

Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor, Op. 67

Dmitri Shostakovich

Following the 1936 condemnation of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* by the Soviet authorities, Dmitri Shostakovich increasingly split his composing into parallel universes — one for public consumption, the other for personal expression. His chamber music, and most prominently his 15 string quartets, probably constitute the most complete body of the music he *wanted* to write, rather than the music he was *allowed* to write. Mixed among the quartets are other chamber pieces of the highest order, including the magnificent Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor.

Shostakovich wrote the piece in memory of Ivan Ivanovich Sollertinsky, who died of a heart attack on February 11, 1944, at the age of 41, while in evacuation in Siberia with the Leningrad Philharmonic, which he was then serving as artistic director. Sollertinsky was a brilliant musicologist, music critic, linguist, professor (at Leningrad University), and administrator; he had become close friends with Shostakovich in 1927, had opened the composer's eyes to the glory of Mahler, and had stood by him through the darkest days. Shostakovich wrote to Sollertinsky's widow:

I cannot express in words all of the grief I felt when I received the news of the death of Ivan Ivanovich ... who was my closest friend," "I owe all my education to him.

In fact, Shostakovich had already begun thinking about writing a piano trio, but when news of Sollertinsky's death arrived, he started over. His response to this loss is clearly reflected in the elegiac portions of this trio, which seem a fitting tribute to such a brave friend. But the piece is much more than just an elegy: it is rich in variety, and its diversity stands as an appropriate tribute to the man

who championed all aspects of Shostakovich's art. This is, moreover, a wartime work — the death camps of Majdanek and Treblinka had recently been discovered in the wake of the Nazi's retreat from the Eastern front — and its macabre aspects surely evoke the extremes of joy and bitterness that might be juxtaposed even in daily life during such a time.

The work covers broad emotional and even descriptive terrain. A nervous opening movement flits among moments of muted reflection, transparent neo-Baroque happiness, folk-like depictions of Russian life, and angry defiance. The second movement is an often riotous, sometimes menacing scherzo built from a theme whose simplistic triads sound sarcastic. Although the movement is headed *Allegro con brio*, the string parts carry such indications as *marcatissimo, pesante* (strongly accented, heavy), suggesting the stylistic and expressive schizophrenia particularly associated with the composer.

The *Largo*, in the dark key of B-flat minor, is one of Shostakovich's great threnodies. As he had in his Piano Quintet of 1940, the composer drew inspiration from Bach, setting the movement's opening as a vast, emotionally

IN SHORT

Born: September 25, 1906, in Leningrad

Died: August 9, 1975, in Moscow

Work composed: February 15 through August 13, 1944; dedicated to the memory of Shostakovich's friend Ivan Sollertinsky

World premiere: November 14, 1944, at the Great Hall of the Leningrad Philharmonic, by violinist Dmitri Tsyganov, cellist Sergei Shirinsky, and the composer (as pianist)

Estimated duration: ca. 26 minutes

desolate passacaglia: the piano repeats its deep-voiced, eight-measure chordal progression six times as the strings weave in counterpoint above.

A quiet drumming figure in the piano leads from this reverie into the finale, which, like the scherzo, juxtaposes joy and sorrow in such a way as to intensify emotions in both directions. Ian MacDonald, writing in *The New Shostakovich*, says that “horrified by stories that SS guards had made their victims dance beside their own graves, Shostakovich

created a directly programmatic image of it.” The shell-shocked, or otherwise stunned, *danse macabre* unrolls propulsively, though contrasting passages of broad lyricism and a curious dollop of densely contrapuntal atonality cast it into relief along the way, recalling somewhat the structure of a rondo. At the end, the dance gives way to a return of material heard earlier: memories of the first movement’s theme, the muted anguish of stratospheric strings, a fleeting glimpse of the piano’s passacaglia from the slow movement.

Speed Limit

The pace of the second movement of Shostakovich’s E-minor Piano Trio can prove problematic. The movement is headed *Allegro con brio* and it carries a metronome marking of $\text{♩}=132$, which would seem impracticably fast and musically unsatisfying. Yakov Milkis, a violist in the Leningrad Philharmonic, reported having asked the composer about the tempos in this piece:

As a general rule, the metronome markings in the score were always faster than the tempos taken during performance. ... For instance, take the Second Piano Trio. There the metronome marking of the scherzo is so fast as to render it virtually unperformable. Once, while I was studying this trio, I happened to be in Komarovo when Dmitri Dmitriyevich was also staying there. I plucked up the courage to ask him about the markings, not only the fast speed of the scherzo, but the very slow speed indicated for the third movement. He answered, “You know, take no notice. I use this rickety old metronome, and I know I should have thrown it out years ago, as it’s completely unreliable, but I have got so attached to it that I keep it. But you, as a musician, should just play as you feel the music and take no notice of those markings, take no notice.”

Shostakovich in the late 1940s

