

Shostakovich, Piano Trio #2 in E Minor

Introduction and listening guide by Robert Philip for Hyperion Records

The Piano Trio No 2 Op 67 was finished in the spring of 1944, and grew out of both national and personal tragedy. After several years of brutal war Russia was in a state of exhaustion. The siege of Leningrad, in which over a million people had died, had come to an end in January. The German army was in retreat from Russia, and revelations of the horrors of the death camps and the fate of Jews were beginning to surface. It was just at this time that Shostakovich lost his closest friend, Ivan Sollertinsky, a fine writer on music, a brilliant linguist and witty public speaker.

Shostakovich had first met Sollertinsky in 1927. Seventeen years later, in February 1944, Sollertinsky gave a talk introducing a performance of Shostakovich's Symphony No 8. Five days later, he died from a heart attack. Shostakovich wrote to Sollertinsky's widow: 'I cannot express in words all the grief I felt when I received the news of the death of Ivan Ivanovich. He was my closest friend. I owe all my education to him. It will be unbelievably hard for me to live without him.' Shostakovich, who had been working on his second Piano Trio since December, decided to dedicate it to Sollertinsky, following in a tradition of elegiac Russian piano trios—Tchaikovsky had written his in memory of Nikolai Rubinstein, Rachmaninov had followed with a trio in memory of Tchaikovsky. But the music itself makes it clear that Shostakovich intended a memorial far beyond the individual human being who was his friend.

The first movement begins with an unearthly fragment of a fugue, the cello playing high, eerie harmonics, the muted violin entering below, the piano following with deep octaves. This is Shostakovich at his bleakest. A sudden increase in pace brings not relief, but a heightening of anxiety. The motif with which the work began is thrown from instrument to instrument, there are sudden climaxes, and the movement peters out uncertainly just as one expects some new development.

The second movement is savagely ironic, taking the witty conventions of a scherzo and subjecting them to biting discords and obsessive repetition. In the middle of the movement, the violin flings fragments of a folk song high in the air, but the effect is desperate rather than joyful.

The third movement is a passacaglia: the piano repeats a slow, stark sequence of chords six times. Above the chords the violin and then the cello enter, like figures in a ruin rescuing fragments of musical memories—unaccompanied Bach, perhaps. The music slowly builds to a climax, subsides to an inconclusive chord, and then launches straight into the finale. This brings together all the moods of the earlier movements—the bleakness of the opening, the bitter irony of the scherzo, the searching lament of the passacaglia. To these it adds a specifically Jewish element, for this is Klezmer, the wild music of Jewish celebration, here grotesquely metamorphosed into an image of sustained destructive power. At the final climax it breaks off, and a swirling pattern based on the passacaglia leads in a desperate reminiscence of the first movement, as if the terrible vision of the finale was foretold right at the beginning of the work. And at the end the chords of the passacaglia come together with the eerie harmonics from the very opening, leaving the bleak landscape as empty as when we entered it.

Whatever detailed programme or narrative Shostakovich may have had in his mind when writing the Trio is secondary to the direct impact of the music. In *Testimony*, the volume of memoirs assembled by Solomon Volkov, but now much disputed, Shostakovich is reported as saying: 'I am horrified by people who think the commentaries to a symphony are more important than the symphony. What counts with them is a large number of brave words—and the music can be pathetic and woebegone. This is real perversion. I don't need brave words on music and I don't think anyone does. We need brave music.' That sounds like Shostakovich.