

# Different strokes

The Faculty's lecture programme is designed to open and expand undergraduates' critical perspective. Here, as a taster of the approaches that new students might encounter in Cambridge, three lecturers consider one of the most famous twentieth-century chamber works from very different angles.



## Shostakovich: String Quartet No. 8

### An historical perspective

Many years ago, still in Soviet times, when I was a student in Moscow, I gave a talk about Shostakovich's Eighth Quartet (1960). I spoke about the genesis of the work, which was allegedly conceived in Dresden, a city still rising from the rubble after Allied bombing during World War II, and I spoke about the work's dedication 'to the victims of fascism and war'. I took this dedication as a programme for the Quartet, and it seemed to fit beautifully, turning it into a kind of war memorial. The arch-like five-movement construction seemed almost architectural, while echoes of Beethoven's late string quartets (in the beginning and in the final fugue) provided the specifically German context. The terrifying *moto perpetuo* of the second movement, featuring a 'Jewish' theme, seemed to paint scenes of Nazi concentration camps; the sinister waltz of the third movement, based on Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre*, a dance of death, also seemed to fit with the dedication, and so on. I commented on the fact that the Quartet was tied together by the four-note D-(e) S-C-H motif (D-E $\flat$ -C-B in English spelling), which was Shostakovich's musical monogram, and I chose to interpret this motif as playing a structural, rather than a meaningful role – a kind of cement for the musical edifice. I was aware that Shostakovich quoted some of his earlier works in the Quartet – but since this would have contributed nothing to the programme, I didn't have much to say about it.

Imagine my embarrassment – which I carry with me to this day – when a few years later, a letter was published, in which Shostakovich spoke frankly

of the genesis and meaning (for him) of his Eighth Quartet. There was no mention of 'fascism' or 'war'. The Quartet, Shostakovich claimed, was entirely autobiographical, a kind of 'memorial to himself'. He created it at a low point of his life, suffering pangs of conscience after agreeing to join the Communist Party – some say he was even haunted by suicidal thoughts. The process of composing this Quartet, however, cheered him up, and he was able to retell the story to a friend with a great deal of self-mockery, even referring to the Quartet as a 'pseudo-tragedy'. Reading this, I realised that the autobiographical programme could easily be matched to the music: even without the composer's letter, there are clear signposts: the obsessive use of the DSC $\bar{H}$  monogram and the multiple self-quotations from Shostakovich's landmark works – namely, the First Symphony, the Fifth Symphony and the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*.

The autobiographical evidence was compelling, but this interpretation of the Eighth Quartet would not have gone down well in the Soviet Union of the mid-1980s. Instead of a great anti-Fascist work by a civic-minded composer, we would have had self-obsessed outpourings hiding behind a fraudulent dedication. This would have amounted to an abuse of the 'war theme', which was a sacred subject in a country that had lost 26 million people in the Second World War.

I've shared this story to highlight the hazards of 'definitive' history. How do we find meaning in an instrumental work? How do we interpret pieces of intra- and extra-musical evidence that may fit together badly, or even contradict each other? How is our listening affected by our own experiences, our outlook, our social conditioning? Can we establish any 'absolute' truths, or are such hopes simply deluded? These are all questions my students have enjoyed debating, and you shouldn't be surprised to discover that the answers can't be found at the back of the book.

Prof Marina Frolova-Walker



Above: Caricature of Shostakovich and Stalin by Nathan Jensen

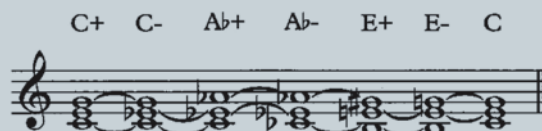
## An analytical perspective

‘A motive,’ wrote Schoenberg, ‘is incomplete and depends on continuations: explanations, clarifications, conclusions, consequences, etc.’<sup>1</sup> It is a provocative thought, and one which, if taken as advice to the analyst rather than the composer, warns us that worthwhile motivic analysis needs to do more than simply list the appearances and various transformations of a given motive across the course of a composition: the question ‘*what* is happening here?’ is less interesting than ‘*why* is this happening?’ or ‘*how* is this happening?’.

The point is all the more significant in the case of a work such as the Shostakovich’s Eighth Quartet, whose ‘basic theme’, as we have seen, has strict autobiographical reference, spelling out his initials D-S[Eb]-C-H[B] (in scale-degree terms, 2-3-8-#7). Of course, a perfectly worthwhile analysis might well result from the pursuit of the composer and his own and others’ music (again, Shostakovich pointed the way) throughout the score; equally, there is much to ponder in considering the Quartet in the context of its forerunners, not least some of Beethoven’s late quartets: Op. 131 in C# minor, with its opening fugal movement and semitonally rich subject (G#-B#-C#-A, or 5-#7-8-6), which reappears transformed in the finale, is especially relevant.<sup>2</sup>

But to return to Schoenberg: one ‘consequence’ flowing from the ‘basic theme’ can be seen in some harmonic shifts: the striking reharmonisation of the final B in the context of an E-minor chord at Figure 1 (the moment is ‘marked for consciousness’ by the dynamic indications) is a local example which will have further longer-term consequences (the E naturals from Figure 4 onward, or the long E-based passage at Figure 44 in the third movement, for example). Meanwhile, the outer limits, B-Eb, of the motto theme are ‘rethought’ enharmonically to yield the upper third of the G# minor triad of the second movement.

A different, non-motivic explanation of Shostakovich’s harmony could be adopted from the work of Richard Cohn on parsimonious voice-leading:<sup>3</sup>



Major and minor triads of C, E, and Ab/G# – keys which appear distant from one another if plotted around the circle of fifths – emerge as closely related through semitonal shifting (itself a feature

of Shostakovich’s ‘basic theme’). Admittedly, this approach leaves the G minor and C# minor of Movements 3 and 4 unaccounted for; but both pitches are themselves semitonally related to C and G#/Ab...

The G-G# shift is something else that is highlighted at Figure 4 (viola); and its reverse, Ab-G (exactly the same pitches, but now in Violin 1), will be the last pitch motion we hear in the Quartet. The conjoining (Figure 72 onward) of the end of the ‘basic theme’ with the C-G-Ab-G motive first heard at Figure 3+5 perhaps hints at a suppressed motivic ‘answer’, B-C-Ab-G, to the ‘basic theme’ itself, while the recomposition here of the end of the first movement, so that this material now appears in Violin 1 and not Violin 2, might prompt an analysis in terms of narrative and instrumental personae or agencies; but that is for another day ...

*Prof Nicholas Marston*

## A performance-related perspective

A search of the literature on Shostakovich’s Eighth Quartet reveals relatively little material on its performance history, and even less on the performance issues confronting ensembles keen to play the music. It goes without saying that performances do not come out of the blue; nor are they confined to the time it takes to give them. Instead, a typical performance reflects many hours of preparation, not to mention years of more general training during which one’s musical abilities are developed and refined.

The Shostakovich Quartet poses innumerable performance challenges. First of all, the fact that the five movements are played without interruption requires an ensemble to decide how they should relate in terms of character, length, and so forth. This is especially important given that the first, fourth and fifth movements are marked ‘Largo’. The last thing one would want is for the music to sag and cause listeners to lose interest.

But decisions about such matters as character and length are by no means straightforward: the information in the score about these and other musical features is incomplete at best. Among other things, this explains the wide disparities in the lengths of recordings of Shostakovich’s Eighth Quartet – length obviously being determined by the tempo at which individual movements are taken. For example, the premiere performance<sup>4</sup> by the Beethoven Quartet in Leningrad on 2 October 1960 lasted 18’50”, which is about the same as a live performance by the Borodin Quartet in 1962 (18’37”)<sup>5</sup> but a good deal faster than many recordings, including others by the

1 Arnold Schoenberg, ‘Folkloristic Symphonies’, in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein (London: Faber, 1975), 164.  
2 For an exhaustive study of the Quartet from multiple perspectives, see David Fanning, *Shostakovich: String Quartet No. 8* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).  
3 The example is adapted from Richard Cohn, ‘Maximally Smooth Cycles, Hexatonic Systems, and the Analysis of Late-Romantic Triadic Progressions’, *Music Analysis* 15 (1996), 9–40.

4 A recording of this performance is available on YouTube at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=YS0MvtC6wZ4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YS0MvtC6wZ4) (accessed 8 June 2015).  
5 Available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwostsHeRdw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwostsHeRdw) (accessed 8 June 2015).

Borodins. David Fanning has described the tempos taken at the premiere in 1960 as ‘among the swiftest’; he also refers to the Beethoven Quartet’s ‘remarkably romantic’ phrasing and ‘lush’ colour.<sup>6</sup> It is not clear whether these characteristics reflected Shostakovich’s preferences or the ensemble’s. Fanning does note that the edition prepared by the quartet’s first violinist Tsiganov states, ‘dynamic marks and nuances approved by Shostakovich during rehearsals’,<sup>7</sup> but this may not be accurate.

It is fascinating to study individual performances of this piece – and indeed others – ‘on their own terms’, by which I mean not as projections of the composer’s intentions or as more or less faithful reproductions of what is in the score, but rather as a reflection of the decisions taken by the musicians responsible for them. For example, some recently developed analytical tools and techniques help one drill down into a performance

to determine how tempo and dynamics change as the music is unfolding; it is also possible to reveal the distinctive acoustic properties of, say, a violinist’s vibrato or a cellist’s portamento. One such tool is Sonic Visualiser, which is freely available online. By using this ingenious software, you can discover how different elements of particular performances have been shaped. Of course, you then have to decide what the data you’ve collected mean. This is not easy: studies have shown that what listeners perceive may or may not match ‘the facts’ of a performance. So, any conclusions that you reach after studying recordings of Shostakovich’s Quartet with Sonic Visualiser would have to be weighed up very carefully. On the other hand, the potential insights on offer are enormous: you may end up with a better sense of what is happening in the performances than your ears alone could achieve.

*Prof John Rink*

<sup>6</sup> David Fanning, *Shostakovich: String Quartet No. 8* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 161.  
<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

Below: D. Shostakovich, *String Quartet No. 8, Op. 110*. I. *Largo*, bb. 124–26 and II. *Allegro molto*, bb. 1–5. Spectrogram, waveform, and tempo curve in the performance by the Beethoven Quartet (1960). The waveform shows fluctuations in loudness over time. By depicting the changing frequencies, the spectrogram provides information about overtones (and the intensity thereof), articulation, vibrato, etc. (Diagram prepared by Ana Llorens using Sonic Visualiser, based on a measurement unit of one minim.)

