



Echoes of Eternity

Shostakovich's Manipulation of Time in the First Movement of String Quartet no. 15, op. 144

By Declan Siefkas

“**P**lay it so that flies drop dead in mid-air, and the audience starts leaving the hall from sheer boredom.”¹ So Shostakovich instructed the members of the Beethoven Quartet as they rehearsed the first movement of his fifteenth, and final, string quartet. What could the composer have meant by such an imperative? If we rule out that Shostakovich, whose dry sense of humour is well-documented, truly intended to bore his audience, what are we left with?

Many scholars and critics have read the first movement's elegiac gloom as a meditation on death, with some speculating that the piece bears an unwritten dedication to the violinist David Oistrakh, then recently passed, or even to the composer himself.² Evidence abounds for this last interpretation: by the time Shostakovich began the quartet, he had been diagnosed with a trio of incurable and progressive medical conditions and found even the physical act of composition taxing. Musicologist Laurel Fay further suggests that his contemporaries understood the piece as his personal requiem.³ Yet does this theme manifest in the music? And if it does, what is its nature?

One possible answer lies in Shostakovich's manipulation of musical time. The movement adheres in many respects to common precepts of sonata form, most notably in the exposition of two themes that contrast in several ways. The first unfolds as a dense fugato locked in a dark and chant-like E-flat aeolian (or natural minor), whereas the second arises as a homophonic, airy melody in diatonic C major.⁴ But perhaps the most striking difference between the two resides in the temporalities they abet: in the first theme, an archaic and nonlinear time; and in the second theme, an illumined and linear time. The first shrouds the march of time in a changeless mist, presenting music unable to grow or progress. The

second, at the moment of its arrival, dispels the mist and furnishes a sense of clarity and trajectory. Once introduced, the weaving of these two themes and their morphologies of time constitute the central drama of the movement.

The first theme can be conceived of as a chain, its links as repetitions of a short-short-long rhythmic motif (or anapest, in the terminology of classical Greek poetry) (Ex. 1). Its metric regularity is notably disturbed twice: first, by the tie over the barline in its 3rd measure, and then by the shift to 3/2 meter in its 5th, both of which expand the 'long' part of the motif. This design creates perceptual tension. The listener loses the ability to predict the beginning of the next anapest, yet, once begun, foresees precisely its manner of unfolding.

Shostakovich summons pitch analogously. Just as the statement's rhythm consists of the anapest motif with expansions, so the melody consists of the tonic E-flat with obsessive, circling elaborations. Indeed, the quarter note gestures that depart from E-flat seem only to describe ever more distant orbits around the tonic, perceptually instilling their point of return with a monolithic gravitational pull. Further, pitch and rhythm conspire to place the ennobled E-flat on every downbeat but the one in measure 3, over which it is merely sustained. The theme thus appears fragmentary and enfeebled, unable to trace a span larger than a single anapest, and unable to escape the pull of E-flat.

The second theme, by contrast, appears light and continuous. It is built not from a single rhythmic tattoo, but from a relatively diverse group of rhythmic motifs that connect to form larger wholes (Ex. 2). Gone, as well, is the constrained and orbital configuration of gesture, replaced by wider leaps and more spontaneous contours. While a focal pitch (in this case, G above the treble staff) still presides, the melody appears to glide rather than limp around it. Furthermore, these wider



Example 3: The second attempt at resolution (R. 8–R. 9)

intervals describe neat arpeggiations of tonal harmonies which, in the simplified context of the movement, appears to stand for diatonicism itself. Glancing at the second theme as a whole, one apprehends that the larger statement consists of three overlapping phrases of four measures, each of which holds a single harmony. The whole statement thus outlines a tidy plagal progression over 10 measures and articulates a strong point of arrival at its conclusion.

Or rather, that is how the second theme *might* behave, if its third phrase were not interrupted. Right as the third phrase begins (Ex. 2: m. 7), the serenity of the texture is disturbed by a sudden re-emergence of the anapest motif in the lower three voices. Ominously, the transformation of the anapest here breaks with the pure diatonicism of the theme by metrically and dynamically emphasising D-flat, a dissonant semitone above the tonic and the first chromatic pitch since C major's arrival. Yet

the most remarkable trait of this anapest intrusion is the way it seems to pause the melodic arc of the 1st violin. Looking at the melody in measures R. 6/7–R. 7/1 (Ex. 2: mm. 7–10), we detect the analogue of R. 6/1–3 (Ex. 2: mm. 1–3), but with a marked distension of the first note owing to the intrusion of the anapest. As a result, the third phrase does not conclude in the manner of its predecessors, but is interrupted wholesale (R. 7), a point emphasised by the abrupt cessation of the pedal texture in the measure before its projected point of arrival (R. 7/2) (Ex. 2: m. 11).⁵

In examining the two themes comparatively, their temporal differences bear out. Through its set of archaic and immutable properties, the first theme exhibits a nonlinear sense of time; it does not grow or change, but merely winds on.⁶ Meanwhile, the hierarchical differentiation of phrase structure and the limpid pull of tonality conspire to instil the second theme with a subdued but



discernible linearity. The presentation of these themes poses a question to the rest of the movement. Can the lightness and goal-oriented motion of the second theme be sustained? Or is the refuge it offers merely that: a temporary redoubt, doomed to be swallowed by the looming echoes of eternity?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the answer hews closer to the latter. The reverberating effect of the interruption discussed above is the denial of closure in the second theme. The effect has a few facets. For one, the anapest summons the use of 3/2 meter just after its arrival. Further, the phrase interrupted by the anapest morphs into unstable, episodic material that wanders chromatically, even temporarily yielding C-flat major. These two features—the destabilisation of meter and the saturation of flattened tones—are associates of the first theme, and bring with them its attendant stasis. This interruption of flow falls under a compositional strategy Mark Mazullo dubs “time displacement,” which he defines as “a complex of gestures that all contribute to a sense of halting, of poignant hesitation that calls attention to the affective nature of the material.”⁷ In our case, the effect is one of time dilation, a sort of portal back to the nonlinear realm of the first theme that undermines the linearity advanced earlier in the passage.

A second attempt at resolution in the second theme crops up at R. 8, with the melody presented in the cello. This apparent corrective, suddenly back in C major, is

interrupted by an identical anapest motif in the violins, this time after only four measures (Ex. 3). The effect resembles the one discussed above: motifs from the first theme abound, harmonic stability is lost, and the theme plunges flatward. The ensuing episode is temporarily leavened by a slip into bright A major (R. 9), but this excursion is similarly harried by the anapest motif (R. 9/4–5 & R. 9/10–11) and seems to gradually lose energy as a result. Finally, a third attempt at closure momentarily succeeds (at R. 10), before descending once again to E-flat aeolian (R. 10/7).

Much of the remaining movement can be traced in the manner outlined above.⁸ As these two themes compete for audibility, they trace an intricate dialogue of equilibrium and resistance. To revisit the question posed at the beginning of this spotlight, one can read the theme of impending death as manifest in the clashing of musical temporalities: the gloom of everlasting stasis, present from the very beginning of the movement, interrupts and debilitates any attempt to cultivate a sense of progress or continuity. The second theme makes several bids for vitality only to be systematically rebuffed, returned each time to the fabric of eternity. This rather grim vision of the end of life resonates not only with Shostakovich’s degenerating health, but also with our understanding of the composer’s ideologies in his late period. As one scholar put it, “as a materialist, death was for him the end.”⁹

Author:

Declan Siefkas is a master's student in music theory at the New England Conservatory, and holds a BA in music from Colorado College. His analytical work focuses on the phenomenology of musical time—a subject that also informs his work as a pianist/composer, in which he strives to evoke an inner awareness of time's passing.

Notes:

- 1 Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 470. The quote is relayed by Fyodor Druzhinin, long-time violist of the Beethoven Quartet.
- 2 Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 274–276; 280.
- 3 Laurel E. Fay, “The Late Quartets of Dmitri Shostakovich: A Stylistic Investigation” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1978), 14. See also Gerard McBurney, liner notes to *The Soviet Experience* (Vol. IV), Pacifica Quartet, Cedille 90000 145, CD, 2013.
- 4 The degree to which this movement conforms to sonata precepts is a fascinating question that merits a separate investigation. In her dissertation (cited above), Laurel Fay does not describe the movement as a sonata adherent, yet more recent applications of Sonata Theory to Shostakovich’s music have yielded fruitful results. See especially Charity Lofthouse, “Rotational Form and Sonata-Type Hybridity in the First Movement of Shostakovich’s Fourth Symphony” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2014).
- 5 This projected point of arrival takes into account the extra measure added to the phrase by the elongated first note.
- 6 For a more detailed examination of musical temporalities, see Jonathan D. Kramer, *The Time of Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1988). My definition of nonlinearity considers his discussion on page 21.
- 7 Mark Mazullo, *Shostakovich’s Preludes and Fugues: Contexts, Style, Performance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 106.
- 8 For an analysis that considers the way the quartet’s six adagio movements relate to one another through a similarly time-based perspective, see Richard N. Burke, “Film, narrative, and Shostakovich’s last quartet,” *The Musical Quarterly*, 83:3 (1999), 413–429.
- 9 Eric Roseberry, “A Debt Repaid? Some Observations on Shostakovich and his Late-period Recognition of Britten” in *Shostakovich Studies* Vol. 2 ed. Pauline Fairclough (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 252.

