

## 9. Shostakovich

### String Quartet No. 8, Op. 110: movement I

(For Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

#### Background information and performance circumstances

String Quartet No. 8 by Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-75) was composed in July 1960 (in just three days). The first performance was by the Beethoven Quartet in Leningrad (now St Petersburg) on 2 October 1960.

Shostakovich, the most important Russian composer born in the early years of the twentieth-century, was frequently at odds with the Soviet authorities, and his freedom as a composer was often seriously curtailed. In 1960, however, he gave in to strong pressure to join the Communist Party, and became to some extent an establishment figure. He was very uneasy about this capitulation, and his String Quartet No. 8 has been said to be in the nature of an obituary for himself as he had contemplated suicide. There are important quotations from previous works, and there is much use of the motto theme D–E flat–C–B, whose pitches are derived from part of the composer's name as spelt in German (D[mitri] SCH[ostakowitsch], with 'S' represented by 'Es', German for E flat, and 'H' being German for B natural). The dark tone of the work was partly also the result of a visit to Dresden, a city in East Germany ravaged by Allied bombing in the Second World War.

#### Performing forces and their handling

As the title makes clear, the performing forces are two violins, viola and cello.

The sombre character of the music arises partly from use of so many low notes (with much exploitation of the bottom open string – G below middle C for violins, tenor C for viola and C an octave lower for cello). Ranges are quite narrow generally, with no place for the brightness that the upper registers can provide.

Restraint and self-denial extend to avoidance of even such relatively common devices as pizzicato, tremolo and double-stopping. There is very little use of staccato, tenuto or accents. Dynamics remain low, with the only *forte* appearing in bar 25.

#### Texture

Bars 1-11 are contrapuntal – with imitative entries, rising from cello to Violin I, based on the DSCH motif and transpositions of it.

- The cello enters alone (monophony).
- The viola imitates this motif two bars later (bar 23) a fifth higher.
- Violin II enters only one bar after the viola, then Violin I is heard two bars after a behind Violin II, but now a fourth higher.

Notice also the two-part counterpoint which occurs at bars 19-23 and the four-part free counterpoint at bars 92-94.

**Homophonic** textures are widely used. They include the following.

- Bars 23<sup>3</sup>-27 where the music is partly **homorhythmic** (all parts sharing identical or similar rhythms).
- In bars 28-45<sup>1</sup> a melody in Violin I is accompanied by **extended tonic and dominant drones** in the lower parts – viola and cello have an octave C, and Violin II has G. (On the term 'drone', see below, the paragraph following the table in the section on 'Harmony'.)
- The texture in bars 50-78 is similar except that from bar 52 Violin II has the melody, while from bar 55 Violin I has a **countermelody** apparently based on a passage from the Fifth Symphony (see the 'Melody' section). A countermelody is a melody heard with the principal melodic part of a homophonic texture, but one that is clearly of secondary importance.

**Parallelism** is occasionally used in ways uncharacteristic of pre-twentieth-century music: for example, the violins and the cello moving in double octaves around a G (dominant) pedal in the viola (bars 11-12).

## Structure

The movement proceeds without reference to such traditional structures as sonata form. The opening imitative passage may be viewed as an introduction. The main part of the movement can then be considered to have a symmetrical arch-like structure with five sections conveniently labelled A B C B<sup>v</sup> A<sup>v</sup> (with <sup>v</sup> signifying 'varied'). The three homophonic statements of DSCH are key moments for the listener, not least because of their *mf* dynamics.

Section	Bar	Brief description
Introduction	1-11 <sup>2</sup>	Five entries of the DSCH motif
A	11 <sup>3</sup> -27	Begins with DSCH motif in octaves Includes quotation of material from the First Symphony Ends with the first of three homophonic statements
B	28-49	New (chromatic) melody in Violin I, with drones in lower parts DSCH in cello at bar 46
C	50-85	50-54: new C-G-G-A flat-G figure 55, 63, 71: three statements by Violin I of a theme derived from the Fifth Symphony 79-84: second homophonic statement of DSCH
B <sup>v</sup>	86-104	B <sup>v</sup> is a <i>much</i> varied version of B Melody somewhat similar to that of section B, played by <i>cello</i> ...

A <sup>v</sup>	104-126	104 <sup>3</sup> -114 <sup>2</sup> are almost identical to 11 <sup>3</sup> -21 <sup>2</sup> , leading to the third homophonic statement of DSCH at bar 118  122-126: based on bars 52-53 (Section C), with a final shift to unison G sharps in the Violin II, viola and cello – a link into movement II (see the section on 'Tonality').
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## Tonality

To some extent Shostakovich still thought in terms of conventional major–minor tonality. Such conservatism (for older composers had explored atonality from about the time of his birth) was connected with contemporary attitudes in Soviet Russia, where, for example, atonality was viewed as 'decadent'. Shostakovich even labelled his Quartet No. 8 'C minor', using a key signature of three flats.

This movement does not depart from C minor for long, as the following table shows. Note in particular that Shostakovich did not modulate decisively to the key most frequently linked with C minor in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – E flat, the relative major – nor indeed to the dominant, G minor.

Section	Bar	Comment
Introduction	1-11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>C minor</i> cello entry – the DSCH motif (with its pitches D-E flat-C-B natural) clearly implies that key</li> <li>● The first four entries (bars 1-8), however, include all 12 notes of the chromatic scale, creating ambiguity</li> </ul>
A	11 <sup>3</sup> -27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>C minor</i> at beginning and end, with considerable ambiguity in between</li> <li>● 11<sup>3</sup>: The unison statement of DSCH begins by signifying <i>C minor</i>, but...</li> <li>● ...the B natural is harmonised with chords of E minor, E major, E flat major and D major (tonality obscure) before reaching <i>C minor</i> (Ib) in bar 16</li> <li>● Tonality is obscure during the reference to the First Symphony (from bar 16), hinting at C sharp minor (bar 19), B minor (bar 21) and A minor (bar 23<sup>1-2</sup>)</li> <li>● 23<sup>3</sup>-27, the first homophonic statement of DSCH, in <i>C minor</i></li> </ul>
B	28-49	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Up to bar 45, lower strings sustain C and G below a chromatic Violin I melody</li> <li>● 46-49: clear <i>C minor</i> with DSCH motif in cello</li> </ul>
C	50-85	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 50-54: sustained C and G (then just C) in lower parts – in the absence of E flats and E naturals, A flats point more to <i>C minor</i> than to C major</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 55-78: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Viola and cello sustain C, then G, then C – which register as tonic, dominant, tonic in C – but the mode is unclear.</li> <li>○ Prominent E naturals at bars 55, 63, 71 suggest C major...</li> <li>○ ...but D flats (notably in bar 57) give more of a passing impression of <i>F minor</i></li> <li>○ Overall, the passage is in <i>C minor</i>, in spite of the bitter-sweet E naturals</li> </ul> </li> <li>● 79-84: Basically <i>C minor</i>, but with ambiguous 'bare-5th' C-G chords (neither major nor minor) in bar 84</li> </ul>
B <sup>v</sup>	86-104	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 86-91<sup>2</sup>: <i>A minor</i>, a minor 3rd below C minor</li> <li>● 91<sup>3</sup>-94: Several F sharps and C sharps hint at <i>F sharp minor</i> (a further minor 3rd down from A minor.)</li> <li>● 95-104: Briefly <i>C major</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Bar 95 is an isolated moment of brightness, despite the <b>pp</b> dynamics; both violins play their highest notes in the movement here</li> <li>○ There follows a tonally obscure, chromatic passage before the return to C minor in section A<sup>v</sup></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
A <sup>v</sup>	104-126	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 104<sup>3</sup>-114<sup>2</sup>: Compare 11<sup>3</sup>-21<sup>2</sup> above</li> <li>● 114<sup>3</sup>-124<sup>1</sup>: Settles in <i>C minor</i>, n.b. V-I in bars 120-2</li> <li>● 125-126: Unison G sharps, i.e. enharmonic A flats, preparing for Movement II in G sharp minor</li> </ul>

## Harmony

Shostakovich's harmony is very varied – ranging from one or two passages that could have been written by a pre-twentieth-century composer to dissonant writing that goes well beyond traditional major and minor triads and seventh chords. Something of the contrast begins to emerge if we look at the harmony in the homophonic statements of DSCH.

Note: The statement in each case is understood to include the two Cs that follow the B natural of the DSCH motif. These Cs (the first of which is a short note of anticipation, as in cello, bar 24) are tonics that follow on naturally from the leading note B.

Statement	Bar	Detail
1	23-27	C minor V-Ib-IV-V (with 9-8 suspension)-I (but without 3rd), i.e. a perfect cadence

2	79-84	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 79: C minor V</li> <li>● 80: III with flattened 3rd (E flat minor chord)</li> <li>● 81: IV with raised 3rd (F–A natural–C)</li> <li>● 82–83: V with semibreve A flat appoggiatura in Violin II Viola's dissonant F flat resolves to E flat, then D</li> <li>● 84: I (but without 3rd)</li> </ul>
3	118-122 <sup>2</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Begins with III, this time an augmented triad (E flat-G-B natural), in place of C minor V); D is added at 118<sup>3</sup>, making an unusual seventh chord</li> <li>● 119: Cello F delayed by extension of E flat, generating additional dissonance</li> </ul>

Other traditional features include the insistence on tonic and dominant notes of the (C minor) scale. These are often much prolonged, and it is inviting to call them 'pedals'. But because there are usually no clear changes of harmony above them it is useful to refer to 'drones' (especially where both tonic and dominant are used simultaneously). In bars 28-45 a single chromatic line moves over a long held C and G, while in bars 50-78 there are two independent lines (for violins) above a single note held by viola and cello in octaves.

One of the more striking harmonic features is use consecutively of chords of E minor, E major, E flat major, D major and E flat major under a sustained B natural (bars 13-16<sup>2</sup> and 106-109<sup>2</sup>).

## Melody

- Melody is placed in the lower ranges.
- There is much conjunct (stepwise) movement, with some scalic passages, for example in bars 67-70 with the notes B natural-C-D-E flat (and their reverse) from the C minor scale.
- Chromatic scalic passages (particularly descending ones) occur several times, notably in Violin I (bars 28-30) and cello (bars 87-89).
- Among small leaps, the most important are the descending minor 3rds that belong to the crucial DSCH motif (D-E flat-C-B natural).
- Melodies are often narrow in range.
- Repetition of motifs (bars 50-56 in violins).
- Sequential repetition (bars 19-23 in viola).

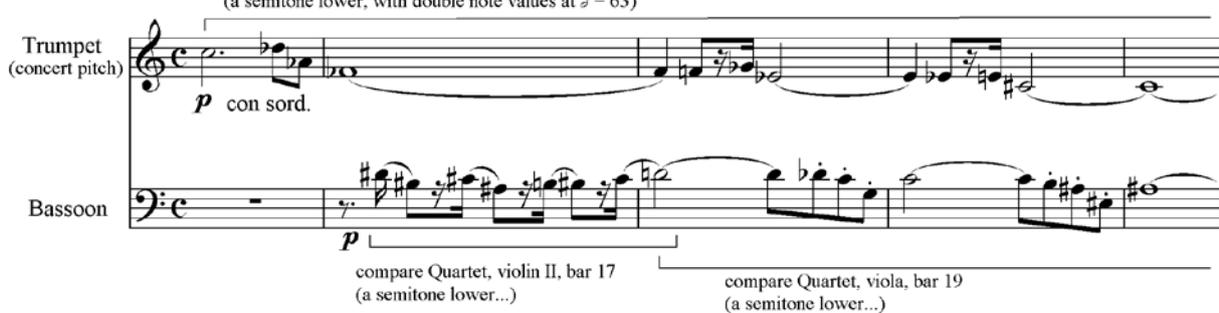
Quartet No. 8 includes several quotations from previous works by Shostakovich. Movement I refers to the beginning of the First Symphony of 1926, from bar 16 as shown below and again from bar 109. In both cases the borrowed music follows on very naturally from music that is original to the quartet, moving at less than half its original speed.

It appears that the first four notes of a theme from movement I of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony in D minor (1937) (see Example 2) are alluded to by Violin I in bars 55-58<sup>2</sup>, 63-65 and 71-74<sup>2</sup>. The effect of these four notes, which outline a descending tritone, is very different in both works, however. In the symphony, they take us from the dominant of D

minor to the flattened supertonic, whereas in the quartet the journey is from the raised third of C minor down to the unraised leading note. The descending tritone pattern is *faster* when heard in the quartet than in the symphony.

Example 1

**Allegretto** ♩ = 152  
 compare Quartet, violin I, bar 16  
 (a semitone lower, with double note values at ♩ = 63)



Trumpet (concert pitch)  
*p* con sord.

Bassoon  
*p*

compare Quartet, violin II, bar 17  
 (a semitone lower...)

compare Quartet, viola, bar 19  
 (a semitone lower...)

Example 2

**Moderato** ♩ = 76



Vln I  
*p*

## Rhythm and metre

The first movement of Quartet No. 8 is in simple quadruple time ( $^4_4$ ), despite the metronome mark of *minim* = 63 and notation clearly implying a minim beat.

Rhythms are generally simple. Syncopation is uncommon, but there are important examples at some cadences, notably in bars 24-25 (Violin II) and 120-121 (viola), with the tying of minim to minim in an inner part.

The quotation from the First Symphony is typified by its dotted rhythms, and a dotted rhythm also appears in the cello's opening motif, i.e. the dotted minim plus crotchet. The same dotted rhythm follows the chromatic groups of crotchets in such places as bars 30 and 33. These 'irregular' three-bar phrases can be contrasted with the 'regular' structure of three times eight bars in the Violin I part of bars 55-78, and the two-bar units in Violin II consisting of minim, two crotchets, two minims.

### Additional points:

- The very long notes in the lower parts of sections B and C.
- **Rhythmic augmentation** in the second homophonic statement of the DSCH motif. Minims are doubled to semibreves here. The dotted minim is more than doubled to last for *seven* crotchets, so that the crotchet that follows can remain as a crotchet and clearly retain its function as a short note of (tonic) anticipation.

Further reading

Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, (Oxford, 2001). Available by subscription online, has much information on Shostakovich's life and work.

N. Kay, *Shostakovich*, (London, 1971). This is an excellent introduction to Shostakovich's work (up to 1971). Concerning Quartet No. 8, see pages 53-56.