



Shostakovich: Trio op. 67 in E minor

“That is his temper, his polemics, his manner of speech, his habit of returning to one and the same thought, developing it.” The speaker here is the sister of Ivan Sollertinsky, speaking of the portrait of her brother in the second movement of Shostakovich’s Piano Trio No.2. It is a furiously-paced movement, glee and madness mixed together in equal parts, a hodgepodge of themes thrown together, each one more frenzied and excited than the previous one, crashing chords ending the brief movement with extreme bravura and breathlessness. Ivan Sollertinsky was a friend of Shostakovich’s, alternately described as being his “ideal companion”, “mentor” and “alter ego” – the trio was dedicated to him, and was the first major work written after his unexpected and tragic death in 1944 at the age of 42. Upon hearing of Sollertinsky’s death, Shostakovich offered the following words of condolence to Sollertinsky’s widow: “It is impossible to express in words all the grief that engulfed me on hearing the news about Ivan Ivanovich’s death. Ivan Ivanovich was my closest and dearest friend...To live without him will be unbearably difficult.”

Four days after the death of Sollertinsky, Shostakovich finished composing the first movement of the Piano Trio No.2. It is a bleak, despairing movement, opening with the main theme being played entirely by solo, muted cello harmonics, this theme subsequently being obsessively developed throughout the movement, traversing from the ghostly opening through to pensive piano theme backed by static repeating staccato eighth notes, transforming into an explosive, martial statement by the cello, then carrying on as a sinister waltz played by pizzicato strings, developing on into a full-throated fortissimo wail, and finally trickling out as a reminiscence on the piano at the end of the movement. The tragic mood is briefly broken by the mad frenzy of the second movement, but then picked up again in the third movement, which opens with crashing, tormented piano chords, followed by a profoundly beautiful and sad theme played out on violin and cello, first by the two instruments separately, then

interwoven between the two instruments. The final movement brings together many of the various elements and themes of the piece up until now, as well as introducing a fresh crop of tunes, including some distinctly Russian folk melodies, and a Jewish tune. In 1944, the news of the horrors of the concentration camps was just starting to trickle out; but Shostakovich's interest in Jewish music dated back further than 1944. At the time of his composition of the trio, he was working on completion of his student Fleyshman's opera, Rothschild's Violin; he stated himself, "It seems I comprehend what distinguishes the Jewish melos. A cheerful melody is built here on sad intonations...Why does he sing a cheerful song? Because he is sad at heart." This mixture that attracted to Jewish music, of tragedy thinly papered over with cheer, of irony both masking and expressing profound sadness, of beauty and despair expressed together, is present in all of Shostakovich's music, but finds particular poignancy in this Trio, reflecting both the horrific, devastating historical time in which he was writing this piece, as well as intense personal quality of the loss for him of his closest and dearest friend, Sollertinsky.

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