

Music for the Viola

A Twentieth Century Anthology, Vol. 3

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH: *Sonata for Viola and Piano*

WILLIAM BERGSMAN: *Fantastic Variations on a Theme from Tristan*

BENJAMIN BRITTEN: *Lachrymae, Reflections on a Song of Dowland*

John Graham, violist

Thomas Muraco, pianist

Sonata for Viola and Piano, Op. 147, is the last work of **Dmitri Shostakovich** (b.1906, St. Petersburg; d.1975, Moscow). It is an important and moving work, not only because it is rendered awe-inspiring, as all last works are, by its creator's proximity to death, "the undiscover'd country from whose bourn/No traveller returns..." But it is an especially valuable gate into the composer's musical mind given the circumstances of his creative existence. For being a composer in the Soviet Union of the twentieth century meant being harrassed by ever-changing ideological tenets. No composer of any century was more buffeted by a relationship with schizophrenic regimes which lionized him one moment and denounced him the next, which sometimes placed the most lavish apparatus of the musical world at his feet, and at others stripped him of honor and the barest opportunity to pursue his art. But, as Socrates is our witness, it is at the end of a man's life that he is most free of political connivings and least touched by the world. He is free to work out his individual visions.

Shostakovich's last vision is not an anguished testimony to the depths of human pain, as is Mahler's, whose *Symphony No. 10* bears, scribbled in its margin, the words, "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Nor did he produce, like Bach, an *Art of Fugue*, an exhaustive compendium and the last word in a dying art form by a composer who would, himself, soon be dead. Shostakovich's last work is moving because there is an unselfconscious matter-of-factness about it; here a depth of artistic expression is turned inward. The composer returns once again to his most beloved musical gestures, which he feels free to spin out and explore in a most loving way. Gone are the acerbic sneers and sardonic gestures, the only weapons of a composer whose world is out of joint. Rather, we are left with Shostakovich's musical memories, newly found and made over, all the more touching, as they themselves are touched by the shadow of death.

All three movements make use of the same melodic material—scalar passages and the intervals of the fourth and fifth, and all three have their own simple, characteristic rhythmic figures, which recur prominently through the course of each movement. In addition, from a simple pool of materials, each movement spins itself out expansively, working and reworking its characteristic material.

The first movement begins with the solo viola plucking an eerie, rocking, cradle-song accompaniment that becomes, with a Beethovenian triplet figure reminiscent of his *Symphony No. 5*, the central figure of the movement. The movement is remarkable for the patience in its unfolding—it beautifully sustains its mood of quiet, gentle rocking until it gathers its forces for a developmental climax. Just as the materials with which the composer works tend to be simple—repetitive rhythms and minor scalar passages—so too is the form simple: climax gives way, once-again, to a quiet, if sometimes eerie, cradle music.

The second movement reminds one of a Shostakovich scherzo without the bite. It is replete with march and dance motives, folk-like in nature. The repetitiveness of the piano accompaniment sets up little bursts of dizzying newness, a modulation that is pure light, or a sudden charge of dancing energy.

Throughout, the oom-pah of the bass and the martial two sixteenth notes followed by two eighth notes (the movement's characteristic rhythm) is alternated with more somber recitative and long-lined melodies.

It is fitting that the last movement Shostakovich wrote is a tribute to Beethoven. Shostakovich used his final musical utterance not as a vehicle for the expression of his independent and unique musical spirit, but as a way of forging a bond with the composer whose last symphony was, itself, a utopian vision of humanity forging a bond with itself. The movement makes liberal and explicit reference to the slow movement of Beethoven's "*Moonlight*" *Sonata*, with its simple, arpeggiated chords and its dotted rhythm, which ultimately acquires, in its repetition, a chilling directness and profound beauty.

Fantastic Variations on a Theme from Tristan by **William Bergsma** (b. 1921, Oakland, CA) was composed in 1961. The work is direct and forceful, a kind of Americana with harmonic bite; its rhythmic metamorphoses—the plays on rhythmic ideas—are straightforward and clearly perceptible. Less obvious is the *melodic* genesis of the variations. The Wagnerian theme alluded to in the title is a phrase from the sailor's song that is heard in the first scene of *Tristan und Isolde*. This theme is heard explicitly only twice in the piece: at the end of the lengthy introduction, and in the very last measures. In the six variations themselves, while one hears fleeting connections with the theme, mainly through shared intervallic content, the connection between theme and variations is tenuous. Variations I, II, and III, all quite different in character, seek not to reinforce the introductory material or the theme. Variation IV is the first variation that refers back to the opening; it reinvents the incisive music of the introduction, in which a chromatic motive is fashioned from the first four notes of the Wagnerian tune; F—E—C—D, with its emphasis on the descending minor third, F—D, is turned into F—E—E-flat—D. But this fragment is the closest the composer comes in the variations to the theme itself. Perhaps the word "fantastic" in the title alludes to the play of the composer's imagination as it ranges freely over the material. The Wagnerian theme serves not as a model for replication and explicit variation, but as a point of departure for often distant musical musings.

All three of the pieces on this recording derive some measure of inspiration from the work of another composer. Shostakovich's parting composition invokes Beethoven, while Bergsma chose a theme of Wagner as the subject of his work. ***Lachrymae*** (Tears), by **Benjamin Britten** (b.1913, Lowestoft, England; d.1976, Aldeburgh, England), refers to *Flow, My Tears*, one of two songs by John Dowland (1562-1626) that Britten "reflects" upon in this composition. The other song, *If My Complaints Could Passion Move*, is the main subject of Britten's musical discourse.

In ***Lachrymae, Reflections on a Song of Dowland***, Britten sets himself the following musical problem: he is not interested in the tried-and-true method of stating his theme explicitly in a familiar context before varying it, only to return to it intact at the composition's conclusion. Rather, the compositional process is one of using variation techniques to incarnate a theme out of a series of motivic fragments, varied moods, and alien harmonic contexts. Only in the end, only finally, does one of the songs appear in something akin to its original form in its original harmonic context.

The piece begins with statements, repeated ever higher, of the ascending major triad that opens *If My Complaints*. . . . The setting, however, is impressionistic, so much so that the appearance of a significant portion of the melody in the bass of the piano slightly later seems to bear little relationship to the Dowland song. In this way, the composer fulfills his obligation to make explicit the material that is going to be varied; but he does so in a way that is foreign to the spirit if not to the substance of the original song. In this way, the revelation of the song, pieced together and finally born of the variation process, is saved for the work's conclusion.

It is the opening triad that becomes the subject of the majority of the variations. Slowly, through the variations that follow, this opening triad gives birth to music of different characters as it is also expanded to encompass more and more of the melody. Nevertheless, one remains conscious throughout the first set of several variations that the composer is dealing with fragments.

Because of this fragmentation, the appearance of the song *Flow My Tears* in a long, explicit statement in E-flat (the large harmonic scheme of the movement is: c minor—E-flat major—c minor) is immensely satisfying, introducing both a dramatic brightening and a sense of melodic completeness. The remaining variations, on *If My Complaints...*, are contrasting, and engage the main theme in varied degrees of explicitness.

It is not until the end of the composition that the main theme of *If My Complaints* is heard in something very much like its original form. But even here, Britten is not content to present the song with the simple harmonies of the original. The first ten measures of the song are accompanied by modern harmonies. Slowly these harmonies dissolve into the chords of the original. By measure eleven, we are back in Elizabethan England. This process of emerging from one musical land to another in the last section mirrors the larger compositional structure, in which musics of different character and varied treatment of the song finally coalesce to reincarnate the original.

—Perry Goldstein

John Graham has performed throughout the United States, Europe and China in recital, orchestra and chamber music engagements, and has been active in expanding the literature for the viola through his premiere performances of new works for the instrument.

He has been guest artist with several major American string quartets, and appears frequently at the Marlboro Music Festival and the Aspen Music Festival. He has recorded the complete quintets of Mozart with the Juilliard String Quartet, quartets of Berg, Debussy and Ravel with the Galimir String Quartet and numerous American works by composers with the new music ensemble Speculum Musicae,

Graham has taught at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, China. He is currently Artist-in-Residence at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, and is on the faculty of the Mannes College of Music in New York City.

Pianist **Thomas Muraco** has appeared in concerts throughout the United States, Canada, Central America and Europe. He has collaborated with a wide range of singers, instrumentalists and chamber ensembles, and has performed in the Aspen, Banff, Bermuda and Casals Music Festivals. He has recorded for Serenus, CRI and Musical Heritage.

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