

Monday, July 19, 2010

Notable 5

Beth David

Piano Quintet in G minor, op. 57 (1940)

Prelude: Lento—

Fugue: Adagio

Scherzo: Allegretto

Intermezzo: Lento—

Finale: Allegretto

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)—*Piano Quintet in G minor, op. 57* (1940)

When Shostakovich's *Piano Quintet in G minor* begins, we might briefly think we were hearing a piano sonata, since the keyboard plays alone for some forty seconds. After the strings join in, Shostakovich then juggles the instruments throughout much of the quintet, often using them in groups of only two, three, or four; all five appear simultaneously less often than we might expect. In the central Scherzo (which does employ all five players fairly consistently), Shostakovich might have had a little tongue-in-cheek fun, for its melody resembles a Russian circus clown tune. The other movements, however, are more contemplative; the "Fugue" pays tribute to the intricate counterpoint of J. S. Bach, and time seems almost to stand still during the "Intermezzo." There is a sense of carefulness all through the quintet until the "Finale," when a note of defiance takes over the second theme.

Shostakovich had good reason to be careful: a composer working under the dictates of Stalin's Soviet regime had a delicate balancing act, needing to write "safe" works that still had artistic integrity. Four years earlier, Shostakovich had run afoul of the government with his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*; an editorial in the newspaper *Pravda* called it "muddle instead of music," although it's been suggested that Stalin—who walked out of a performance—may have been more offended by the story's sexuality rather than its musical score. Nevertheless, this official displeasure put both Shostakovich and his family at risk, but he managed to start rehabilitating himself with the successful premiere of his Fifth Symphony the next year, and this quintet helped even more, thanks to the encouragement of the Beethoven String Quartet. The ensemble had recently played Shostakovich's *String Quartet No. 1*, and the members immediately begged Shostakovich to write a new work, but this time with the addition of the piano. After the premiere at the Moscow Conservatory (with Shostakovich himself playing the piano part), one review called the quintet "the rich-toned, perfect voice of the present." Shostakovich surely must have breathed a large sigh of relief when the quintet was awarded the first "Stalin Prize."

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