

Dmitri Shostakovich

Chamber Symphony, Op. 110a

BORN

September 25, 1906, in St. Petersburg

DIED

August 9, 1975, in Moscow

WORK COMPOSED

1960 (original string quartet); 1967 (orchestral version)

Of Shostakovich's 15 string quartets, the eighth has received the most attention, especially in the West. Its grim depiction of the horrors of fascism and compelling musical arguments, *sui generis*, has earned it a hal-
lowed place among chamber works of the past century. Shortly after its composition, Rudolf Barshai ar-
ranged the quartet for string orchestra.

In 1960, Shostakovich was sent to Dresden to write a film score for an East German film, *Five Days, Five
Nights*. Much rebuilding of Dresden remained unfinished, and the affecting ruins of war awakened the com-
poser's haunting personal memories of World War II. The resultant string quartet was his exorcism of those
painful memories, and a testament "To the Memory of the Victims of Fascism," the quartet's subtitle.

As in previous works, in this quartet Shostakovich used a musical cryptogram based on his name—D-S-C-H
(in German spelling) to represent the notes D, E-flat, C, and B), which recurs in all five movements—played
without pause—of the quartet. The cello introduces the motto theme before the other instruments enter, one
by one. Then, as if reflecting on past memories, Shostakovich quotes themes from his 1st and 5th sympho-
nies, works that had brought him great praise at crucial points in his career.

Without break, the second movement jolts us with a violent flurry of furious notes hurdling by, only to be
interrupted by another statement of the four-note motto, this time by the viola and cello. The third move-
ment, a bitter and ironic waltz reminds us of the composer's admiration for Mahler, obvious in the inten-
tional grotesquerie of this expressionistic music. Here, and in the fourth movement, he quotes again, this
time from his 1st cello concerto.

The fourth movement opens with a sequence of harsh chords after which we hear a tune sung by 19th century
Siberian convicts, translated as "Exhausted by the hardship of prison" and/or "Tormented by lack of free-
dom." Yet another quotation appears: music from his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, which
had been savaged by Stalin in 1936 and had remained banned in Russia until 1960. Well into the movement,
a slashing sequence of harsh chords suggests nothing less than gunfire, a sound amply familiar to the com-
poser from his experiences during the war as well as a possible reflection on how close he had come to death
at the hands of his regime. The final movement marks a return to the fugato of the opening, now broken
down into two dissonant minor seconds, a grim reminder of the anguish that gave birth to this powerful
score.

John Tavener

The Protecting Veil

BORN

January 28, 1944, in Wembley, England

WORK COMPOSED

1988

WORLD PREMIERE

September 4, 1989, Royal Festival Hall, London, Steven Isserlis, cellist,
Oliver Knussen conducting the London Symphony Orchestra

John Tavener's esthetic and spiritual journey, which led to his conversion to the Russian Orthodox Church

in 1977, reflected his personal response to what he perceived as the decline of authentic spirituality in the West. In embracing the Eastern Church he resonated to a religious purity that in his eyes had dissipated in the increasing secularization of contemporary thought in Europe and the United States. Such a move parallels the path taken by several composers of the defunct Soviet sphere, including Arvo Pärt (with whom Tavener is not infrequently compared) as well as such originals as the American composer (of Scottish/Armenian heritage) Alan Hovhaness and the French Olivier Messiaen, both of whom had lived in rapt spirituality from early in their lives.

Tavener's music training was "on track," studying at the Royal Academy of Music with Lennox Berkeley and David Lumsdaine. His first taste of public success derived from his 1968 cantata, *The Whale*, which enthralled early listeners and led to further expansion of his audience through recordings of his music on The Beatles' Apple label.

A decade after Tavener's conversion, the eminent British cellist Steven Isserlis suggested to the composer that he write a work for cello and strings, an idea that took hold with the BBC, which proceeded to commission a piece for the 1989 Proms season. The result was *The Protecting Veil*. Much of Tavener's music had been conceived for the human voice. The cello's timbre has often been likened to male baritone voice, and Tavener's treatment of the solo instrument in this work takes advantage of its warmth and lyrical propensities. Thematic inspiration and the name for the piece came from the Orthodox Church's "Feast of the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God," which celebrates the Virgin's appearance in the Church at Vlacherni in Constantinople in the tenth century.

A program note written by the composer states that he "strive[d] to capture...the almost cosmic power of the Mother of God. The cello represents the Mother of God and never stops singing throughout and one can think of the strings as a gigantic extension of her unending song. The music falls into eight continuous sections and use is made of the eight Byzantine tones." He continues, "Various Feasts inspired [him]...; the second, for instance, is related to her birth, the third to the Annunciation, the fourth to the Incarnation, the fifth (unaccompanied) to her lament at the foot of the cross, the sixth to the Resurrection, the seventh to her Dormition, and the first and last sections to her cosmic beauty and power over a shattered world. *The Protecting Veil* ends with a musical evocation of the tears of the Mother of God."

In its rich and deliberately paced unfolding, the music taps into distinctly Eastern melodic embellishments, diaphanous background ensemble textures, sudden and intense slashing sounds, quasi-Medieval episodes that recall plainchant, and an pervasive lyricism.

It goes without saying that a piece of music must stand on its own as music, i.e., independent of a specific religious affiliation. *The Protecting Veil* reaches out to its audience with a beauty and contemplative power that is not dependent on a particular belief system. As with Handel's *Messiah* and Bach's *Passions* and Mass in B minor, for many listeners the music taps deeply into deeply ingrained and still potent esthetic faculties, just as for others it also kindles their spiritual fires.

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