

# SHOSTAKOVICH

## STRING QUARTETS

selected poetic responses

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### Shostakovich String Quartet No.3 in F op.73 [summer 1946]

*[allegretto]*  
 we used to drink tea and talk about the future, remember?  
 joscha and nadzia would laugh and say so much without using words  
 just their eyes, remember? isn't it remarkable how much  
 stays with us as time rots on...  
 i thought i heard thunder.  
 remember how the chickens hated thunder  
 as much as we hated artillery  
 this is chambered music  
 each score is placed in a drawer  
 upon completion  
 i won't even bother  
 trying to have this stuff  
 performed or even published  
 not now  
 what a peculiar position  
 to be in

everything we create  
 is subject to  
 official interpretation  
 and i'd rather have  
 no interpretation  
 at all  
 into the drawer  
 with this entire cycle!  
*[moderato con moto]*  
 what's that they're saying?  
 christ! haven't i been a good boy?  
 they have no idea...  
 now my fiddles will mince around  
 in secretive tip-toe mincing steps  
 as if not to cause a ruckus  
 i'm rubbing my head with both hands  
 i just want to be left alone  
 i haven't done anything wrong

*[allegro non troppo]*  
 i can see them all commence to dance  
 when the directors say so  
 can't you?  
 every so often  
 the current gets switched on  
 and they all commence to dancing  
 on their knees  
 or even in their graves  
 at least a game on the field is honest:  
 one kicks the ball either  
 this way or that  
 and if we disagree with the way it's called  
 we can holler together in protest

*[adagio]*  
 but the rest of life seems to be much more irrational  
 i've begun to sign my name to the most ridiculous statements  
 simply to get them to let me be  
 there comes a point at which  
 the natural response consists  
 of resignation,  
 to all appearances  
 you know the saying:  
 give 'em the finger  
 but with your hand  
 deep down in  
 your pants pocket

*[moderato]*  
 yes, moderation.  
 everything in moderation  
 especially moderation itself  
 i had a bit too much to drink  
 walked through the square to the park  
 it was very dark  
 the moon had waned  
 to nearly nothing up there  
 comrade stalin  
 has measured everything out  
 including insomnia  
 i have my share  
 once in the night shadows of the trees  
 i began to relax and breathe deeply  
 the vodka was still in my bones  
 but i felt better able to handle myself  
 i heard an owl  
 lit a cigarette  
 sat down  
 and rubbed my eyes  
 slowly the dance returned  
 in my head  
 i found myself smiling  
 but it's surely that strange smile i've cultivated:  
 one corner up, one down.

### Shostakovich String Quartet No. 7 in F Sharp Minor Op.108 [1960]

*[allegretto]*  
 my first wife, nina  
 was a nuclear physicist  
 she died of the cancer  
 radiation poisoning  
 do you really expect for me  
 to join the party? this  
 is still the bolshevik party  
 i'm still not seeing socialism  
 haven't seen it yet, have you?  
 has anyone hereabouts?  
 has anybody here seen socialism?  
 i've been waiting

*[lento]*  
 look at the way  
 i'm floating  
 over the surface  
 of the street  
 nothing makes me hover in  
 this disconcerting way, not  
 touching the ground in spite  
 of enormous gravitational  
 pull, nothing does me this  
 way the way your party does  
 and always has. can you see  
 why i never joined? fuck.

*[allegro]*  
 here i will scribble my name  
 and exactly how i feel today  
 if anyone has to ask what  
 this means, i am very sorry.  
 everything means something.  
 [didn't mayakovsky say so?]  
 i cannot put it more clearly.  
 this one takes not very long.  
 if you wish to understand  
 i want you to look for the  
 diminutive figure whose  
 feet cannot touch the earth.

wearing a raincoat and  
 puffing a cigarette, reading  
 pravda and wincing in the  
 broad daylight, here i am.  
 stalin is seven years dead  
 yet i am subject to his  
 centrifugal antigravitation  
 and try as i may  
 i cannot reach the ground

### Shostakovich String Quartet No. 8 in C Minor Op 110 [July 1960]

*[largo]*  
 my name is dmitri shostakovich  
 i am a citizen of the union of  
 soviet socialist republics. i have  
 been asked to write something for  
 the victims of fascism and war  
 i am also writing for myself, as  
 this could be my last will and  
 testament if i do myself in  
 which is precisely what i want  
 to do at this point. yes i saw  
 the ruins of dresden but i  
 saw petrograd become leningrad  
 and the siege wherein they ate  
 the dogs and cats; i saw the  
 world through eyes of typhoid,  
 eyes of typhus staring out

*[allegro molto]*  
 and now at long last coerced  
 to join the communist party here in russia  
 —party of stalin to this very day—  
 nothing like what it should be  
 nothing like what they struggle  
 to create in chile, in guatemala  
 tangled up in cuba's militarism  
 none of this succeeding the way  
 we thought it could so long ago  
 instead of democratic socialism  
 we had bolshevism, party of  
 shoot them in the stem of  
 the brain, party of torture  
 vsevolod meyerhold  
 tortured for six months  
 before allowed to expire  
 and his wife stabbed to  
 death dozens of punctures  
 stabbed in her eyeballs  
 this is the party of stalin

*[allegretto]*  
 to this very day and i  
 am vomiting alone again  
 my head is spinning i am  
 utterly despondant

*[largo]*  
 it is only  
 a continuum  
 a series of  
 variations  
 on the same  
 theme as slew  
 all the mensheviks  
 and old bolsheviks  
 and so many  
 of my good friends  
 i feel it in my  
 heart and lungs  
 this is the real  
 essence of largo  
 right here in  
 my suicide

*[largo]*  
 the suicide  
 i so badly  
 want from  
 myself  
 it's the  
 mass mind  
 and heart  
 brought  
 in to me  
 and sent  
 back  
 out  
 in  
 this  
 way  
 out  
 do i have to  
 write it on  
 the moon  
 for you to see?

*[largo]*  
 if i put myself  
 out of this body  
 this shall be  
 my last word  
 how much can  
 a person bear?  
 how much do  
 you expect me to?  
 i lay myself  
 down by the  
 river i lay  
 myself down  
 by the river  
 i lay myself  
 down until  
 the breath  
 is gone  
 and no one  
 will know



# Shostakovich String Quartet No. 12 in D Flat Major Opus 133 [1968]

all twelve notes of the octave  
 says the cello  
 the four of us will discuss without hesitation  
 without too much hesitation just enough  
 we will discuss as we see fit the face of the day  
 and know that we see the power play  
 clearly spelled out unmistakable  
 either shoot them or have them simply vanish  
 judge me not by what you think i do for why  
 you think i do it judge me not

do you have any idea what we're under?  
 let me allow me permit me  
 for twenty minutes to establish  
 in your mind's ears and the lungs of your heart  
 exactly what i'm still living through  
 let's get it right let's be explicit  
 here in the drawer let's speak plainly

**I AM STILL AFRAID**  
**A M S T I L L A F R A I D**  
**S T I L L A F R A I D**  
**I AM STILL AFRAID**  
**L L L A F R A I D**  
**A F R A I D**  
**R R R A F R A I D**  
**I AM STILL AFRAID**  
**D D D**

i was raised in this manner not by my family but by the benevolent state i was raised to be  
 like this  
 like this  
 and this  
 and this like this  
 like this  
 torture is terrible even in your own language  
 whether they torture you in german or in russian  
 or english for that matter torture in french

it's still torture  
 like meyerhold was tortured or the sustained, more gradual torture  
 out here like me in the street torture is torture  
 even in your own home town  
 even if you don't shoot me behind the ear  
 my ears still ring with the essence of shooting  
 and anyone with conscience has the same auditory problem  
 someone is laughing under the concrete  
 someone called my name i'm leaving the square  
 hands in my pockets i bit my cigarette in two

spat spat spat spat on the pavement  
 but cannot expel the life my mouth is full  
 of this kind of a life cannot spit it out  
 it has bonded with the orbitals of my jaws  
 my palette is painted with the life i've led  
 the lives we've lived my teeth are ringing with it  
 my tongue is silent behind my lips, silent  
 with witness and mute with having left itself  
 immobile during each segment of my time here

time in our bodies should be precious  
 i wanted to savor every evening  
 but instead i swallowed each night, whole  
 my teeth could not penetrate the surface  
 of the night, and my throat needs must  
 dilate to allow the night to slip down  
 into my stomach where every honest effort  
 is made to digest the night, each hour  
 every fucking minute wedged in my guts

see how the string vibrates to mimic my gizzard  
 listen to my gizzard i have the guts  
 of a rooster  
 i wasn't born this way the government  
 performed a transplant whereby the cock's gut  
 was planted inside of me i have a soviet gizzard  
 when stalin planted chicken guts inside  
 his citizenry it was to enable us  
 to peck the ground and live on scratch

have you seen the rooster up all night staring  
 both ways at once did you know that  
 insomnia is from reptilian ancestors of birds?  
 there are no solutions  
 i become a dragon breathing smoke at 2 AM  
 i sit perfectly still except for ashes falling  
 and at dawn hear me cry out!  
 but when they come to see who's generating  
 all these noises i am silent and immobile  
 you'd never know it was i who had crowed

i crow like a crow i hide very much like a beetle  
 the rain collects in my pockets and nothing  
 can be resolved  
 i sit unblinking a weary little reptile  
 a wary little bird never do i blink  
 i have swallowed my own voice  
 i let it out through the drawer  
 where chamber music waits out the siege  
 the siege of khrennikov the siege of brezhnev

my eyeballs crawl out from behind  
 my spectacles my eyeballs  
 end up perched up by my cowlick  
 i am watching those who are watching  
 they are watching but i saw them first  
 mine eyes never close i am watching too  
 i have become a sphinx i can perch here  
 longer than lenin, even longer than lenin  
 i am perched here long as you like  
 like it or not here i am

# Shostakovich String Quartet No. 15 in E Flat Minor Op. 144 [1974]

*[elegy (adagio)]*  
 fifteen is the devil card in the tarot  
 this in translation means: coercion  
 the curtailment of one's expression  
 by another who maintains controls thusly  
 i'm leaving fifteen symphonies and fifteen quartets  
 often nowadays i feel as though i've got fifteen fingers on each hand, all numb  
 and growing cold

there is a sense of projection  
 my voicings will move out from here to far  
 beyond my present reading  
 sometimes i'm thinking four dimensionally  
 it's disconcerting but also wonderful  
 and i'm leaving the echoes of all who've worked with me  
 either directly or in solidarity

anatoli kuznetsov for instance  
 far in the future from where i sit today  
 an american is writing poetic responses to my work  
 he tells me, twenty seven years between us, that  
 kuznetsov's book *babi yar*  
 had a powerful effect upon him when he was a boy of ten years  
 it is gratifying to hear this

*[serenade (adagio)]*  
 and i think of ukrainian collusion and anti-semitism

i think of officialdom  
 and all the varieties of dissent not everyone may act openly  
 or, honestly now, flamboyantly  
 we all must do what we can that is the fabric of principle  
 [how often it is frayed and torn]  
 khrennikov, like zhdanov hated to have his teeth on edge  
 that is, if *music* needled them

*[epilogue (adagio)]*  
 fifteen is the number of curtailment  
 and coercion i will not be taken down  
 into invisibility and oblivion  
 without that sure and uncompromised continuum  
 we cannot know my strings exactly now, but will sound  
 i will live tomorrow tomorrow  
 goodbye for now

*[funeral march (adagio moto)]*  
 what is silence? particularly in my country?  
 i mustn't allow these ideas these questions and contradictions  
 to cause me any more pain and yet i have a true conscience  
 a russian conscience have i this much you may hear plainly  
 i am silent as i write  
 but i am never fully silent

but how did this blood stay in my veins  
 all of these years? under such circumstances?  
 while so many others known to me intimately  
 and absolutely anonymous to my understanding  
 all of them taken and bled—slowly  
 or all too suddenly how odd is fate  
 to have shuffled our deck in this way. i cannot pretend to begin to understand

*[nocturne (adagio)]*  
 i am silent yet certainly not  
 i will never be silent surely you understand  
 such a condition is impossible especially looking ahead  
 i will never ever be silent perhaps i should feel  
 satisfaction thereof