

9. Shostakovich

String Quartet No. 8, Op. 110: movement I (for Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

String Quartet No. 8 by Dmitry Shostakovich (1906–75) was composed in July 1960 (in just three days). The first performance was by the Beethoven Quartet in Leningrad (now St Petersburg) on 2 October 1960.

Shostakovich, the most important Russian composer born in the early years of the 20th century, was frequently at odds with the Soviet authorities, and his freedom as a composer was often seriously curtailed. In 1960, however, he gave in to strong pressure to join the Communist Party, and became to some extent an establishment figure. He was very uneasy about this capitulation, and his String Quartet No. 8 has been said to be almost an obituary for himself (he even contemplated suicide), or more positively an autobiography. There are important quotations from previous works, and there is much use of the motto theme D–E flat–C–B, whose pitches are derived from part of the composer's name as spelt in German (D[mitri] SCH[ostakowitsch], with 'S' representing 'Es', German for E flat, and 'H' being German for B natural). The dark tone of the work was partly also the result of a visit to Dresden, a city in (East) Germany ravaged by Allied bombing in World War II.

Performing forces and their handling

As the title makes clear, the performing forces are two violins, viola and cello.

The sombre character of the music arises partly from use of so many low notes (with much exploitation of the bottom open string – G below middle C for violins, tenor C for viola and C an octave lower for cello). Ranges are quite narrow generally, with no place for the brightness that the upper registers can provide:

- Violin I: low G to F just under two octaves higher (and still within the standard range of the soprano voice).
- Violin II: low G to A natural only a major 9th higher.
- Viola: tenor C to C sharp (an augmented 8th or minor 9th higher).
- Cello: bottom C to F (an octave and a perfect 4th higher).

Restraint and self-denial extend to avoidance even of such relatively common devices as pizzicato, tremolo and double-stopping. Everything is *arco*, and there is even very little use of staccato, tenuto marks or accents. Dynamics are predominantly quiet, with much at *pianissimo*; the opening fugal entries are at *piano* and there are two passages at *mezzo piano* (the quotations from the First Symphony, from bars 17 and 110). Two of the three homophonic statements of the DSCH motif are highlighted partly by their rising to *mezzo forte* (bars 23 and 82); the first of these briefly touches the only *forte* in the movement.

Texture

Bars 1–11 are *contrapuntal* – with imitative entries, rising from cello to violin I, based on the DSCH motif and transpositions of it.

- The cello enters first alone, and so the term *monophony* can be used. The notes are D–E flat–C–B (DSCH untransposed).
- The viola enters two bars later (bar 2³) with DSCH transposed up a fifth (A natural–B flat–G–F sharp).
 - Such repetition a fifth above is found in much fugal writing, but here neither the arrangement of the subsequent entries nor the brevity of the contrapuntal process encourages reference to fugue (or even fugato).
- Violin II enters only one bar after the viola with the motif starting on D (as it had done in the cello).
- Violin I is two bars behind violin II, but does not pair with violin II as the viola did with the cello – it enters a 4th rather than a 5th above (G–A flat–F–E natural).

The viola repeats its entry on A natural, but as it does not genuinely *overlap* with the entry in violin I it is not really an additional *imitative* entry. Compare how in bar 52 violin II repeats rather than genuinely imitates what violin I began in bar 50.

Homophonic textures are widely used. They include:

- Bars 23³–27 where the music is partly *homorhythmic* (all parts sharing identical or similar rhythms). This is one of the three homophonic statements of the DSCH motif whose appearances help to define the structure of the movement.
- In bars 28–45¹ a melody in violin I is accompanied by *extended tonic and dominant drones* in the lower parts – viola and cello have an octave C, and violin II has G. (On the term ‘drone’, see below, the paragraph following the table in the section on ‘Harmony’.)
- The texture in bars 50–78 is similar except that from bar 52 violin II has the melody, while from bar 55 violin I has a *countermelody* apparently based on a passage from the Fifth Symphony (see ‘Melody’ below). A countermelody is a melody heard with

the principal melodic part of a homophonic texture, but one that is clearly of secondary importance.

Parallelism is occasionally used in ways uncharacteristic of pre-20th-century music.

- In bars 11–12, both the violins and the cello move in double octaves around a G (dominant) pedal in the viola.
- In bars 14–16 the octaves are *between violin II and cello*, not, as is more conventional, *between neighbouring parts* (e.g. between two violins).
- In the same place, parallel 10ths between viola and cello combine with the octaves to create incomplete parallel 5/3s in the three lower parts (under the sustained B natural in violin I).
- In bars 95–96, the violins begin with parallel 6ths, but in 97–98 they move in parallel *perfect 5ths* (forbidden, of course, in most pre-20th-century styles).

Structure

The opening imitative passage may be viewed as an introduction. The main part of the movement can then be considered to have a symmetrical arch-like structure with five sections conveniently labelled A B C B^v A^v (with ^v signifying 'varied'). The three homophonic statements of DSCH are key moments for the listener, not least because of their mezzo forte (*mf*) dynamics.

Section	Bars	Brief description
Introduction	1–11 ²	Five entries of the DSCH motif
A	11 ³ –27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begins with DSCH motif in octaves • Ends with the first of its three homophonic statements
B	28–49	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New (chromatic) melody in violin I, with drones in lower parts • DSCH in cello at 46
C	50–85	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50–54: new C–G–G–A flat–G figure • 55, 63, 71: three statements by violin I of E natural–D–C–B flat – apparently derived from a theme from the Fifth Symphony • 79–84: second homophonic statement of DSCH
B ^v	86–104	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • B^v is a <i>much</i> varied version of B • A melody somewhat similar to that of Section B is played by <i>cello</i>... • ...<i>below</i> static or slow-moving <i>upper</i> parts
A ^v	104–126	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 104³–114² are almost identical to 11³–21² • 114³–121: begin as an extension of the preceding, and incorporate at 118 the third homophonic statement of

		<p>DSCH, this motif being now in violin II (which has crossed above violin I)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 122–126: based on 52–53 (Section C), with a final shift to unison G sharps in the violin II, viola and cello – a link into movement II (see 'Tonality' below).
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Tonality

To some extent Shostakovich still thought in terms of conventional major-minor tonality. Such conservatism (for older composers had explored atonality from about the time of his birth) was connected with contemporary attitudes in Soviet Russia, where, for example, atonality was viewed as 'decadent'. Shostakovich even labelled his Quartet No. 8 'C minor' (although this is not clear from the anthology), and he used a key signature of three flats.

Our movement does not depart from C minor for long, as the following table shows. Note in particular that Shostakovich did not modulate decisively to the key most frequently linked with C minor in the 18th and 19th centuries – E flat, the relative major – nor indeed to the dominant, G minor. He was more interested in keys and chords that include E natural. E natural would normally suggest the 'bright' tonic major (C major), but in our movement the effect is psychologically more complex, especially because the harmony heard against E naturals is often minor; there is little cheer, let alone a happy ending.

Section	Bars	Comment
Introduction	1–11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>C minor</i> cello entry – the DSCH motif (with its pitches D–E flat–C–B natural) clearly implies that key. • The first four entries (bars 1–8) however include all 12 notes of the chromatic scale. There is neither serialism here nor atonality, but considerable obscuring of the underlying C minor (which continues through the fifth entry). • Fugal entries pass briefly through G minor (bar 4) and F minor (bar 7)
A	11 ³ –27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>C minor</i> at beginning and end, with considerable ambiguity in between. • 11³: The unison statement of DSCH begins by signifying <i>C minor</i>, but... • ...the B natural is harmonised with chords of E minor, E major, E flat major and D major (tonality obscure) before a glimpse of <i>C minor</i> (Ib) in bar 16. • Tonality is obscure during the reference to the First Symphony (from bar 17), with implied chords of C sharp

		<p>minor, B minor and A minor (19, 21, 23¹⁻²) helping to maintain the atmosphere of gloom.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23³–27 (the first homophonic statement of DSCH): <i>C minor</i> without any doubt and reinforced by a perfect cadence in bar 25-26.
B	28–49	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to bar 45, lower strings sustain C and G (ambiguous – could be major or minor)... • ...below a chromatic violin I melody (which eventually covers all 12 notes – 10 of them having been heard in the first three bars). • Three prominent E flats (in 28, 35, 43), together with A flats and B flats (notably in 30, 34, 39–41) give some impression (in conjunction with the sustained C and G) of <i>C minor</i> with Aeolian inflections. • Three F flats, including a long one in 33, are <i>not</i> E naturals –there is no feeling of C major. • 46–49: clear <i>C minor</i> with DSCH motif in cello.
C	50–85	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50–54: sustained C and G (then just C) in lower parts – in the absence of E flats and E naturals, A flats point more to <i>C minor</i> than to C major. • 55–78: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Viola and cello sustain C, then G, then C – which register as tonic, dominant, tonic in C. But is 'C' major or minor? ○ Very prominent E naturals at 55, 63, 71 suggest we are in C major... ○ ...but together with D flats (notably in 57), the impression may be more of <i>F minor</i>... ○ ...although numerous E flats, together with A flats, B flats and B naturals, point to C minor (perhaps the D flats hint at flattened-supertonic Neapolitan harmony or even the Phrygian mode?) ○ One view is that, essentially, the passage overall is <i>C minor</i>, somewhat 'adulterated' with bitter-sweet E naturals. • 79–84: basically <i>C minor</i>, but with surprises in 80–81 (see table in 'Harmony' section below), and with ambiguous 'bare-5th' C–G chords (neither major nor minor) at the perfect cadence in 84 (and 85).
B ^v	86–104	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 86–91²: <i>A minor</i> (linked to the preceding C minor by the common note C). The shift from one minor key to another a minor 3rd lower is chilling (together with the sudden <i>pianissimo</i>). The tonality is destabilised by the chromaticism in the cello underlying the A minor harmony above. • 91³– 94: there are several F sharps and C sharps, and a couple of (Neapolitan/Phrygian?) G naturals, dropping fairly strong hints of <i>F sharp minor</i> (a further minor 3rd down from A minor), especially at 91³ and 93–94¹. There follows a last-minute chromatic slide onto a chord of C major.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 95–104: briefly <i>C major</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> bar 95 is an isolated moment of brightness, despite the <i>pp</i> dynamics; both violins play their highest notes in the movement here there follows an intense and very chromatic passage with obscure tonality before the return to <i>C minor</i> in section A^v.
A ^v	104–126	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 104³–114²: compare 11³–21² above. 114³–124¹: continued instability at first; then <i>C minor</i> (V–I) from 120. 125–126: unison G sharps, which are approached as A flats – see violin II part in 122–123. (These lead into movement II which begins with a signature of five sharps and whose first chords are G sharp minor.)

Harmony

Shostakovich’s harmony is very varied – ranging from one or two passages that could have been written by a pre-20th-century composer to dissonant writing that goes well beyond traditional major and minor triads and seventh chords. Something of the contrast begins to emerge if we look at the harmony in the homophonic statements of DSCH.

Note: The statement in each case is understood to include the two Cs that follow the B natural of the DSCH motif. These Cs (the first of which is a short note of anticipation, as in cello, bar 2⁴) are tonics that follow on naturally from the leading note B.

Statement	Bars	General comment	Detail
1	23–27	Traditional ‘functional’ harmony	<i>C minor</i> V–Ib–IV–V (with 9–8 suspension)–I (but without 3rd)
2	79–84	Outer parts imply the same harmonies as for statement 1, but inner parts are varied – with two unexpected 5/3 chords, and additional non-chord notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 79: <i>C minor</i> V 80: III with flattened 3rd and non-raised leading note (E flat–G flat–B flat: E flat minor chord) 81: IV with raised 3rd (F–A natural–C) 82–83: V with semibreve A flat appoggiatura in violin II. Viola’s dissonant F flat resolves(?) to E flat, then D 84: I (but without 3rd)
3	118–	Largely the same as statement 2,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Begins with III (augmented triad E flat–

	122 ²	but violin parts are exchanged...	<p>G–B natural, in place of C minor V); D is added at 118³, making an unusual seventh chord</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 119: Cello F delayed by extension of E flat, generating additional dissonance – the effect is almost of an upward-resolving suspension.
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Other traditional features include the insistence on tonic and dominant notes of the (C minor) scale. These are often much prolonged, and it is inviting to call them *pedals*. But because there are usually no clear changes of harmony above them it is useful to refer to *drones* (especially where both tonic and dominant are used simultaneously). In bars 28–45 a single chromatic line moves over a long held C and G, while in bars 50–78 there are two independent lines (for violins) above a single note held by viola and cello in octaves. It is sometimes more the case that the harmony is a by-product of melodic movement, than that the melodic parts are directed or governed by harmonic considerations. Nevertheless, there are moments of comparative harmonic clarity and repose, notably where chords of C minor I emerge at 60¹⁻³ and 61¹⁻², and V with appoggiatura C at 68. There are some functional chord progressions for example at bar 23. Perfect cadences help define the tonic key of C minor and can be seen at bars 25-26, 83-84 and 121-122.

One of the more striking harmonic features is use consecutively of chords of E minor, E major, E flat major, D major and E flat major under a sustained B natural (bars 13–16² and 106–109²).

Melody

There is much conjunct (stepwise) movement, with some scalic passages, for example in bars 67–70 with the notes B natural–C–D–E flat (and their reverse) from the C minor scale. Chromatic scalic passages (particularly descending ones) occur several times, notably in violin I (bars 28–30) and cello (bars 87–89).

Among small leaps, the most important are the descending minor 3rds that belong to the crucial DSCH motif (D–E flat–C–B natural). This whole motif, as befitted Shostakovich's mood, is minor. It can be formed only from a minor scale, and every interval is minor: as well as the minor 3rd E flat–C, there are the minor 2nds D–E flat and C–B natural. As

a whole, it spans the diminished 4th from the leading note of C minor (B natural) to the mediant (E flat), a very tense interval.

The following table shows the varied use of the DSCH motif. In many cases DSCH is followed by two Cs, as previously explained.

Section	Bars	Instrument(s)	Comment
A	1–11 ²	cello, viola, violin II, violin I; viola ('solo')	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four imitative entries (see 'Texture'), plus one additional entry 'Solo' means that the player must emphasise or slightly 'bring out' the motif (obviously in a string quartet there's no implication of only one instrument to a part!)
	11 ³ –16 ²	violins I and II, cello	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In (double) octaves The B natural of the DSCH motif is greatly extended
	15 ³ –17	violin II ('solo')	Leads into a quotation from the First Symphony (Example 1)
	23 ³ –27	violin I	First homophonic statement (with brief added G at end)
B	46–49	cello	Concludes section B: quiet, but prominent because accompanied only by violin I
C	78–84	violin I	Second homophonic statement, with rhythmic augmentation (see 'Rhythm') and greater harmonic intensity than previously
B ^v			
A ^v	104 ³ –109 ²	compare 11 ³ –16 ²	
	108 ³ –110 ¹	compare 15 ³ –17 ¹	
	118 ³ –122 ²	<i>violin II</i>	Third homophonic statement (further, see table on Harmony above)

Quartet No 8 includes several quotations from previous works by Shostakovich.

Movement I refers to the beginning of the First Symphony of 1926, from bar 16 as shown below and again from bar 109. In both cases the borrowed music follows on very naturally from music that is original to the quartet. It sounds at less than half its original speed, however, because note values are doubled, but the metronome mark is $\text{minim} =$

63 (not the 'equivalent' minim = 152). Possibly Shostakovich was trying to demonstrate how his youthful vigour (he was about 20 when the symphony was composed) had drained away by 1960?

Example 1

Allegretto ♩ = 152
 compare Quartet, violin I, bar 16
 (a semitone lower, with double note values at ♩ = 63)

Trumpet (concert pitch)
p con sord.

Bassoon
p

compare Quartet, violin II, bar 17
 (a semitone lower...)

compare Quartet, viola, bar 19
 (a semitone lower...)

It appears that the first four notes of a theme from movement I of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony in D minor (1937) (see Example 2) are alluded to by violin I in bars 55–58², 63–65 and 71–74². The effect of these four notes, which outline a descending tritone, is very different in both works, however. In the symphony, they take us from the dominant of D minor to the flattened supertonic, whereas in the quartet the journey is from the raised third of C minor down to the unraised leading note. The descending tritone pattern is *faster* when heard in the quartet than in the symphony.

Example 2

Moderato ♩ = 76

Vln I
p

Rhythm and Metre

The first movement of Quartet No. 8 is in simple quadruple time (⁴₄), despite the metronome mark of *minim* = 63 and notation clearly implying a minim beat.

Rhythms are generally simple. Syncopation is uncommon, but there are important examples at some cadences, notably in bars 24–25 (violin II) and 120–121 (viola), with the tying of minim to minim in an inner part. Although the harmony is not entirely characteristic either of Baroque or Renaissance polyphony, the rhythmic effect is similar.

The cello's opening rhythm, with three minims and dotted minim plus crotchet, is particularly associated with the DSCH motif. It is probably no accident that the same dotted rhythm follows the chromatic groups of crotchets in such places as bars 30 and 33. These 'irregular' three-bar phrases can be contrasted with the 'regular' structure of three times eight bars in the violin I part of bars 55–78, and the liking in the violin II countermelody for two-bar units with the rhythm minim, two crotchets, two minims.

Additional points:

- The very long notes in the lower parts of sections B and C.
- *Rhythmic augmentation* in the second homophonic statement of the DSCH motif. Minims are doubled to semibreves here. The dotted minim is more than doubled to last for *seven* crotchets, so that the crotchet that follows can remain as a crotchet and clearly retain its function as a short note of (tonic) anticipation.

Further reading

(for general interest and information – not essential reading)

The New Grove (2001), available by subscription online, has much information on Shostakovich's life and work.

N. Kay, *Shostakovich*, (London, 1971). This is an excellent introduction to Shostakovich's work (up to 1971). Concerning Quartet No. 8, see pages 53–56.