One has the sense, when listening to the Sonata for Viola and Piano (op. 147, 1975), that Dmitri Shostakovich (b. St Petersburg, 25th September 1906; d. Moscow, 9th August 1975) may well have known that he was about to die. Shostakovich’s final work, the Sonata was premiered in Leningrad on October 1, 1975, by Fyodor Druzhinin, to whom it was dedicated, and Mikhail Muntyan, shortly after the composer’s death.

This sense of morbidity is the greatest challenge posed by the piece to the performer. The brink of the passage between this world and the next is a state that simply cannot be imagined in its fullness. While it is the performer’s duty to embody the intent of the composer as indicated on the page, there remains an empathetic gap that effusiveness and expressive exaggeration cannot fill. Live performances and even some recordings – those of Nobuko Imai with Roland Pontinen (BIS, 1987) or Kim Kashkashian with Robert Levin (ECM, 1990), for example – which seek to bridge the gap between the living and the dead with some extroverted wildness may be in some sense correct upon reflection of the very moments of transition from the here to the hereafter; but this Sonata seems somehow suspended in that phase of recognition and resignation before departure. It is an overall vessel of expiration.

By the final year of his life, Shostakovich had been unwell for some time. A heart ailment contracted in 1966, coupled with severe arthritis, left him debilitated. The tortuous struggle of maintaining two Janus-like personae – one publicly adhering to the pro-Revolutionary ideals of the Communist regime, the other, desperately in conflict, seeking to maintain his artistic integrity whilst expressing alongside his original musical ideas certain subversions of these public exaltations by means of veiled thematic nuances apparent only to composer colleagues and others in the know – had finally taken its toll. The focus of his works became introspective and brooding, and, most of all, concerned with death.

Public denunciations, one in the form of a 1936 Pravda article shunning the 1934 production of his opera Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District, another a 1948 decree against several artists who displayed most strikingly the formalistic perversion and anti-democratic tendencies in music induced in Shostakovich an almost complete withdrawal. Over time, the pains of maintaining the two personae of public submission and covert subversion in the face of such humiliations gave vitality to the mission to create portals by which some shred of his own objective, non-propagandist history could be imparted on future generations. Solomon Volkov, in his memoirs of Shostakovich (1979) notes: for many years it seemed to him that the past had disappeared forever. He had to grow accustomed to the idea that an unofficial record of events did still exist. ‘Do you not think that history is really a whore?’ he once asked me.

What is curious, however, is his choice of medium with which to direct this final obsession. Why indeed did the so-hailed master of the twentieth century symphony, the creator of fifteen poignant and beautifully balanced string quartets, select the compositional form of a sonata to express his final words? He had previously composed a sonata for cello and piano, op. 40, in 1934, but in contrast to this final work its character may be interpreted as altogether ironically playful. A sonata for violin and
piano, op. 134, came later in 1968, well into his darker, morbid musical phase, which shares many structural and thematic similarities with the final viola and piano sonata—a pensive yet fleeting first movement and seemingly never-ending finale, interrupted by a superficially aggressive and manic second movement. However, aside from two others for piano solo, these are his only sonatas; those undertaking to perform op. 147 must bear in mind the special significance of this particular choice.

What may shed light on this query are the references to Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight’ Sonata (1801) throughout the third movement. The broken arpeggio chords in the piano, alongside the unmistakable dotted-rhythm theme in the viola, stand aside from any other unconcealed references to the work of other composers. The theme sings of melancholic farewells; and even when it is used in the viola’s final quasi-cadenza of the piece, marked ff, it does not lose its taint of forlorn romanticism. As Nicolas Slonimsky (MQ, 1942) explains, Beethoven was esteemed by the Communist regime as the ideal revolutionary composer, and his emulation was encouraged of all Soviet artists. Other references to his idiosyncrasies can be found elsewhere in Shostakovich’s works, for example in the opening of his 7th Symphony (1941), which, to Slonimsky, immediately suggests the Beethoven of the last sonatas. That such an overt reference is made at the end of the Sonata may be an indication of Shostakovich’s final resignation to the state of affairs: the Party demands revolutionary references to Beethoven—so they shall be given.

Of equal significance is Shostakovich’s choice of instrument. He had not written any other works of this scale for the viola, although it had been given prominence in other pieces such as the thirteenth quartet. Something about the distinctive qualities of the instrument must have appealed to him in his final months, and so it is of the greatest significance that these qualities be brought out in performance. The depth and richness of sound at the bottom of the C string, the tonal awkwardness of the upper regions of the A string, and an overall similitude with the human voice, far greater than that afforded by the sound of the violin and cello, are rightly demanded throughout the text and should be sought after onstage.

That the piece has since been transcribed for cello and piano is of no surprise, given its musical gravity; but the tone quality required and technical struggles produced by the piece sit beautifully, almost perfectly, on the viola. A cellist could not handle them to the same effect, as Shostakovich had perceived at the end of his life.

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