

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) String Quartet Op 110 in C minor (1960)

Largo – Allegro molto – Allegretto – Largo – Largo

Shostakovich's C minor eighth quartet is his best known, and most personal. It was composed in just three days in Dresden in 1960, where he was writing the music for a Soviet / East German film "*Five Days and Five Nights*" about the World War II bombing of Dresden. His health was not good – he was suffering from the initial appearance of a rare form of polio, and he had finally yielded to pressure to join the Communist Party, a move which he associated with a moral as well as a physical death. He had recently finished his seventh quartet, dedicated to the memory of his beloved first wife, Nina, and his short-lived second marriage had just broken up. He had hinted at his intention to commit suicide. Although this eighth quartet is nominally dedicated "*to the victims of fascism and war*", his daughter Galina claims that this dedication was imposed by the authorities, indeed Shostakovich wrote:

"I've been thinking that when I die, it's hardly likely that anybody will ever write a work dedicated to my memory. So I have decided to write one myself. The dedication could be printed on the cover: 'Dedicated to the memory of the composer of this quartet'."

He saw this work as his epitaph.

Each movement of the work is dominated by Shostakovich's DSCH motif. It consists of the notes *D, E flat, C, B natural*, or in German musical notation D, Es, C, H thus standing for the composer's initials: D.Sch. He had used variants of this motif widely in his first Cello Concerto which was finished in October 1959. The quartet also contains copious other quotations, many from Shostakovich's own works (Symphonies 1, 8 & 10, the Piano Trio and *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*), but also a theme from Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony and a 19th century revolutionary song (*Grievous Bondage*) and formal references to Beethoven's C# minor quartet Op 131. "*Quite something- this little miscellany*".



The four movements are played continuously. The work opens, like Beethoven's C# minor quartet, with a slow fugue, in this case with the cello giving the DSCH motif. The first violin then plays the saddest sinking figure



(*illustrated*). This despairing movement leads over a held G# with no warning into the relentlessly vicious second movement at one of Shostakovich's fastest tempo markings (semibreve = 120 !). The third movement is a sinister, sour waltz which ends with the first violin holding a long A#, which is brutally interrupted by three rapid *fortissimo* hammer blows, repeated after a reappearance of the DSCH motif. It is open season on what these three notes signify: bombs falling on Dresden? Siegfried's Funeral Music from

Götterdämmerung? the warning signal when a KGB informer



entered a room? Perhaps all of these. Later in this movement the high cello sings a theme based on Katerina's aria from *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. The movement ends with the DSCH motif on the first violin, again holding the final note across into the inconsolable sorrow of the last movement.