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Alexander String Quartet and Robert Greenberg, January 11th

String Quartet No. 11 in F Minor, Opus 122

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg

Died August 9, 1975, Moscow

In the summer of 1965, violinist Vasily Petrovich Shirinsky died. For over forty years Shirinsky had been a friend of Shostakovich and also the second violinist of the Beethoven Quartet. That fall, Shostakovich set to work on a new string quartet, his *Eleventh*, and dedicated it to Shirinsky's memory. The quartet was completed in January 1966, and after several private performances, the Beethoven Quartet (with a new second violinist) gave the official premiere in Leningrad on May 28, 1966.

As is fitting in a memorial piece, the *Eleventh Quartet* is somber music. It is also extremely original in structure, consisting of seven connected movements that last a total of only sixteen minutes. The *Eleventh Quartet* has been described as a suite of quartet movements rather than an actual string quartet, but its thematic concentration, emotional unity, and Shostakovich's economic development of just two fundamental ideas across the span of seven sharply-contrasted movements place this work squarely within quartet form.

The *Eleventh Quartet* has a beautiful beginning. The *Introduction* opens with a lament for solo violin that soars and falls back, soars and falls, constantly changing keys. Almost immediately the cello has a measured figure in its lowest register-Shostakovich will build the entire quartet out of variations on these two themes. The *Introduction* concludes with the opening violin melody high over fragments of the cello theme, but at the *Scherzo* the cello theme is suddenly transformed into the subject of a quick-paced fugue. The first violin introduces the fugue subject, and the other instruments enter to the accompaniment of swooping glissandos and harmonics. The steady pulse of eighth-notes continues throughout, finally dissolving into fragments and resolving on the viola's low C.

The brief *Recitative* opens with an explosion from the lower strings before the first violin enters in double-stops; the shape of the scherzo theme returns very quietly here. The *Etude* is a perpetual-motion movement, which-as its name suggests-sounds like an exercise. First violin and later the cello have an unending rush of sixteenth-notes here, and again the scherzo theme is implied very subtly in the background. The *Humoresque* features a demonic second violin that chirps out the interval of a minor third throughout, like a cuckoo gone slightly mad; over that steady pulse, the other strings offer fierce fragments of the scherzo theme. The *Elegy* returns to the mood of the very beginning: over grieving lower strings, the two violins have an extended variation of the opening melody. The *Finale* is muted throughout. It opens with the fugue theme, but soon this gives way to music from the beginning: solo violin sings its lamentation while far below the other voices have bits of the fugue theme. These fragments gradually fall away, and finally the *Eleventh Quartet* ends with the first violin all alone, its high C shimmering into silence. It is a very effective conclusion to a very effective piece of music.

String Quartet No. 12 in D-flat Major, Opus 133

The official Soviet position on serial composition was completely negative: the Soviets believed that Schoenberg's theory of composing with sequences of twelve tones was the worst sort of "formalism"-music separated from natural impulses and alien to the tastes of the public. But late in his career-at a time when his standing as a composer was secure-Shostakovich became intrigued by certain possibilities inherent in serial procedures, and twelve-note sequences appeared in several works, principally the *String Quartet No. 12* and the *Violin Sonata*, both composed in 1968. Questioned about this during his final visit to the United States in 1973, Shostakovich told an interviewer: "I did use some element of dodecaphony in these works. Of course, if you take a theory and use solely this theory, I have a very negative attitude toward this kind of approach.

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But if a composer feels that he needs this or that technique, he can take whatever is available and use it as he sees fit. It is his right to do so. But if you take only one technique, whether it is aleatory or dodecaphonic, and use nothing but that technique, then it is wrong."

This comment is the best possible introduction to his *String Quartet No. 12*, for while twelve-tone rows appear in this quartet, the music's harmonic language remains tonal-Shostakovich treats the twelve-note sequence not as a row but as a theme to be developed in traditional ways. The quartet is in a specific key-D-flat major-and however chromatic Shostakovich's development may become, the music remains firmly anchored in that home key, as the triumphant conclusion demonstrates. Shostakovich's encounter with twelve-tone music in this quartet is more a flirtation than an embrace-it is as if he raises the issue just to get beyond it.

The *Twelfth Quartet* has an unusual structure: a brief opening movement is followed by a long second movement that breaks down into smaller sections at different speeds and in contrasted moods. Some observers have been quick to relate these sections to the slow movement, scherzo, and so on of the traditional string quartet, but such a reading straitjackets Shostakovich's quite original music into other molds. Far better to take this music on its own terms than to attempt to understand it in ways that may be alien to it.

Solo cello opens the *Moderato* with the twelve-note sequence that will recur throughout the quartet, but the first true theme-firmly tonal-follows immediately in the first violin. That same instrument has the lilting second idea at the *Allegretto*, another sequence of the twelve tones. Shostakovich's treatment of these ideas can be full of chromatic tension, but the movement remains fundamentally harmonic, and it comes to a quiet close.

The long second movement opens with fierce trills in the upper instruments as the cello spits out the five-note rhythmic cell that will run through this movement. This opening section, which can be quite abrasive, gives way to a long *Adagio*, introduced by solo cello-its somber song is answered by a dark chant from the muted upper voices, harmonized triadically. Material from the first movement begins to reappear here, and the *Moderato* fuses some of these ideas as it builds to a huge climax punctuated by biting chords. Finally the dancing first violin draws us into the concluding *Allegretto* section, derived from the cello's five-note cell at the opening of this movement. This section drives with great energy to its close, where the rhythm of that cell rockets home in triumphant D-flat major. In the *Twelfth Quartet*, Shostakovich may raise the issue of serial music, but only as a starting point-the form and treatment of these ideas is anything but serial, and at the end the quartet seems to thumb its nose defiantly at the whole issue of atonality.

Shostakovich completed the *Twelfth Quartet* on March 11, 1968, and the Beethoven String Quartet gave several private performances that June. Shostakovich, who knew that this music represented new directions for him, was quite pleased with these performances and with his new creation. Shostakovich dedicated this music to the Beethoven Quartet's first violinist, Dmitri Tsyganov, and that quartet gave the public premiere Moscow on September 14, 1968.

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