

ИСПОЛНИТЕЛЬСКОЕ ИСКУССТВО

PERFORMING ART



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IN THE SHADOW OF SHOSTAKOVICH (RECORDING OF VITALY KHODOSH'S STRING QUARTET)



Vitaly Khodosh's String Quartet was composed between the years 1984 and 1985. It was written for, and dedicated to the Rostov String Quartet, which comprised Yury Yurasov (first violin), Leonid Aizenberg (second violin), Lev Atlas (viola) and Alexander Volpov (cello). The collaboration and friendship between the Rostov String Quartet and Khodosh, the prolific author of many works, including symphonic and operatic opuses, began many years previously; as fellow students the musicians would perform the composer's earlier pieces, both in a solo and chamber ensemble capacity. When the Rostov String Quartet was awarded First Prize in the Borodin String Quartet Competition, Khodosh had the opportunity to write and dedicate a piece that could be published and recorded. The concept behind the composition was to write a piece that would be based upon the Russian romantic chamber music tradition (such as the works of Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov and Shostakovich), and it was composed utilising monothematic techniques. The String Quartet consists of three movements and is beautifully compact and laconic.

The original recording of Vitaly Khodosh's String Quartet was made by the Rostov String Quartet in 1985, when they were invited by the Union of Composers to record this and Vladimir Krasnoskulov's string quartet for the Soviet State Radio programme *Muzykalnye Vechera* (Musical Evenings) at the prestigious State House of Sound Recordings.

We took to recording Khodosh's Quartet in the usual manner, which consisted of meticulously sorting through the structure of the piece and its technical details, and after that every dynamic, bowing and phrasing was taken care of. The piece itself, at first glance, did not present a substantial challenge. Its very clean, pure and classical form with

traditional movements and transparent, economical writing was deceptively simple. Thus only when we began to listen back to recorded takes did we realise that, as with every good classical work, there is still much more below the tip of the iceberg. The difficulties were mainly found when we attempted to open up and deliver musical ideas which were not obvious at first glance, such as the more tragic connotations of the piece. Nevertheless, the recording was completed on time and the piece proceeded to be broadcast, following which it was named as the 'Best Contemporary Chamber Music Recording of the Year' 1985 by the Chamber Music section of the Broadcasting House.

The technical part of the recording from a quartet point of view refers to the way it is executed through aspects such as intonation, togetherness, unity of strokes etc. From this point of view, the recording is almost faultless. This has a lot to do with our obsession with quality. Another contributing factor to the quality of playing was the complete absence of commercial pressure. There was no time limit, nor any limitations on the number of rehearsals. Regardless of how long we rehearsed, our meagre monthly salaries remained unaffected.

However, with hindsight, I can see that this technical prowess sometimes got the better of us, and somehow resulted in a clouded vision of this piece. It was at times too forceful and rhythmically tight with no space for breath within the phrases themselves, at times giving the wrong impression of the musical ideas behind the piece.

The work which bears most similarities to Vitaly Khodosh's String Quartet is Shostakovich's First Quartet. Shostakovich completed the work in 1938 when he was thirty-two. In 1984, when Khodosh brought us the completed score of his quartet, he was thirty-nine.

By 1938 Shostakovich had already written several chamber ensemble works. They were his First Piano Trio, op. 8 (1923), Three Pieces for Cello and Piano, op. 9 (1923-1924, now lost), Two Pieces for String Octet, op. 11 (1924-1925), Two Pieces for String Quartet (1931)¹, and a Sonata for Cello and Piano, op. 40 (1934). Nevertheless, the composer's chamber music output before 1938 was still small in comparison to his symphonies, operas and ballets.

Khodosh in turn, by 1984, had already written a Chamber Symphony in four movements (1973), Chamber Music for chamber orchestra (1974) and a Sentimental Suite for violin and piano (1976). For both composers writing a first string quartet was a landmark in their creative output, and some of the circumstances leading to writing the quartet in both cases are almost comically similar.

By 1938 Shostakovich began teaching at the Leningrad Conservatoire, and the Glazunov Quartet, also on staff there, began pestering Shostakovich to write a work for their ensemble. The Glazunov Quartet reportedly peppered Shostakovich so incessantly with questions about the promised quartet, that, upon seeing one of them, he would just say «I will write it; I will write it!» and run in the opposite direction².

In 1980, members of the Rostov String Quartet assumed teaching positions at the Rostov State Conservatoire where Khodosh was Professor of Composition. Almost immediately we approached him with a request to write a string quartet. I would not go as far as to call it pestering but at least once a week one of us would ask the composer about the progress of the piece. Unlike Shostakovich, Khodosh patiently listened, and in the end he would reply in his usual soft and polite manner: «Please wait a little bit longer».

It is interesting to note that the descriptive attitude of both composers towards their works was also very similar. «One should not seek special depth in this, my first quartet opus. In its mood it is joyful, cheerful, lyrical. I would call it 'spring-like'» [2, p. 287]. Shostakovich's description mirrors that given by Khodosh in reference to his own work: «Following your request, I looked up my notes for the year of 1985. The main reason to compose a quartet was my great desire to establish a closer creative contact with Rostov String Quartet, with you guys! From the very beginning, I decided to put all my soul into the melodic part of the piece, at the same time firmly basing it on the traditional classical quartet structure. I was completely aware, even then, that for all intents and purposes, I was not writing a contemporary piece. It looked especially old fashioned from the point of view of many of my friends and colleagues who were completely

in love with avant-garde, as you well remember. But it was my own reaction to the life around us and it was the only way I could reflect this life in my work. Even now, almost three decades later, I am still trying to pitch 'beauty' (as I understand it) against the troubles of our everyday life. My firm belief is that if the Almighty gave me a melodic gift (however modest) I must not avoid using it, even if it seems old-fashioned and outdated»³.

Apart from the obvious similarities in the general mood and character of the pieces there are a number of characteristics in Khodosh's piece which I associate with Shostakovich's chamber music.

The **Moderato** begins in diatonic C-major but from its second bar, Bs, Es and As and even Ds and Gs are intermittently flattened, as if the music is unsure of its major modality. The next five quartets (2-6) will be notated in a major mode that soon disappears and seems like more of a hope than a presence [5, p. 28] (see Example 1).

Khodosh uses the same principle only in reverse order. He starts with modal uncertainty, firmly based on the cello's C-major 5th, the first violin moves the question like phrase through almost complete B-minor *arpeggio*, and only after sixteen bars it arrives at resonance in C-major.

«In Shostakovich's First Quartet the *coda* transforms motivic elements of the secondary theme, and the rising sixths from the accompaniment form a languid waltz melody. This is the first of many 'sixthy' waltzes that appear in the quartets <...> Often, in Shostakovich's quartets; 'sixthy' waltzes seem to make a similar generic connection with the world of personal feelings. Often quite fragile Shostakovich's waltzes sometimes come under attack or disintegrate, or as in the First Quartet just fade away» [5, p. 31] (see Example 2).

In the first movement of Khodosh's String Quartet the secondary theme starts in 4/4 time and resembles *gorodskoi romans* (urban romance) as in Example 3, but already in bars nine and ten of figure 4 of the first movement Khodosh introduces downward sliding sixths. The importance of this becomes clear later when through change of time (4/4 to 3/4), tempo and dynamic, the secondary theme gets transformed to a typical 'sixthy' waltz, which then fades away gradually (see Example 4).

The subject of Jewish music and Shostakovich's special take on this distinctive folk music has been widely discussed and disputed, and is still fraught with a significant amount of controversy⁴. The undisputed fact however is the use of elements of Jewish music by Shostakovich in some of his most prominent creations. It seems I comprehend what distinguishes the Jewish melos. A cheerful melody is built here on sad intonations... «The 'people' are

like a single person...Why does he sing a cheerful song? Because he is sad at heart» [1, p. 284].

«Jewish features» are present throughout in Shostakovich's quartets. They occur at times in isolation, at times grouped together, creating a continuum of Jewishness. Jewishness is, of course, probably as much in the ears of the listener as in the mind of the composer.

«I finished the third movement and began the corrections. Suddenly, I realized that it is full of Jewish inflections. I do not remember doing it consciously, but somewhere deep inside my head Shostakovich's Second Quartet and Second Trio were planted». ⁵ An example of such inflection in Khodosh's String Quartet can be found in the third movement. After the initial two bars of *toccata*-like quavers, the main theme appears. From the third bar of the theme it radically changes from *toccata* to vicious *klezmer* dance. Khodosh achieves this by syncopating the strong beat, which in turn transforms *toccata*-like quavers into dance-style accompaniment, which Braun calls 'um-pa' [4] (see Example 5).

Another example of this characteristic is found in the first movement in the development section, when a striding, march-like melody (figure 6), transforms into a waltz with a typically *klezmer* feature. The accompaniment and part of the melody starts moving in parallel seconds (see Example 6).

In *klezmer* performing practice, this particular tool is often used for added humour or for sarcastic effect. In my own *klezmer* performing practice I came across this a long time ago when I took part in performing and arranging Ponomarev's string trio (see Example 7).

There are certain things to consider when performing and recording chamber music, and string quartets in particular. A string quartet score is a symphonic one in the sense that the four main groups of instruments of the orchestral score (sopranos, altos, tenors and bases) which are represented in an orchestra by many instruments and are often doubled and tripled in quantity are, in the string quartet score, played by one instrument each. There is absolutely no margin for error; every sound, note and phrase is of utmost importance because it is a single player carrying the line. Even a simple drop in balance could prove detrimental.

Another challenge when performing a string quartet is for every player to have an intimate understanding of the whole score. Often different groups of the orchestra are playing without fully hearing what their colleagues in the other sections are playing at the same moment. Conversely in a string quartet it is essential to hear and be aware of every note and phrase that your colleagues play.

This kind of playing demands much higher levels of attention, concentration and intensity. All of this is before the subject of intonation – something that is notoriously difficult in a string quartet – is even broached. With this in mind, the following were the performance issues as they stood prior to rehearsals on 29 June 2009:

- balancing the differences in age, experience and technical approaches of the performers in a very limited rehearsal period;
- a lack of common experience – would this prove to be a disadvantage, or an opportunity to find a new approach?

Among the multitude of performing practices of chamber music in the twentieth century, two approaches in particular stand out for me. Firstly, that of the Borodin Quartet, who reached an unsurpassed technical, musical and psychological unity, and extended the arsenal of colours that the four string instruments could produce to nearly symphonic proportions. Yet upon evaluation the Borodin Quartet's catalogue includes very few recordings of Mozart and Haydn Quartets. My teacher, Prof. Yaroslav Alexandrov, who played second violin with the Borodin Quartet for over twenty years, often told me that no matter how hard they tried Mozart somehow did not come alive in their hands. Total unity of sound, technical proficiency, wonderfully powerful strokes, a full-bodied sound, and yet Mozart still evaded them.

On the other side of the Iron Curtain was a very different ensemble that played and recorded predominantly Mozart, which was reflected in their collective name: the Amadeus Quartet. Here the players were technically very different from each other, yet each was a wonderful performer in his own right. They did not try to polish and unify their performance to absolute perfection, but rather celebrated their individuality. When I first heard them playing Mozart it was a shock to my system. If a performance by the Borodin Quartet was all about four wills moulded into one, the Amadeus was a free flight of spirit and mind. Sometimes sad, occasionally tragic, elsewhere happy, they played Mozart's crystal clear music naturally and effortlessly.

After considering both approaches I decided to try to go with that of the Amadeus. This project had an interesting mixture of players: two Russians (myself and Sasha Volpov); Vaclav Bohonek, a Czech who was trained in Prague in the 1960s (which, to all intents and purposes, closely matches Russian training) but who has spent the greater part of his career in Western Europe; and finally a younger Czech, Jiri Kabat, whose educational background is eclectic: Russian (he was one of my students), Western European and much of his own person-

ality also shines through in his playing. Although our ensemble did not have common experience, we did have enough similarity in our educational background and musical approach to be able to address most of the performing issues.

The most important issue during the rehearsal and recording process was to find a balance between pure technical prowess and the emotional side of playing. This took a measure of persuasion in trying to bring all participants to the same creative performing level, and to maintain this level of concentration, physical impact and consistent delivery. The recording of Vitaly Khodosh's String Quartet was a special experience because it provided an opportunity to adopt and compare two different approaches to performing chamber music. On one side were two Russian musicians – myself and Sasha Volpov, whose approach was to discuss, then learn and perfect every given phrase or passage. After that we would play every time as close to the agreed variant as possible, eventually producing an acceptable unity of playing and musical thinking.

On the other side were two Czech musicians, Vaclav Bohonek and Jiri Kabat, who could play the same phrase or passage differently every time. We attempted to combine two approaches. After the initial period of some awkwardness it started to work and even to produce some wonderfully spontaneous results. Both pairs of players eventually rose to the challenge, and once the first difficulties and teething problems of a new-born ensemble were overcome, the performance began to work. When it became apparent that the technical side of our playing was beginning to sort itself out, I attempted to move the emotional climax of the piece to the second movement, which is another major psychological and philosophical difference between the

recording of 1984 and the current one. In the 1984 recording, the first and third (finale) movements are the ideological and musical frames which carry the weight of the main musical idea of the piece. The second movement is the element of rest and reflection between these turbulent and eventful passages. What I attempted was to change this structure and give more meaning and gravitas to the second slow movement. It worked, I think, quite well, giving the whole piece a distinctly different emotional feel.

In the context of this research, the performing and recording of Vitaly Khodosh's string quartet was a very useful and successful exercise. It provided positive answers to the following performance issues:

Would the differences in age, experience and technical approaches of the performers be overcome in a very limited rehearsal period? – Yes.

Would the lack of common experience prove to be a disadvantage or an opportunity to find a new approach? – The latter.

It also gave me an opportunity to fulfil an historical context by bridging a twenty-seven year time gap between the two recordings. But perhaps most importantly, it brought back from oblivion a wonderful piece of music. I would like to finish this article with the following information: since the recording of the quartet I have received numerous requests from Royal Conservatoire of Scotland students who have wanted to perform it. It has been performed at least five times by different student quartets during the RCS' string department concerts. I have also received a number of requests from the Conservatoires of Prague, Vilnius and Bonn to send them the score and the parts of the piece. It looks like after twenty-seven years of complete obscurity Vitaly Khodosh's String Quartet is now coming back to the stage.

NOTES

¹ This was an arrangement of an aria from «Lady Macbeth» and the polka from «The Age of Gold» for the Vuillaume Quartet; see J. Kuhn, Shostakovich in Dialogue, Ashgate, 2010, pp. 15-16.

² S. *Khentova*, Dmitriy Shostakovich: zhizn i tvorchestvo (Dmitriy Shostakovich: life and works), 2nd ed., Vol. 1, Moscow, Kompozitor, 1985, p. 414; as quoted in Kuhn, op. cit., p. 17.

³ V. *Khodosh*, personal communication, 19 August 2011.

⁴ For a comprehensive discussion see B. Schwarz, «Interaction between Russian and Jewish Music and Musicians in the 19th and 20th Centuries», in J. Cohen [ed.], Proceedings of the World Conference of Jewish Music, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv: Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, 1982, p. 210; and J. Braun, «The Double Meaning of Jewish Elements in Dimitri Shostakovich's Music», in the Musical Quarterly, Vol. 71, January 1985, p. 80.

⁵ V. *Khodosh*, personal communication, 12 April 2013.

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Example 1
D. Shostakovich. First Quartet. Movement I (Opening)

Example 2
D. Shostakovich. First Quartet. Movement I (Second Theme)

4 [Moderato ♩ = 80]

pp (*senza cresc.*)

pp sempre (*senza cresc.*)

ppp *f espress.*

ppp

Example 3
V. Khodosh. String Quartet. Movement I (Figure 4)

4 Meno ♩ = 60

pp

ppp

p

p

p

The image displays a musical score for a string quartet, consisting of three systems of four staves each. The first system (Figures 11-12) features a complex rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The tempo and dynamics markings are *crescendo e allargando*. The second system (Figure 11) begins with a circled number 11 and the tempo marking *a tempo*. It features a more melodic and sustained texture. The third system (Figure 12) begins with a circled number 12 and the tempo marking *Meno mosso*. It includes a prominent tremolo effect in the upper strings. The score is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature.

Example 5
V. Khodosh. String Quartet. Movement III (Opening)

Allegro molto $\text{♩} = 120$
senza word
ff marcato
senza word

Example 6
V. Khodosh. String Quartet. Movement I (Figure 8)

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В ТЕНИ ШОСТАКОВИЧА

(ОБ ИСТОРИИ СОЗДАНИЯ И ИСПОЛНЕНИЯ КВАРТЕТА №1 В. ХОДОША)

В статье осуществляется компаративный анализ Струнного квартета №1 Д. Д. Шостаковича и Струнного квартета №1 В. С. Ходоша с целью подтверждения гипотезы об уникальной близости процессов творческих исканий двух отечественных композиторов XX века. Приводится краткий обзор исторических событий, давших импульс созданию обоих квартетов. Статья содержит цитаты из личных интервью автора с Ходошем, которые позволяют провести определенные параллели между творческими исканиями мастеров. Характерные черты стиля Шостаковича, такие как ладотональная неопределенность, трансформация мотивных элементов и интонации еврейской музыки анализируются в параллели с аналогичными характеристиками струнного квартета Ходоша.

Музыковедческий анализ обоих квартетов совмещается с исполнительским, а образно-смысловая интерпретация музыки – с описанием приемов игры. Проводимые автором аналогии между двумя сочинениями призваны обратить внимание исполнителей на общность композиторских приемов в воплощении лирических и драматических образов обоих произведений. В рассуждениях о специфике исполнения камерной музыки автор приходит к выводу, что разница в возрасте, опыте и исполнительских подходах участников квартета не является препятствием для создания ансамбля тонко чувствующих друг друга музыкантов.

Ключевые слова: струнный квартет, Д. Д. Шостакович, В. С. Ходош, камерная музыка, исполнительский анализ.

IN THE SHADOW OF SHOSTAKOVICH

(RECORDING OF VITALY KHODOSH'S STRING QUARTET)

A comparative analysis of String Quartet No. 1 by D. Shostakovich and String Quartet No. 1 by V. Khodosh is carried out with the aim of confirming the hypothesis on the peculiar proximity as applied to the creative search processes of the named XXth century Russian composers. A brief overview of the historical events giving an impetus to the creation of both quartets is given. The article contains quotes from the personal interviews of the author himself with V. Khodosh, which allow us to draw certain proximity between the artistic intentions

of the mentioned masters. Characteristic features of the Shostakovich's style, such as tonality uncertainty, the transformation of motive elements and intonation of Jewish music are analyzed in parallel with the similar characteristics of the String Quartet by V. Khodosh. The musicological analysis of both quartets is combined with the performing one, and some interpretation of the imagery and semantics of this music – with a description of the definite devices of ensemble playing. The analogies between the two compositions carried out by the author are

called upon to draw the attention of performers to the commonality of composer's approaches to the embodiment of lyrical and dramatic images in the both works. Discussing about the specifics of chamber music performance in the whole, the author comes to the conclusion that the difference in the age, experience

and performance principles of the quartet participants is not an obstacle to formation of an ensemble of musicians who subtly understand each other.

Key words: string quartet, D. Shostakovich, V. Khodosh, chamber music, analysis of the performance.

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