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# CHAMBER MUSIC OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY RUSSIANS

by

**Nyle Takeo Matsuoka**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree**

of

**HONORS IN UNIVERSITY STUDIES  
WITH DEPARTMENTAL HONORS**

in

**Piano Performance  
in the Department of Music**

**Approved:**

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**UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY**

**Logan, UT**

**Fall 2007**

The goal of my project was to further enhance my abilities as a collaborative pianist and take an in-depth look at two composers (Prokofiev and Shostakovich) who are strong influences in my love of music. I found the challenge to be in balancing all of my individual practice time with all of the rehearsals between the three separate groups. Each group met at least once a week for a two-hour rehearsal in addition to having weekly coachings with members of the Fry Street Quartet. In the end, the recital was an immense success and the program notes turned out nice. This project has really shown me what I am capable of as a musician, but more importantly, as a collaborator. I have strong hopes for a solid future in the world of piano.

### **Chamber Music of the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Russians**

The selection of the program for this recital proved to be a challenging feat. The original plan was to have a mix of three pieces from different periods in musical history. In the end, however, it was decided that it would be more intriguing to focus on a particular niche in the musical world. The music of Prokofiev and Shostakovich has always been very close to my heart. I remember first being exposed to their work as a young boy and instantly being drawn in. Their music explores the duality of life; both composers explore the gamut of emotions from exhilaration to bitterness and cruelty. Both Shostakovich and Prokofiev composed under the harsh conditions of Soviet Communism, therefore they had to please those in power with their music. Aside from achieving this goal, most of the time, they were able to integrate their own very distinctive styles and ideas. The sarcasm and irony that permeate their music shows their ability to mock the severity of the times. The music is unashamed and, more often than not, extremely dark. Tapping into this music has allowed me to explore the most horrific aspects of my life thus far, as well as the dark side of my personal psyche. I feel like this music allows me to vent my rage, and then in turn, cleanse my spirit. It has always acted as a catharsis of sorts. More importantly than allowing me to delve into the unpleasant side of life, however, is the fact that the music allows it to be okay to explore those dark thoughts. It allows a safe passage through the night, while still being able to take in all the terror that might lurk in its shadows.

#### **Piano Quintet in g minor, Op. 57, Dmitri Shostakovich**

Dmitri Shostakovich composed his piano quintet in the year 1940. The composition was his first major piece following the dismal reception of his Sixth Symphony, Op. 54. "If the Sixth Symphony left many critics perplexed and disillusioned, Shostakovich's next major work, the

Piano Quintet in G minor, op. 57, elicited uniformly enthusiastic responses from listeners and critics alike” (Fay 116). The immense success of the work was an extreme pay off for Shostakovich. The work not only catapulted him back into favor with the critical public, but also with the government. “In March 1941, when the first recipients of Stalin Prizes were announced, Shostakovich received a ‘category one’ award for his Piano Quintet” (Fay 117).

The piece is a “splendid continuation of classical tradition...” (Fay 116). It indeed showcases Shostakovich’s mastery of traditional classical forms and contrapuntal techniques. The work is comprised of five movements that create a large arch form. The movements are as follows: a prelude, fugue, scherzo, intermezzo, and finale. The center movement acts as the climax, or the peak of the arch. The second and fourth movements are related to each other in terms of tempo and character. The first and last movements are also related to each other in similar ways. Shostakovich treats the former two movements as slow movements. Both movements are cast in a minor key, the second being in g minor and the fourth being in d minor. The key schemes create an overwhelming sense of tragedy. The first and last movements mirror each other less obviously. Both movements have a strong sense of flow and motion, but the first doesn’t pick up the tempo until the second section, whereas the last movement is a brisk *allegretto* throughout. The first movement is in the key of g minor, while the last movement is in the key of g major. These contrasting keys give very different characters to the movements, but they share the tonic g nevertheless. It is important to note that both of these movements conclude in the key of g major. The third movement stands alone as the raucous climax to the piece and is cast in the key of b major. This makes the entire key scheme of the piece as a whole create a g major chord: g, b, d. The keys are as follows: g minor, g minor, b major, d minor, and g major.

The prelude opens with a grand piano solo, firmly establishing the minor key as well as the heavy, tragic atmosphere that permeates so much of Shostakovich's music. The writing is extremely contrapuntal, meaning that there are several lines acting as their own melodic ideas. These lines work together to create the harmony and the texture, not unlike if several people were to sing *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* in a round. After the piano solo, the strings enter with the main theme. The theme is showcased by the cello in this first entrance and is used throughout the entire piece. This kind of compositional technique is known as *cyclicism*. Shostakovich will use the same theme in different ways in other movements in order to bring a sense of unity to the piece. The B section that follows is marked *poco piu mosso*, or a little more motion. This is where the movement begins to mirror the finale in a more tangible way. The writing is again very contrapuntal, opening with a haunting piano melody accompanied by a very lyrical viola passage. The movement climaxes at a *lento*, or very slow section. The strings play motives heard in the B section on top of extremely heavy piano chords. The return to the A section is a huge round, the piano entering first, followed by the two violins, and then the lower instruments. The movement ends in g major and is linked to the fugue by an *attacca* marking, which means to go right into the next movement rather than take a large break in between.

The fugue, especially since it is linked to the prelude, harkens back to the days of Bach. Some of Bach's most famous masterpieces include preludes and fugues. Shostakovich utilizes Bach's famous coupling of these two forms in the first two movements of his quintet. The movements are in the same key, as is traditional. This fugue is marked *adagio*, so it's played at a relatively slow tempo. A fugue is generally comprised of a subject, counter subject, transition material, and various compositional techniques such as stretto (where the subject of the fugue is played in all voices, but they enter at different times). The subject is first stated in the first

violin. When it's completed, the second violin enters with the subject while the first violin goes into the counter subject. This counter subject will almost always be in conjunction with statements of the subject. The next entrances of the subject are as follows: cello, viola, and piano. The transition material takes us from one section to the next and is made up of intertwined eighth notes between various combinations of instruments. Sometimes this transition material is even used with the subject or counter subject. Tying the piece together further, Shostakovich uses the opening string theme from the prelude at the climax of the fugue. The theme is now stated in the piano and begins much the same way the piano began the prelude. The chords are now much more dissonant, being a half-step apart from the bass g octave. The piano solo is followed by a cello solo using the same theme. The cello then leads back into the fugal material, beginning with a *stretto*. The prelude theme is again restated by the strings toward the end of the piece, almost as a final attempt to rise above the tragedy. In the end, however, the piece dies away using fragments of the fugal material, slowly drifting away on a g major chord held by the strings.

The scherzo is traditionally a humorous piece with joke-like connotations. The form is ABA. Beethoven utilized this form widely in his symphonies and sonatas, and it was even expanded upon by Chopin into full-length pieces that included flashy codas, or conclusions. As stated by David Denby in his notes for Yefim Bronfman's recording of this piece with the Juilliard String Quartet, "almost every epic Shostakovich work has a scherzo, either friendly or menacing, and this is one of the friendly ones" (9). It is true that this scherzo has a general feeling of excited jollity, but in the underlying harmonies there lurks a sinister nature. It's as if the clowns at the circus are demented, smiling as they hold a knife clutched behind their back. The piece follows the traditional scherzo form outlined above, as well as including a brief coda

using the main themes. The movement is extremely repetitive in its rhythms. Shostakovich was a master at incorporating mockery and sarcasm into his music, and the almost militaristic use of rhythm in this so-called funny movement could be a blatant stab at the severity of the Soviet government and military. This is the only movement that doesn't incorporate themes or motives from the previous movements. Its sole purpose is to act as the peak of the quintet. There's no *attacca* between the fugue and the scherzo, nor is there one between the scherzo and the intermezzo. It completely stands alone.

The intermezzo in many ways is the most haunting and mournful of the movements. It's cast in the key of d minor, and is the only movement to end in a minor key. The cello opens with a *pizzicato*, or plucked, accompaniment to the first violin's solo. This bass accompaniment is continued throughout the movement, switching between instruments. It recalls the use of a *basso continuo*, or continuous bass that was so prevalent in the Baroque era. The movement is in a traditional ABA form, with the piano not entering until the B section. This second theme in the piano recalls the theme from the prelude, however it's shown in an extremely truncated form. The idea remains, but is now only a hollow shell of what it once was in the prelude. The piece climaxes during the second A section, and unlike the slow fugue, it uses material from its own first theme. The second violin showcases a brief fragment from the fugue before the piece dies away with repeated d's in the piano.

The finale is linked by an *attacca* to the intermezzo. The allegretto tempo of the finale creates an almost upbeat atmosphere that we have yet to see since the scherzo. The piano opens the movement and has one of the most interesting markings. The very first measure has a *ritardando* written, which means to gradually slow down. The piano, from the very beginning, must start to slow down, and within a few measures it's allowed to pick up the pace and bring the



strings in to the movement proper. This movement is in classic sonata form, which includes an exposition, development, recapitulation, and sometimes a coda. The exposition introduces the two main themes of the movement, while the development section takes them through all sorts of changes. The recapitulation is basically a restatement of the exposition with a few little changes, and the coda uses the main themes to bring the movement to an end. The chromatic motive that is used to transition between themes is reminiscent of the crazy circus music of the scherzo, while the second theme itself is unabashedly militaristic. The over-emphasis on strict repetition seems to poke fun at the strict Soviet government. The material from the prelude is stated in the strings right before the recapitulation, recalling what the piece has taken us through up to this point. This movement's character is intriguing, because on first listen it would appear to be the most carefree and happy music one has ever heard. The opening theme even sounds like something that a German composer would have written. Considering the nature of Shostakovich, along with what he lived through, one remembers that his music often reflects his experience with sarcasm and irony. The character quite possibly is not one of happiness, but one of bitterness. It's as though the music is saying that life inevitably goes on, even after being through such horrible experiences. The tongue-in-cheek conclusion allows us to know that we don't necessarily have to be happy about life going on.

### **Piano Trio in e minor, Op. 67, Dmitri Shostakovich**

The trio was composed in the year 1944, and "...was Shostakovich's anguished response to the sudden and unexpected death...of his closest friend...Ivan Sollertinsky..." (McCreless 113). The piece is in fact dedicated to the memory of Sollertinsky. It was also during the composition of this piece that "...Shostakovich learned of the Nazi concentration camps...and

that the grotesque, dance-like, *allegretto* finale...is a grim commentary on the camps..." (McCreless 113). These two inspirations have led to the conclusion that "...the work as a whole...is permeated with images of death" (McCreless 113). The piece does indeed seem to be a study on the various emotions of death. Its intense dark tone is much more horrific than anything that he conjured in the quintet. The boisterous, upbeat moments in the trio even have extremely dark undertones.

The first movement opens with an introductory canon between all three instruments. The cello states the theme first in ghostly harmonics, followed by the muted violin in a much lower register than the cello, and finally by the piano, utilizing the extreme bass register. This introduction, as well as various other themes and ideas throughout the piece, are used in a cyclic fashion in the finale. The movement proper opens up after the slow introduction and offers us the main theme of the movement in the piano. The tempo progression throughout this movement is of interest. It begins with a slow introduction, and then moves to a more moderate tempo once the movement proper begins. From here it moves to a much more brisk tempo that introduces us to transition material. We finally arrive at the tempo that remains for the rest of the movement at the second theme, marked *poco piu mosso*. This second theme is in stark contrast to the first. It's extremely rhythmic and quite bouncy, whereas the first theme was more lyrically driven and melancholy. This movement is indeed in sonata form, excluding the canon introduction. The development takes the character through extreme changes. We have very vicious, ferocious moments, while there are extremely sneaky and mysterious parts. The climax occurs at the recapitulation and the movement dies away on steady eighth notes from the piano and chords in the violin and cello.

The second movement is cast in a rondo form: ABACA Coda. With each return of the A, it's stated with slight differences. The violin, with a little help from the cello, states it in the opening with the piano adding substance with chords. The second statement of the A is also in the violin, but this time the cello plays a developmental passage on the B theme. The third time it is stated in the piano, with accompanying chords in the two strings. The B theme is much more grotesque, and the C is extremely sarcastic. It's quite brash in its statements and often conjures a feeling of horror with its obscene use of rhythm and harmony. The key of f-sharp major is in jarring contrast to the first movement, which ends in e minor. It creates a sense of glee, such as the scherzo from the quintet, but it remains very unsettled. If there's any pleasure to be had here, it's quite possibly of a psychotic nature.

The third movement opens with very large, sonorous piano chords. These chords repeat throughout the entire movement, acting as a passacaglia. The violin and cello have an intensely mournful dialogue above the chords. They literally act as two voices interacting and reacting to each other's sadness. The movement is in an arch form. It climaxes in the middle and then dies away. The bulk of the movement is in b-flat minor, however, it ends in b minor. The b then acts as the fifth of e major, which is the key of the finale. There is an *attacca* at the end of the third movement that links it to the finale.

The fourth movement utilizes Jewish themes that Shostakovich often used from this point in his life onward. He himself stated "...that Jewish folk music has made a most powerful impression on me...it can appear happy while it is tragic. It's almost always laughter through tears" (Solomon 156). This idea is the very basis of Shostakovich's writing. The development of Shostakovich's use of Jewish themes possibly came from "...the impact of Shostakovich's pupils...There is strong circumstantial evidence that Fleishman's *Rothschild's Violin*,

orchestrated by his teacher after the composer's death at the battlefield, gave...significant impetus toward his adoption of Jewish dance idioms..." (Fanning 285). This inspiration, in conjunction with the discovery of the Nazi concentration camps, incited the grotesque finale.

The movement does indeed have a strong sense of dance-like music, which Ian MacDonald, as quoted by Patrick McCreless, says is attributed to the fact that "...SS guards had made their victims dance beside their own graves..." (126). The music, while set in the key of E major, never gives a feeling of joy. The feeling is always one of horror. The form, like the second movement, is generally a rondo. The climax explodes using the dance ideas, and MacDonald states that it gives "...the impression of someone stumbling about in exhaustion..." (McCreless 126). The passacaglia chords of the third movement return after the climax, but this time they appear as fast arpeggiations in the piano. This is followed by a direct restatement of the opening canon of the first movement. Both string instruments are muted, but are instructed to play *fortissimo*. This restatement of the canon dies back into the opening Jewish theme of the finale. Similar to the fugue in the quintet, this material seems to be a final attempt at survival. It's an intense struggle. The passacaglia is restated in a slow tempo at the conclusion of the movement, and it dies away in E major, the violin and cello stating fragments of the Jewish themes.

The trio is most definitely a study on death. There's no doubting that. However, there's significant evidence that shows how Shostakovich might have written the various movements with different aspects of death in mind. Patrick McCreless clearly outlines this in his essay:

Indeed, casting a broad view over the entire Trio, we might suggest that the Trio, as a work about death, turns precisely on an axis of two aspects of our experience of death: a subjective, inner-directed, reflective aspect that involves the subject's response to and coping with loss; and a more objective outer-directed aspect that, though still in essence an inner experience, peers out of the self towards the one or ones who have died, with a

view to sharing a memory of them in a more public way. I would argue that the Trio presents both these aspects – the inner-directed one in the introduction to the first movement and in the passacaglia, and the outer-directed one in the dance-like scherzo movement and the ghostly finale. And we might also surmise that both Shostakovich's friend Sollertinsky, whose death provided the original impetus for the composition of the Trio in February 1944, and the victims of the Nazi death camps, about whom the composer learned in the summer of the same year, are memorialised in both the private and public ways. Thus, in the introduction to the first movement and in the second movement we might surmise that the object of the subject's (the composer's) memory is Sollertinsky (the private shock of the sudden loss of a friend in the introduction, and recollections of the public side of a close friendship in the second movement). Similarly, in the passacaglia and the finale the focus is on the Jewish victims of the Holocaust (private mourning in the passacaglia and public horror in the finale). (128)

This idea is clearly evidenced in the music. There is a distinct change in atmosphere between the first two movements and the last two. Yes, they are united at the end by the cyclic devices he employs, but the separate influences are prevalent. We never get a sense of Jewish idioms in the first two movements. Likewise, the style of writing even differs. The first and third movements are largely based upon contrapuntal techniques, while the second and fourth utilize more melody and accompaniment ideas. This piece clearly shows Shostakovich's mastery of his art in the many ways that it depicts death. It allows us to see that there is not only one side to death, but many. It is a multi-faceted phenomenon that clearly consumed much of Shostakovich's music.

### **Sonata in f minor for violin and piano, Op. 80, Sergei Prokofiev**

Sergei Prokofiev detailed his struggles with his first violin sonata in a letter to Nikolai Yakovlevich. He described how he had "...begun one a long time ago already, but cannot seem to figure out how to continue – it's hard" (Robinson 330). This pretty much sums up the intimate form of the duo sonata. Prokofiev had a passion for dissonant, rhythmically driven psychotic episodes of music. Much of his work tends to be overly boisterous and frenzied, while always managing to indulge in calm melodies. The task of creating a balance between two

instruments with extreme differences in sound capabilities while allowing both to be free in their own manias is, to say the least, hard. Prokofiev, however, managed to concoct one of his most dark and foreboding masterpieces. It's true that "...no other work of Prokofiev's exceeds its depth and profundity" with the exception of possibly the second piano concerto (Minturn 140).

The first violin sonata was completed in 1946, although material for the work is dated back to 1938. The second sonata, which was taken from a flute sonata he had previously composed, was finished in 1944. The f minor sonata was completed after it, but remains No. 1 due to the material dating from 1938. The confusing numbering was recognized by Prokofiev as he began having his piano sonatas published, stating that "...the second sonata...became *Sonata No. 1*, but only after a rather thorough reworking" (Appel 193). The piece is dedicated to the famed violinist David Oistrakh. The work is cast into four movements and, not unlike the Shostakovich quintet and trio, utilizes cyclic techniques. The general mood of the piece is extremely dark. It was completed near the end of World War II, and is only removed by his mammoth "war" piano sonatas (Ops. 82, 83, and 84) by one opus number. "It cannot be said that the war lessened his energy; on the contrary, it seems to have intensified his creative impetus" (Nestyev 173). The sheer ferocity of the piece could easily label it as his "war" violin sonata.

The first movement acts as an extended introduction to the massive second movement. The main theme is comprised of several open fifths, giving the movement a very hollow, ethereal sound. There's a constant sense of foreboding. The first section gives way to a hypnotic motive in b minor. This is punctuated by loud octaves, again in the interval of a perfect fifth, in the piano. The first theme returns before sending the movement into its signature section. The violin has very fast, wispy runs above a haunting piano melody in chords. The runs are marked

*freddo*, which means chill. When asked about these runs, Prokofiev responded "...that they were like wind blowing through a graveyard" (Hayes 5).

The second movement is in a large sonata form. Its repeated three-note motive is developed extensively throughout and almost becomes obsessive in its nature. The music largely reflects a war. The piano and violin are constantly vying for domination, and only seem to really work together during the very heroic and melodic second theme. The development is the largest section, encompassing nearly half of the movement. The piece is written in c major, but it is a far cry from happy. The dissonances are extreme, as is the percussive nature of the writing. It's rhythmically driven, and the down beat is often obscured by the constant overlapping of the rhythms between the two instruments. The movement comes to an explosive conclusion with rapid runs ascending in the violin, resulting in both instruments crashing down on a C.

The third movement is quite child-like. The ghostly triplet accompaniment pattern that permeates the A section is passed between instruments, as is the very narrative melody. This movement is very much in the fantastical realm. The development of the themes as they run their course in the A section is very minimal. At best, Prokofiev transposes them to different keys and places them in higher or lower octaves. The B section thins out the texture and brings the listener to a starkly more realistic place. There are two themes that are used in the B section. The first is very stagnant, almost lazy. The second returns to a more mythic character. The general feeling of the B is much colder than the A, which does indeed return. The piece concludes with the transitory material that is used between the A and B sections, and the final notes give a feeling of f major.

The fourth movement is in a loose rondo form. The time signature alternates between 5/8, 7/8, and 8/8. This constantly changing meter gives the movement rhythmic ambiguity, but

also intense drive. The different meters make the movement more about rhythm than anything else. The piano and violin are very much equals in the A section. The contrasting theme in the B section brings us back to a more child-like atmosphere. It's a very simple melody. The following sections develop the material from the A extensively. The three-note motive from the second movement recurs as *feroce*, or ferocious octaves in the bass of the piano. This all builds up to the climax of the movement, in which the violin has themes from the first and fourth movements interspersed. This happens over large, repeated chords and octaves in the piano, which recall the second movement motive. This all dies down to a recurrence of the wispy runs of the first movement. He then takes us through a brief transition in which three long f's are played in the piano with a chromatic left hand accompaniment. These three f's are in reference to the second movement motive. The movement ends with a restatement of the second theme of the fourth movement, only now it's much slower and much less child-like. It's grounded more in a serious reality. The chromatic accompaniment in the piano is sparse, creating a very empty sound. The final chord of the piece is in the piano. It's comprised of an open fifth between f and c. This implies the tonic f, which makes sense since the piece is in f minor. However, it makes it extremely ambiguous as to the nature of the ending. Is it major? Is it minor? The sonorities that precede it imply a major conclusion, but one can't help recalling the return of the graveyard winds of the first movement. He puts us back in the foreboding realm of death, then he gives us three notes which originally signified war, and finally we get a child-like theme that has been distorted into a hollow shell of its former self. It's as though Prokofiev were showing the devastating aftermath of war. There may be hope beyond the battlefield, but that doesn't change the pain and horror that is left in its wake.



As I reflect upon the challenges that these pieces brought out, I can't help but notice a common thread amongst all three works. They all take the listener through intense tragedy and pain, and in the end all that is left is a false sense of hope that everything will be all right. This presents quite a challenge for the performer. I felt that I had to tap into my most masochistic tendencies. The performance had to hurt. There was not a moment in any of the pieces that I could feel at ease or relaxed. I always had to force myself into the depths of despair, which I found to be intensely draining. In the end, I wasn't only physically exhausted, but emotionally drained as well. I couldn't have asked for anything more.

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Nyle Takeo Matsuoka, 23, was born and raised in Twin Falls, Idaho. He graduated from Twin Falls High School in 2003 and began studying piano at Utah State University in the fall of that year. Under the tutelage of Professor Gary Amano, Nyle has won the state level of the MTNA competition, received Honorable Mention at the division level of the same competition, won the IFMC scholarship, received the Joyce. A. Chaeffer Trust Fund two years in a row, and performed as soloist with the Utah State University Symphony Orchestra on two occasions. He has been a recipient of the Irving Wassermann scholarship, the Smiley Amano memorial scholarship, various HASS scholarships, and the University Club scholarship.

The USU Music Department, particularly the Fry Street Quartet, has cultivated a love of chamber music in Nyle. Upon graduating in the fall of 2007, he will take a year off from his studies to teach and work as a collaborative pianist at the University. Following this break he will be auditioning for graduate schools with a focus on collaborative piano.