation); and its extensive quiltwork of quotes from other Shostakovich music have always seemed odd in a work that supposedly had a "public" purpose. At the very least, the work has always been understood to contain "I suffered too" as a sub-theme, including as it does quotes from works that were banned for public performance through the Stalin years. What was the Soviet Union's "most loyal son" of composers doing and saying?

It may come as a surprise to many that Shostakovich did not become a member of the Communist Party until 1960, his 54th year. According to his wife Irina, he was finally blackmailed into joining. In *Testimony*, Shostakovich says, "When I wrote the Eighth Quartet, it was also assigned to the department of 'exposing fascism,' You have to be blind and deaf to do that, because everything in the quartet is as clear as a primer. I quote

Lady Macbeth, the First and Fifth Symphonies. What does fascism have to do with these? The Eighth is an autobiographical quartet; it quotes a song known to all Russians: 'Exhausted by the hardships of prison.'

It was not until 1990 that Shostakovich's colleague Lev Lebedinsky further confirmed the Eighth Quartet's link to this low point in the composer's life: "It was his farewell to life. He associated joining the Party with a moral, as well as a physical death... [H]e had completed the quartet and purchased a large number of sleeping pills, he played the Quartet to me on the piano and told me with tears in his eyes that it was his last work. He hinted at his intention to commit suicide. Perhaps subconsciously he hoped that I would save him. I managed to remove the pills from his jacket pocket and gave them to his son Maxim, explaining to him the true meaning of the Quartet."

The composer's son, Maxim, at a conference in 1992, added, "My father cried twice in his life: when his mother died and when he came to say they've made him join the Party. [...]his was sobbing, not just tears, but sobbing." Lebedinsky also reveals that "a much-trumpeted Party plenum" was called to present Shostakovich for one and all to see as a born-again Communist, and the event "deteriorated into a farce due to ... the unexpected absence of the composer!" Abject apologies were made, and Shostakovich was dutifully enrolled as a Party member but clearly one to be *watched*.

In the limited space we have to describe tonight's work, it has seemed more compelling to *tell the truth* about this staggering composition than to engage in musical analysis. Moreover, those who know Shostakovich's music in depth are "insiders" to this music, which resonates with themes from four of his symphonies, several other chamber works, and the opera Stalin hated, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. Better perhaps, to let the DSCH motto take over and view the work as a phantasmagoria of musical threads, woven with passion and musical genius. Since Shostakovich is one of the truly great quartet composers, this work deserves to be examined as pure music — but not now, and perhaps not for a long time to come. Accept this quartet as a message in a bottle, a cry of despair, a warning that collaboration with evil destroys the soul.

Beethoven String Quartet No. 7 in F Op. 59 No. 1 "Rasumovsky" (1805-1806)

Andreas Kirilovich Rasumovsky (1752-1836), the ambassador from Russia to Vienna from 1792 on, lived in an opulent palace in the Austrian capital and became one of the city's most influential arts patrons. A good musician, he had played second violin in Haydn's quartets, and was the sponsor of the virtuoso Schuppanzigh Quartet that premiered Beethoven's later chamber works. Today he is remembered chiefly as a friend and patron of Beethoven, and as the dedicatee of the three ground-breaking Op. 59 quartets. The Russian music lover commissioned the works in 1805, and it was perhaps at his suggestion that two of them contain Russian melodies. (It could scarcely be said that Rasumovsky was homesick for Cossacks and the steppes, though, since he enjoyed his lavish Viennese lifestyle and was a minor Don Juan.)

Beethoven was already sketching new quartets as early as 1804, and the commission prompted him to dust off those sketches and get to work. Recall that Beethoven agonized over his Op. 18 quartets and even withdrew and revised them before their final publication in 1800. This was serious business, and unlike Bach, who left musical masterpieces on the doorsteps of princes who never noticed, Beethoven was

writing for a knowledgeable patron who would study and, if possible, *play* his music. The work was done in 1806, and by 1808, the quartets had been published in Vienna, France and England. They were everywhere regarded as astonishing and revolutionary works.

This may be the greatest of all Beethoven's string quartets, and possibly the greatest string quartet ever written. Although Beethoven's late quartets aim for and achieve an almost superhuman sublimity, the "Middle Period" trio of quartets in Op. 59 turn the modest genre of the string quartet into a new scale and significance. The composer who now had the Eroica symphony and the Appassionata sonata behind him was bursting with symphonic ideas, at the peak of his powers. The F Major quartet we hear tonight has the sweep and power of a Beethoven symphony, and it is a work of truly symphonic emotional breadth and technical difficulty.

Can we "analyze" this quartet in a few paragraphs or even a few pages? No — it takes about 20 pages of dense musicological text to explain what Beethoven does with the beautiful themes and motives in this quartet, but when music is this direct, this emphatic in a non-contradictory way, there is just no point going on and on about modulations and bridge passages and counterpoint. Listen with mind and heart open and Beethoven speaks to you mind and heart — a spiritual telegraph with the quartet players as (hard-working!) mediums if you will. As Joseph Kerman writes of this quartet: "[It] is like coming into a new artistic universe. It is like a first reading of Chapman's Homer, a first visit to Athens or Venice, a first kiss."

The main theme of the opening Allegro, introduced by the cello, spans four octaves by the time it is fully stated. The theme itself contains melodic and rhythmic germs galore, and the composer grabs them and sends them spinning.

The development section introduces a double fugue, with a completely new theme, and elaborates at glorious length until it collapses abruptly on a diminished seventh chord — Beethoven seems fond of fugues that lead to harmonic catastrophes. By the time the recapitulation swings around, Beethoven has notched the movement into the distant key of Db, and it takes 65 bars to come back to the "home" tonality. We have been on a compelling and diverse melodic and harmonic journey, but at the end, the recapitulation and coda assert the main themes masterfully, and with that unique Beethovenian sense that every note was inevitable. As musicologist Kerman puts it, "Multiplicity without confusion, extension without vacuity, prolongation without delay, scope without either flaccidity or tedium."

The impact of this staggering first movement is as great in the history of chamber music as the first movement of the Eroica was to that of the symphony. This is not music of diversion but of total concentration. If the Eroica symphony was "about" struggle and triumph and disaster in the life of the hero, this quartet, set in the open-faced key of F Major, seems to be "about" self-assurance, lucidity, mastery of one's art and its materials. Something important is being said, and the medium itself has been transformed. No one can listen to this movement and not feel larger for it, grateful that such a thing could ever have been created.

The second movement, marked *Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando*, is in the very surprising key of Bb. A shift of the beat makes some measures sound a little like a Polish mazurka. The piece is astonishingly complex, with two returns of the opening *Scherzando* material, not one but two Trio sections (one in F minor, the next in Bb Minor), and a development section thrown in the middle. This is a preview of the great

scherzos of the Seventh and Ninth symphonies, and one cannot help but think, while listening to the phrases thrown about, of how this would sound with all the winds and horns of the orchestra joining in.

The third movement, *Adagio molto e mesto* is in F Minor (the dark side of the “home” key of F Major). Beethoven wrote these words on the original score, “A weeping willow or acacia tree over my brother’s grave,” and we are indeed in a world of tragic import. (We should add that Beethoven’s two brothers were alive and well when the quartet was composed, so the inscription refers to a poetic or abstract sense of “brother.”) A hymn-like interlude in D \flat Major briefly intrudes, but Beethoven resolutely brings the opening tragic theme back to end the movement. A cadenza-like passage on the violin draws us toward the quartet’s final movement.

But how does one follow three intense, and intensely different, movements? With a nod to Beethoven’s patron, Count Rasumovsky, the Russian Ambassador to Vienna, the cello introduces a Russian theme (which Beethoven blithely lifts out its original d minor gloom, turning vodka and blini into schnaps and strudel). The lively movement that follows has the composer merrily extracting melodic and rhythmic material from his source. Beethoven, who had devoted the last movement of the Eroica symphony to a set of heroic variations on his own “Prometheus” melody, may be using the same process here to wind down colorfully and pleasingly. Knowing what should come last would be a problem to haunt all composers after Beethoven (and not a few composers have come around to the idea that three movements are enough).

Program notes by Brett Rutherford.