Dmitri Shostakovich: The Complete String Quartets

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Notes from the 2011 Salzburg Festival

Shostakovich Cycle

One of the delightfully outlandish bits of programming at the 2011 Salzburg Festival was a cycle of Shostakovich's 15 string quartets in chronological order in four concerts over two days: Two shorter afternoon-sessions of three quartets at 4PM (1-3 on the 18th, 9-11 on the 19th), another five and four quartets respectively at 7.30 in the evening. I had operas to attend to in the evening, but was glad to take in even just six Shostakovich Quartets on the side—especially with the wonderful Mandelring Quartett.

Over the last few years the Mandelring Quartett has issued the complete cycle on SACD for Audite (reviews here and here) and recordings gave a pretty good idea of what awaited one at these concerts: "The sheer beauty of all of Shostakovich's brilliantly harrowing ugliness that these discs offer […] is something to behold." That's pretty much it: The Mandelring Quartett offers more beauty and less gore in Shostakovich than one would expect if the only reference were the performances of the (all-Russian) "Borodin", "Beethoven", or "Shostakovich" Quartets. They accentuate surfaces more than spikes and corners; their rhythmic beat is propulsive but rarely maniacal. They are DSCH-seducers, not DSCH-enforcers… which is not to say that they can't work up an awesome storm. The intensity of the afternoon sessions, was considerable to inclined ear. But one must first get out of 'Borodin-mode' to listen to the Mandelring Quartett and gain the maximum reward from their sessions with Dmitry.

In the 1938 Quartet No.1, the melodic opening lines sounded like parallel Christmas songs. As if any dissonance or chromatic stress was sheer coincidence; an innocent by-product of the performance. The first violin's deep, varnished, occasionally dominating sound (Sebastian Schmidt) variously sang and twitched above the viola's (Roland Glassl) beat. The finale bristled with energy even distributed among the four players. The flow and pull of the Second Quartet (1944) and its modulated sweetness swept the rug from underneath your feet and immediately pulled you into that strange, wild, but unthreatening dance that the first movement constitutes. At anywhere between 30 to 40 minutes, it's a comparatively long work and the second movement stretches particularly.

In the course of it a little girl a row behind me, perhaps four, whispered a few curious questions into the ear of her dad, who in turn tried to tamper that curiosity to buy himself a twenty-minute delay and see those questions asked during intermission.

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But they obviously burned upon the girl's little soul and immediate inquiry needed to be made. It was endearing, actually… as was the very fact that a wide-eyed and wide-eared four year old attended an afternoon of Shostakovich String Quartets in the first place. But the intermittent whisper did not fail to bring out the evil eye of indignity of a senior couple two rows in front, which sent buckets full of withering, scornful stares into the innocent's direction. It's not been that long since I've felt similar such ocular pronouncements of disapproval and it touched me distinctively the wrong way. With something less than my usual charm I leaned forward and pointed at the stage, suggesting firmly to the gentleman that the music played up front, and that his contortions would only get him crick in his neck. The advice wasn't taken kindly, but it was taken summarily. My later apology fell flat, though, when I suggested that among extra-musical noises, the whispered question of a curious child was by far the loveliest anyone could wish for… in any case better than hearing-aids going off, dentures incessantly being sucked into prim position, or old ladies in search of tightly wrapped cough drops really getting to the bottom of their bags.

The Third Quartet has my favorite opening of the lot, a light violin line above the chugging cello and viola, buoyantly dancing along, untroubled by darker intrusions occasionally thrown in. It's very hard not to bop my head along to it and shake all the limbs in rhythmic convulsion. But the action would undoubtedly, justifiably call forth even more recrimination than whispers, so I suppressed the urge… especially on the rickety seating in the Mozarteum where every tapped foot is transmitted half a dozen seats to both sides. Peckish, lyrical, intense, but also ruthless in the third movement Allegro non troppo, it was an astonishing way to finish the first afternoon set.

Everything about this opening shot of DSCH suggested that attendance for at least the next afternoon session was downright mandatory, and so I came back for another half measure of Shostakovich, Quartets 9 through 11, opp.117, 118, and 122. Despite being nominally sold out, the Grand Concert Hall wasn't completely full. Perhaps the good weather had kept a number of ticket holders from attending the 4PM part, rolling in only for the more extensive evening bit, while as many of the afternooners were indisposed in the evening (or had their fill of Shostakovich), because similar lacunae were reported among the seats in those concerts, too, with only about half the audience remaining for the 8th and 15th quartets, respectively.

The Mandelring more or less picked up on Friday where I had left them, with great accuracy, excellent intonation (especially evident after hearing less-than-ideal examples), and their lyrical streak. The spiccato riding motif (not unlike the famous Rossini-William Tell Overture motif that Shostakovich uses in his 15th Symphony) in the Allegretto of the 9th Quartet, for example, was played with more delicacy than fierceness, but ever propelling. The concluding Allegro, twice as long as any one of the preceding four movements, was dashing-dynamic—and the leftover energy went right into the Andante of Quartet no.10. After few memorable moments in between, the Mandelring Quartet emerged again for a final movement, Allegretto, that veered nicely between thrilling and serene.

Symphonic dolefulness marks the opening of the 11th Quartet, and the four musicians finally—dug into the seven-movement (but only about 16-minute long) quartet like berserkers which worked well with calm underlying pulse. With so much fun to be had for the ears, it was over before one noticed. Since the four players apparently appreciate the challenge of these Shostakovich marathons (this was the second time they had done the complete set in two days), there might be the opportunity to hear the missing nine quartets soon enough.

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