

THE ARTARIA STRING QUARTET

2017-18 Season

Basically Beethoven

Program III

The Artaria String Quartet's coupling of Shostakovich and Beethoven is not a casual one since both works come from troubled times. It is no surprise that great art has been inspired by such moments in both personal and universal history, and one hopes that our current state of affairs may produce art of great note. That said, it would be a challenge to equal the effects of the two great works on this program. Hats off to the Artaria for taking on the challenge of performing them!

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

String Quartet in F Minor, Op. 95, "Serioso"

Allegro con brio

Allegretto ma non troppo

Allegro assai vivace ma serioso

Larghetto; Allegretto agitato

Written in 1810, Op. 95 is often seen as the culmination of Beethoven's Middle Period or the beginning of his powerful Late Period. It is probably both, but, even more accurately, it stands alone in its expressiveness, its human qualities, and its musical ingeniousness. It is sometimes grouped casually with the earlier Op. 74 Quartet as a transitional work, but in fact the two works could not differ more.

To say that the downdraft of a love affair, encroaching deafness, and financial woes could have affected the composition of Op. 95 is to treat Beethoven like an ordinary human. Academicians turn instead to his use of the Neapolitan Sixth, *i.e.*, a chromatic chord progression from the tonic to the flattened supertonic in its first inversion. In other words, in C Major the Neapolitan Sixth chord would be F, A-flat, and D-flat and in F minor A, D-flat, and G-flat. This writer, however, chooses the less technical approach to figuring out the erratic and inscrutable Op. 95.

The work bursts upon us with angry protest followed by petulant silence that gives way to lyricism before the anger returns. So this pattern continues, the cello warring against the other instruments. The tantrum is quickly over.

The cello opens the second movement in a slow crawl down the scale before all turns lyrical. Lyricism, however, is complicated by a fugue before it returns. This second movement ends on a diminished seventh chord, riveting in itself, that leads directly to the fast third movement bearing the interesting tempo marking, *Allegro assai vivace ma serioso*.

Despite its fast tempo, this third movement is not designated as a scherzo. Indeed, it has nothing jocular about it and, in fact, may be the cornerstone of the work's "Serioso" subtitle which Beethoven himself inscribed on the score.

Consistent with his surprise tactics in this piece, Beethoven opens the final movement with a slow introduction filled with expressive yearning. But true to form, he kicks us in the pants with a comic ending.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)
Quintet in G Minor for Piano and Strings, Op. 57

Prelude: Lento

Fugue: Adagio

Scherzo: Allegretto

Intermezzo: Lento

Finale: Allegretto

The many photographs of Shostakovich's unsmiling face accurately depict the man, his sensibilities, and his music, but that depiction is unendingly complex. Arguments continue even today on his political views and on the compromises he may have made to sustain his creativity. The only thing certain is his position as a victim in the Soviet regime's attempt to control the arts and make them subservient to its political ideals. That many artists died in this process is enough to confirm its devastating effect.

There is always danger of artistic compromise when politics toys with art. Particularly in his chamber music, Shostakovich solved the problem by retreating to the inner sanctum of his creative genius, which was more abstract and therefore more impervious to political controversy. The changing face of Soviet policy towards art at first encouraged Shostakovich's style, later condemned it, and everywhere misunderstood it. Threatened with extinction by Stalin in 1936 for his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, Shostakovich was in turn awarded the Stalin Prize of \$25,000 in 1940 for his Piano Quintet.

The musical appeal of the Piano Quintet is so great that it eluded or transcended, as the case may be, any political opinion and was therefore labeled politically correct despite its dark implications and the personal courage demanded to write it.

A solemn opening introduced by the piano alone gives way to a faster section but solemnity returns before the movement ends. The powerful *Fugue* then displays Shostakovich's full compositional powers in a form he revered and explored so magnificently in his *24 Preludes and Fugues* for piano. The folk-like subject is announced by the violin alone and then works its way through the other instruments with many permutations. A fiery *Scherzo* follows containing dissonances meant to disturb and a contrasting dance-like middle section. The following *Intermezzo* combines lyricism and a staccato bass line in an exploration of the five instruments' color range. The piano foreshadows the fifth movement that continues without interruption. Here Shostakovich employs a clown theme traditionally used in Russian circuses. While there is a certain lyricism to the movement, the dark undercurrents remain, particularly in the march-like rhythms.

The Quintet was received with such enthusiasm in Moscow on November 23, 1940, that the performers were forced to repeat the *Scherzo* and *Finale*, a practice often followed today should the audience demand it.

© 2017 Lucy Miller Murray

Lucy Miller Murray is the author of Chamber Music: An Extensive Guide for Listeners published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2015.