

4-28-2023

## Shostakovich Quartet No. 8

Anna Meehan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/intertext>

---

### Recommended Citation

Meehan, Anna (2023) "Shostakovich Quartet No. 8," *Intertext*. Vol. 31, Article 10.  
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/intertext/vol31/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SURFACE at Syracuse University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Intertext by an authorized editor of SURFACE at Syracuse University. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).



**O**n July 14th, 1960, Dmitri Shostakovich completed his famed String Quartet in C Minor, Opus 110. Visiting Dresden, the composer had planned to write music for the film *Five Days, Five Nights*. Instead, what ensued was the frantic creation of a string quartet in five parts, inspired by the city’s bombing less

than twenty years prior. In a later interview, Shostakovich dedicated the piece to “the memory of the victims of fascism and war” (Fay 219). Despite this broadly accepted interpretation of the work, a close reading of the score by experts revealed motifs and techniques suggesting the piece to be deeply personal. Developments in the composer’s

# SHOSTAKOVICH QUARTET NO. 8:

HOW THE SOVIET UNION'S GREATEST  
COMPOSER USED MUSIC AS AN  
INSTRUMENT OF SELF EXPRESSION  
AMIDST STATE CENSORSHIP

ANNA MEEHAN

Layout by Katherine Nikolau.  
Art by Roman Mansfield.

life—such as his appointment to communist leadership, testimonies of internal struggle from friends and family, and the discovery of sleeping pills in his Dresden apartment—led music historians to speculate an alternate interpretation, in which the true victim of fascism was Dmitri Shostakovich himself. Therefore, the context and inten-

tion of the quartet have become highly controversial, creating two camps of thought: a quartet that displays the harsh reality of war at the hands of the Nazis or the degradation of man at the hands of the oppressive Soviet government.

To decipher the intention of his eighth quartet, it is important first to understand

the background of the composer. Dmitri Shostakovich was a prominent figure of Soviet culture, responsible for highly nationalist works such as the “Leningrad Symphony,” commissioned by the Soviet government. This, however, was not always the case. After the premiere of his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, Stalin criticized the composer for creating music that degraded the Soviet image, as well as relying on a “formalist” approach to music. An innovative and modern musical style, formalism suggested that music’s intention was understood via the structure of the music and was increasingly popular in the West. Formalism varied from the historic Russian classicalism, the musical form that great Russian composers utilized, and thus the artistic narrative that Soviet society was built upon.

In the article “Against Formalistic Tendencies in Soviet Music,” published by the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party in the magazine *Sovetskaia Muzyka* (Soviet Music), Shostakovich was directly called out for his offenses (“Sovetskaia Muzyka”). Clarified by the author, “As far back as 1936, in connection with the appearance of Dmitri Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, Pravda, the organ of the Central Committee of the Party, subjected [the composer] to sharp criticism [for] the anti-popular formalistic perversions in his music and exposed the harm and danger of this tendency to the future of Soviet music” (“Sovetskaia Muzyka”). Throughout the article, Shostakovich (along with similar composers such as Prokofiev, Khatchaturian, and Miaskovsky) is

labeled as a musical criminal, an influential artist who must be monitored to ensure cultural prosperity benefitting the Soviet Union. This provides context to the suppression experienced by Shostakovich throughout his musical career, censored not only in writing but also in musical composition. This also demonstrates that Shostakovich was not censored simply because his music was disliked by Stalin, but rather that it was understood to promote formalism, intentionally turning to the West for artistic direction, fostering an inherently political undertone incompatible with Soviet society. As a result, the Soviet Union expected Shostakovich’s music to have meaning, denouncing the possibility of creating music for merely artistic sake (a source of motivation for the composer Prokofiev, who sought a new musical frontier and was possibly exiled for suggesting that Soviet musical structure could be improved). Therefore, we must understand that Shostakovich’s music post-1936 cannot be separated from politics, as the critics demanded each new work foster a political prerogative in some nature. What remains is a discussion as to whether Shostakovich’s music possessed ulterior intentions, if any at all, beyond what was publicly advertised and promoted by the dominant Soviet culture.

Post-1936, Shostakovich’s pieces became exceptionally nationalist (and were occasionally commissioned by the Soviet government directly). From his esteemed symphonies No. 5 and No. 7 “Leningrad” to various film scores created for pro-Soviet media, Shostakovich’s most famous compositions were publicly attributed to national success and prosperity. Even after Stalin’s death in

1953, Shostakovich remained a pinnacle of national artistic culture. In 1960, the composer was elected head of the newly formed Union of Composers of the Russian Federation, a government organization set to enforce and promote Soviet values in music, as described by the *Sovetskaia Muzyka* article published roughly a decade prior. Allegedly, Shostakovich was forced to apply by an unnamed group of peers while under the influence of alcohol and was thus promoted upon election (Fay 217). Speculation suggests this application may have been compulsory to protect his stature within the Soviet bureaucracy, yet this position likely resulted in increased expectations from the Communist party and greater surveillance of his work. According to friends of the

movements two and three, which are described *allegro molto* and *allegretto* respectively. Overall, the piece is slow, mournful, and reflective, save for the inner movements, which depict brutality, cynicism, and mockery. Present throughout are several major themes, the most prevalent identified by M.T. Anderson in his novel *Symphony for the City of the Dead*.

Later in his life, he used another form of musical code: reducing specific names to notes. For example, he worked out a musical monogram for himself: the letters of his initials, D-S-C-H transformed into a four-note motif.... At the time, people did not know that this brief motif encrypted Shostakovich's own name; to us now, the piece seems to speak privately of his own feeling of grief

**AT THE TIME, PEOPLE DID NOT KNOW THAT THIS BRIEF  
MOTIF ENCRYPTED SHOSTAKOVICH'S OWN NAME; TO US NOW,  
THE PIECE SEEMS TO SPEAK PRIVATELY OF HIS OWN FEELING  
OF GRIEF AND ENTRAPMENT.**

composer, the discovery of sleeping pills in his Dresden apartment and his apathetic views towards life suggested a serious threat of suicide throughout the quartet's composition (Fay 218). Suffering from the pressure and restrictions imposed upon him by the party, the deeply intrinsic details of the eighth quartet justify the close analysis of his piece for signs of internal reflection and subliminal messaging otherwise censored by decades of restrained self-expression.

Structurally, the eighth quartet is divided into five movements, all *largo* except for

and entrapment.

Over the course of the piece, the D-S-C-H motif—constructed by the German note-names for 4 distinct pitches (D, E-flat, B and C in the common musical canon) is the most prevalent theme. In the first movement it opposes a secondary theme borrowed from his “Piano Trio No. 2,” a composition based on Jewish folk music. Considered to be anti-Soviet, Jewish themes were largely banned, making their repeated use throughout the piece not only dangerous, but also distinctly resistant of Soviet musical policy. Therefore,

the inclusion of these themes (and their iterations, as seen in Movement I) exemplifies resistance against Soviet policy.

The inner movements, two and three, may be considered the most revealing. Fiercely and brutally, the second movement rises from a single-note crescendo within all four parts, catapulting the violin into an aggressive hashing of the Jewish theme. The use of ostinato—a repeating and insistent musical phrase—in the lower strings creates a menacing aura of aggression as the upper strings rip out dissonant chords, directly violating the anti-formalist policies. The Jewish theme in its entirety is introduced and repeated until the theme itself becomes an ostinato in the upper strings, starting repeatedly as if conveying a persistent yet incomplete lyrical idea.

Chromaticism, dynamics, accents, off-

to be an allegory for imminent death, resembling the stage of psychosis and terror prior to committing a lethal act—perhaps, suicide. The second movement entertains this idea, simulating the process musically and transferring the emotional experience to the listener. The measure of silence concluding the movement may be interpreted to resemble the uncertainty yet finality of death.

The third movement creates a mockery of the D-S-C-H motif as it is rehashed into cynical variations. With unfamiliar rhythms and achromatic pitches, the motifs feel off-kilter, then later settle to form a dark waltz. A contrasting section relies on triplets, the uneven rhythmic structure associated with insecurity due to its improper orientation within the time signature.

Chaos ensues as atonal screeches and chords interrupt thematic material, tak-

**THE FINAL SCORE MARKING IS A UNIVERSAL MORENDO,  
TRANSLATED TO “DYING,” AS THE PARTS FADE TO SILENCE:  
THUS SIMULATING THE RELEASE OF DEATH, AND THE LOSS  
OF SHOSTAKOVICH HIMSELF.**

kilter rhythm and the presence of the D-S-C-H motif amount to musical chaos. In the final section, the Jewish theme returns, starting over and over again yet never resolving (as seen before). The second time, its use becomes more persistent and harrowing as all parts crescendo towards the peak of a phrasal climax. Once it seems that the music should give way, all sections cut off with a caesura, an extended moment of silence. Many have interpreted the chaotic build-up

ing the place of transitions. It would not be unusual for Shostakovich, known for his scherzos (“musical jokes”), to create an inner movement centered upon self-criticism, as if mocking the very experiences he faces. Once more, the use of his personal motif indicates his relation to the music, and thus focuses himself as the music’s—and the party’s—laughingstock.

The fourth movement seems to explore the feeling of paranoia, using crescendos

to allude to approaching danger, which is articulated by the brutal chord response in the lower strings. The lyrical passage mimics the Soviet song “Tormented by Grievous Bondage,” which is routinely interrupted by reiterations of the opening passage. This suggests the experience of pursuit and capture, nominally faced by the composer under his constant surveillance. The final movement relies almost entirely on the D-S-C-H motif, reinforcing the introspective nature of the work. The movement itself is mournful, wavering, and hardly present as it refuses to resolve musically. Passages between each instrument of the quartet refuse to line up, leaving the movement to float in perpetual motion until it eventually concludes. The final score marking is a universal *morendo*, translated to “dying,” as the parts fade to silence: thus simulating the release of death, and the loss of Shostakovich himself.

Supporters of the composer understand the quartet to emulate a musical “suicide note,” exploring the emotional processes of confronting death at one’s own hands. The omnipresence of the D-S-C-H motif, undoubtedly designed for the self-reflection of the composer, insist throughout that the music speaks to his own life experiences. M.T. Anderson featured in his novel a quote from the composer—when asked to elaborate on the meaning of his eighth quartet, Shostakovich replied simply, ‘I’ve said what I’ve said’ (Anderson 111). The implication that the music includes thematic material set to define an idea, as well as the use of his personal motif, suggests the presence of

a subliminal, low-profile messaging of the quartet, a hidden proclamation of suffering and loss. Likewise, the contradictory use of dissonance and rhythm outlined as anti-nationalist by the Sovetskaia Muzyka article refutes the suggestion that the piece was created for the benefit of the Soviet Union.

This reveals that the string quartet is a piece created with individualism at its forefront, an anti-communist composition disguised at face-value by an explanation that suits socialist realism instead. Clearly the dedication to “the victims of fascism” is not the lives lost in the Nazi bombing of Dresden, but rather the soul, free will, and musicality of its composer, ultimately lost to Soviet hands.

#### Works Cited

- Anderson, M. T. *Symphony for the City of the Dead: Dmitri Shostakovich and the Siege of Leningrad*. Candlewick P, 2017.
- Fay, Laurel E. *Shostakovich: A Life*. Oxford UP, 2005.
- Shostakovich, Dmitri. “Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District.”
- . “Shostakovich: Symphony No. 7, ‘Leningrad.’”
- . “Shostakovich: Symphony No. 9, ‘Leningrad.’”
- . “String Quartet No. 8 in C Minor, Op. 110.” 1960.
- “Sovetskaia Muzyka, No. 1 (1948), pp. 3-8.” *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, 5 Oct. 2015, <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1947-2/zhdanov/zhdanov-texts-against-formalistic-tendencies-in-soviet-music>.