



Shostakovich as Musical Prophet

An Interview with Nicholas Kitchen

By Andrew Schartmann

Nicholas Kitchen leads a many-faceted career as violin soloist, chamber musician, educator, video artist, arranger, arts administrator, and technology innovator. He is on the Faculty of the New England Conservatory of Music (Boston, USA), and is Artistic Director of the Heifetz International Music Institute. He is also a founding member of the Borromeo Quartet, with whom he received top prizes at the Evian International Quartet Competition, and received the Cleveland Quartet Award, the Avery Fischer Career Grant, and the Martin E. Siegel Award. Among his many individual awards, he has received the Albert Schweitzer Medallion for Artistry and was named a Presidential Scholar in the Arts.

Kitchen's appearances as a soloist and chamber musician have taken him across the United States and to more than 25 countries both with the quartet and as guest artist. He has performed in many of the world's great concert halls, including the Berlin Philharmonie, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, the Tonhalle in Zürich, Wigmore Hall in London, Suntory Hall in Tokyo, the Oriental Arts Center in Shanghai, the Seoul Arts Center in Korea, the Dvořák Hall in Prague, Carnegie Hall, and Lincoln Center in New York and the Library of Congress in Washington.

With the Borromeo Quartet, Kitchen has performed complete cycles by Bartók, Beethoven, Dvořák, Mendelssohn, and Shostakovich, among others. Our interview today focuses on his lifelong journey studying and performing Shostakovich's fifteen string quartets. Together we discuss the intricacies of individual movements, as well as broader questions of style, cultural heritage, historiography, and the like.

DSCH Journal: "For those who spend years learning the language of musical expression passed down through the generations of great composers, all roads lead somehow to Beethoven." You wrote this nearly 20 years ago while performing the complete cycle of Bartók's quartets with the Borromeo. Your point was to compare Bartók's extraordinary innovations to those of Beethoven—two composers who charted new territory for subsequent generations to explore. Where does Shostakovich fall in this pantheon of quartet masters?

Nicholas Kitchen: With Beethoven, Bartók, and Shostakovich, we're talking about superhuman talents that happen so rarely in history. It must be a strange yet wonderful curse to discover you're a custodian of that kind of talent. Artists on that level must know there's an enormous amount they can do without working very hard, but they must also know that their most significant work—the work that introduces the world to new possibilities—will challenge them in extraordinary ways. It's hard enough to fathom the facility with which these composers approached music, but what really separates them from the rest is how this facility enabled them to imagine new musical realms.

DSCH: Which new realms did Shostakovich open for us?

NK: I always come back to the musical textures he created. It's stunning to think about the breadth of creativity he achieved in this respect. Take the Thirteenth String Quartet, for example. There's nothing like that particular kind of interweaving of the notes—the most complex counterpoint embedded within a tonal imagination that resembles nothing else. And the speed! He's interlocking

dissonance with abrasive intervals at a phenomenal pace [sings], skipping about in a way that's so unique and ingenious. Somehow that stands out to me as the innovation that goes to the furthest shore, especially with respect to the quartet genre.

DSCH: Do any other quartets stick out in your mind as exemplars of his penchant for new textures?

NK: I often think of the colossal wall of dissonance in the Fourth Quartet that just builds and builds. It's such a singular construction, but it emerges so naturally. Again, I come back to this idea that composers of his ilk had a certain facility that allowed them to conjure fresh landscapes, not just over the course of a career, but from composition to composition. So few people have within their being the ability to write that many quartets that all go somewhere unique. This was also true of Beethoven and Bartók, of course, but differences in personality and historical context led to stunningly diverse results.

DSCH: Can you point to a specific aspect of Shostakovich's personality and/or historical context that led him to innovate with musical texture?

NK: Shostakovich isn't thought of as a great improviser in the sense of, say, Beethoven, but think about his musical upbringing—improvising for silent cinema and composing vast amounts of film music. I get the feeling with certain sections of his music that he thought in theatrical terms, using instruments as participants in a naturalistic conversation. I don't think Beethoven would have been happy with that. His approach was to boil down ideas and rid them of anything extraneous. Shostakovich relished in capturing those conversational relationships.



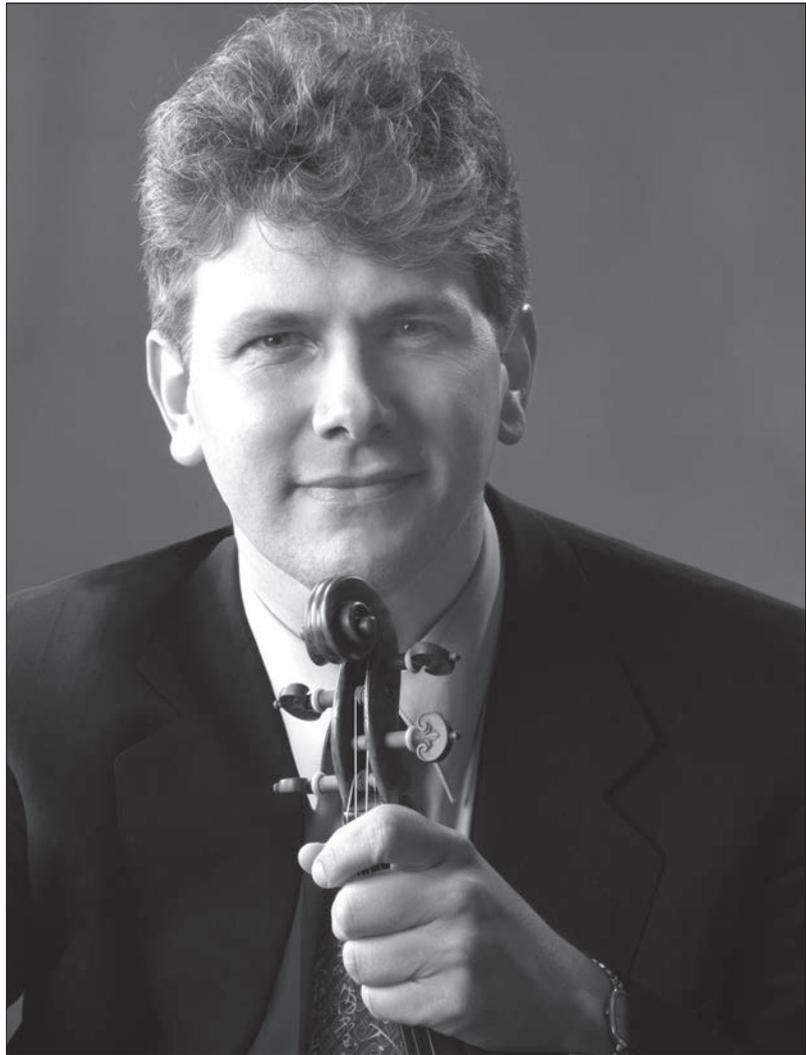
If I'm perfectly honest, I didn't love Shostakovich's conversational style at first. It yielded open-ended forms that were difficult for me to follow, but eventually I learned how marvellous it can be to just go with the flow. It reminds me of how authors experimented with notions of stream of consciousness; I don't think anyone else had done that in music. There are a few moments in Beethoven, and perhaps a few more in Bartók, but neither of those composers experimented with open-ended conversations to the same extent as Shostakovich.

DSCH: I'm fascinated by your allusion to literary influences, especially with a composer like Shostakovich who was theatrically minded from a young age. We know, of course, that he was also immersed in poetry and literature throughout his life. How would you estimate the impact of literary arts on Shostakovich's musical output?

NK: It was interesting for me to discover Shostakovich's brilliance with language, which was on par with his brilliance with music. As far as I understand, you could begin any passage from Gogol, or any other Russian literary giant, and he could complete the passage. It's not a big leap, in my view, to assume Shostakovich was thinking of the modern ways people were experimenting with language, meaning, satire, expectation, and so on, and weaving that into music in analogous ways.

Despite my limited Russian language skills, I've had a few experiences to get close to Shostakovich's word treatment, and it's phenomenal. I remember being in Spoleto when they were producing *Nose*, and it was such an enormous hit that they had fire marshals at every single performance to remove people from the opera house so it wouldn't fall down. That music really speaks to people.

DSCH: And it speaks in so many different ways. I suppose that's true of any composer, but with Shostakovich in particular, the historical context



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complicates matters. In your view, how do historical context and musical style interact to create meaning in his music? Or do they interact at all?

NK: I remember first encountering the Eighth String Quartet, which was usually accompanied by elaborate pre-concert discussions about the Holocaust, Nazi Germany ... well, you know how it goes. I then learned about all of the baggage associated with that approach. And then I gradually became aware of a crisis in Shostakovich's life, prompted by some of the things he was being asked to do around that time. Thus emerged another way of looking at the quartet—as a summary of his life before suicide, which is what he

himself said of the piece in his usual satirical manner.

So how does that relate to musical style? Once again, I come back to texture. It's phenomenal that he could weave a new texture comprised of his past work—a musical art gallery of his own output—and do so seamlessly. But it boggles the mind that his new creation captured the fullness of each imitation. It's a technical marvel indebted to his legendary musical memory, which allowed him to capture every detail of his musical past while telling a story about himself. He uses the DSCH motive and a prison song, of course, but his use of mutes ... a musical symbol of what was once robust but has now become weak. There are no words for that.



DSCH: How does this singular marvel relate to Shostakovich's stylistic evolution as a whole? Or am I falling victim to historical determinism in even asking that question?

NK: Just step one quartet back to no. 7 and nothing is in common between those two. Nothing. You have these prancing figures you can barely hold on to, these choral textures, the fugue ... And then move the other way to no. 9, and you have this construction of a dark palace of excitement that is just colossal in its effect. That's not to say you can't talk about stylistic changes over time—those certainly exist—but the coherent stylistic diversity within a *single* quartet is more remarkable to me. Shostakovich was a true master of contrast.

Take the Third String Quartet, which chronicles the extraordinary emotions one undergoes in wartime—that sense of innocence, that feeling of overwhelming grief, and that lack of poetic justice for what you've felt. Think about the sheer contrast involved: playfulness and innocence that yields to confusion in the second movement, a jolt of excitement in the third movement, a crushing emotional weight in the fourth, and then this sense of grandeur in the fifth that also leaves us feeling somehow unresolved.

DSCH: It's true—the emotional range of that piece is stunning. It makes me wonder how well we can truly know Shostakovich *the person*. We can view him through a Romantic lens that interprets music as a personal expression of feelings, but what about the classical ideology of composers as craftspeople moulding characters in sound rather than etching their souls in music? It was perfectly ordinary for a classical composer to write a sad movement while feeling elated in their personal life. Is it possible we've been reading too much into Shostakovich?

NK: It's impossible to know, but I can't help but think of Shostakovich,

Sollertinsky, and the Second Piano Trio. Sollertinsky could expose a side of Shostakovich that almost no one else would ever see. There's this portrayal of them on the beach being so completely zany and out-of-their-minds joking with each other, using a verbal brilliance and a bank of literary allusions that no one else would be able to follow. I don't think it's a coincidence that the Second Piano Trio—written for Sollertinsky after his untimely death—is one of Shostakovich's most evidently biographical compositions. And yet we also have this prevalent image of Shostakovich as a closed book. That juxtaposition made me realise that any impression I form about a musical biography, so to speak, is probably completely wrong—or would be ridiculous from his point of view, at the very least.

DSCH: We could go down that rabbit hole for hours, but let me pull us back out by relating these two versions of Shostakovich the person to the quartets. On the one hand, we have an extraordinarily guarded man; on the other hand, we have ample anecdotes that tell of Shostakovich wearing his heart on his sleeve. Sometimes it's difficult to find the genuine person at heart of these two contrasting personae. I'm reminded of the last quartet, and in particular Shostakovich's bizarre performance direction to play “so that flies drop dead in mid-air, and the audience start leaving the hall from sheer boredom.” We know, of course, that Shostakovich had death on his mind, but I can't help but feel some of his wit coming through in that statement. In some ways, it's a perfect embodiment of his enigmatic nature we were just discussing. How do you interpret the Fifteenth Quartet?

NK: I don't think I can give you a satisfactory answer, but when I think of the fifteen quartets, there are two spots that still puzzle me: the second movement of no. 2 and the first few movements of no. 15. That notion that he's trying to slow down the clock so there's an hour between every second

... I feel like he's playing a bit of a game with that. And I think you're referring to that, too. I have a feeling that a lot of Shostakovich's music has words behind it, words to which only Shostakovich is privy. I imagine these incredibly wicked and witty self-referential jokes going on in his own mind as the music unwinds. And I don't mean jokes that preclude expressive significance. After all, jesters in Shakespeare often say the most significant things. But there's some element of literary genius behind his art. I'll never know enough to decode it, but I can imagine it being relatively easy for him to take passages from, say, Gogol and give them musical shape. That process could be behind a lot of his music. At the end of the day, it doesn't really matter, because once that underlying kernel of inspiration becomes music it operates under its own rules.

DSCH: Now that we've touched on several of the quartets, I'd like to ask you about your own personal journey in performing the complete cycle with the Borromeo Quartet. How did you become acquainted with the quartets to begin with?

NK: My own journey with Shostakovich began when our quartet was in the Artist Diploma programme at New England Conservatory (NEC) between 1990 and 1992. At that moment, Sarah Caldwell, who was the founding director of the Opera Company of Boston, had a programme with Russia called “Making Music Together” that resulted in a few exchanges between the Moscow Conservatory and NEC. Our quartet was included in one of those exchanges, during which time we had an opportunity to work with members of the Shostakovich String Quartet. Those interactions gave me enough of a taste of the way they were interacting with that sonority to realise I knew nothing about Shostakovich—this musical force that all of these people were truly inspired by, moved by, and proud of. At that moment in the United





The Borromeo Quartet. Kristopher Tong, Violin; Yeesun Kim, Cello; Mai Motobuchi Viola; Nicholas Kitchen, Violinist

States, people didn't interact with his music that way. There was nothing that resembled that deep, deep connection. And so, from that moment on, I knew that whatever our quartet did had to relate to that version of Shostakovich I encountered with the Shostakovich String Quartet and the people of Russia. That was my starting point with Shostakovich. I might have played a tiny bit of his music before that, but at that time I knew I wanted to play all of the string quartets.

DSCH: Did the Borromeo become intimately involved with the entire set at once? Or was it a gradual process?

NK: We had really meaningful performances of many quartets—no. 8, no. 3, no. 1, no. 9, no. 12, no. 11—and we programmed specific quartets several times over. That experience of digging deeper and deeper into our existing repertoire fed a desire to look at all of the quartets. What a blessing to have that opportunity.

DSCH: To study the cycle?

NK: Exactly—I come back to this idea of the small group of people who are blessed (and cursed, you might say) with the charge of being musical prophets, whether it's Beethoven, Brahms, Bartók, or Shostakovich. It's such an incredible privilege to be in front of those fifteen quartets, and to have as my job the stewardship thereof. How lucky am I to get close to Shostakovich's genius—his spirit of imagination, his wicked sense of humour, his emotional warmth? I am so grateful we had the opportunity to perform them and share our journey through the cycle with others.

DSCH: Having lived with Shostakovich's music for so long, you must have encountered myriad perspectives on his work. Are there any lingering misconceptions about his music, especially here in North America, that you'd like to set straight?

NK: I mentioned that experience in Russia, and how there was something special about the way those instrumentalists worked. It's as though they

were searching for an iron track of sound—a sound that wouldn't be squishy, a rhythm that had strict definition and proportion, a certain kind of discipline in the way individual lines were delivered. Their approach gave the music a great deal of power and clarity, to be sure, but it also harboured an inherent danger. Sometimes that ascetic feeling about the best way to portray the music becomes predominant at the expense of its under-appreciated qualities. Yet with every one of our great composers we must internalise the music so that we can truly *sing* the lines and the pitches they've put together in that score. When I bring my full *singing* self to Shostakovich, it becomes clear that his music is just as songful as Bach, Schubert, Dvořák, Brahms... Of course, there *is* an astringent quality to his music—something dry and hard-edged—but when we exaggerate that aspect of the sound by making it *so* even and *so* strict, we lose the songfulness that makes his music so personal, so human.

