

Rhetorical Analysis Benchmarks in the First Part of Shostakovich's Quartet no. 8

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Abstract: *Quartet No. 8 in C minor, op.110 is perhaps the most appropriate direct testimony of the composer, having a special status among his 15 quartets, which he acquired both through the prism of the conjuncture in which it was conceived, as well as through the symbolic charge of the self-readings in its content. We will assume a rhetorical perspective over the opening part of this work, in order to trace, at the level of the score, the immediate manifestation of the composer's intimate persona through scientific means of classification.*

Key-words: *Musical Rhetoric, affective charge, DSCH.*

1. Introduction

The fascination that surrounds the personality and creation of Dmitry Shostakovich is due, in part, to the mythology that has been perpetuated in the Western space at the expense of the most favorable element in the development of such a plurivalent semantics – the unknown; it seems natural to speculate on account of what we do not know or know only partially. This is the case of the more than forty years in which the unknown has occasioned speculations on both sides of the Iron Curtain, speculations on the basis of which statements have been made in accordance with the expectations, knowledge, opinions of the broadcasters. Thus, the West saw in Shostakovich what it considered imperative to see: the seditious artist who is forced to encode his credo with subtlety and prudence in the substrate levels of his creation, for fear of the oppression of the regime (Hakobyan 2017). More often than not, this perspective on the composer has emerged clichédly around his symphonic works.

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In a completely different light, Shostakovich's chamber creation is singularized, especially the quartets, which represent a case of intimate nature to the creative personality from which they descend. Given the narrower scope of a chamber work, compared to symphonic work, it could not have been otherwise. It should be borne in mind a second aspect conducive to this singularization, namely that the realist-socialist propaganda could be delivered much more efficiently through a large apparatus such as the orchestral one, which is why it was precisely these means of dissemination that were subjected more rigorously to the attention and Party control (Wilson 1994).

2. Quartet no. 8 – Overview

Composed entirely over the course of only three days in the summer of 1960, in Germany, where Shostakovich had been asked to compose the music for the film *Fünf Tage, Fünf Nächte* on the bombing of Dresden in The Second World War, the Quartet no. 8 in C minor, op. 110 is officially dedicated to “the victims of fascism and war.” Out of the records, it was considered by its author a personal confession, dedicated to himself under the impulse of possible suicidal intentions, as it follows from the confessions made by Shostakovich to his friend, the critic Isaak Glikman („I reflected that if I die someday then it's hardly likely anyone will write a work dedicated to my memory. So I decided to write one myself. You could even write on the cover: <<Dedicated to the memory of the composer of this quartet >>” – Shostakovich, Glikman 2001).

Op.110 subscribes to the manner of composition in cyclic and palindromic form at the same time. At the rhetorical level, the choice of this recurrent unfolding of the five parts carries a deep spiritual charge, in accordance with the testamentary intention of the work: the end means the return to the origin, in an infinite circular motion.

2.1. The Quartet as a perspective towards the composer's work

The musical motif of the DSCH monogram, present as a binder throughout the work, serves on the one hand as an autobiographical reference and, on the other hand, as a thematic source for the musical material of each part. When iterated on the original sounds it functions as a stabilizing element of the tonality of the quartet (C minor), through the tonal relationship implied by the relationship with the leading-tone B (Reichardt 2008, 92).

2.2.1. *Musical citations*

Along with the DSCH monogram, are inserted during the work citations from the previous compositions of Shostakovich, as follows: in the first part – the incipit of the first Symphony (1925), which marked the graduation of the Conservatory of Leningrad at the age of 19; in the second part is the theme of the last part of the Piano Trio no.2 (1944), a work dedicated to his friend Ivan Sollertinsky, who died in the same year and from whom Shostakovich learned notions about the klezmer musical tradition of the Ashkenazi Jews – the theme in question subscribes to this stylistics; the third part, a grotesque waltz in the style of Mahler's grotesque dance (Sheinberg, E., 2000), proposes a quote from Concerto No.1 for cello and orchestra in E ♭ Major (1959), also dedicated to a friend – cellist Matislav Rostropovici. In contrast to the first three parts, the following two do not include the monogram (Part III) or other quotations (Part IV).

2.2.2. *Form*

On the level of form, part I – Largo – is atypically assembled in a palindromic ABCB'C', with the mention that it does not resolve at the end, because the last two measures, a G# unison in the second violin, viola and cello, anticipate the key of the quartet's second part, which follows attacca (in fact, like all subsequent parts).

3. Rhetorical analysis

At the rhetorical level, Largo can be perceived as an Exordium of the whole work, as it foreshadows almost entirely, in the form of a slow introduction, the thematic material to be processed the thematic material to be processed and approached from both convergent and divergent perspectives and faithfully mirrors the final part, which has an obvious Conclusio role. This Exordium is in turn structured in accordance with the principle of the stages claimed by Quintilian in the unfolding of an artistic manifestation with rhetorical potential. The incipit of the part unfolds in a fleeting manner: each voice starts on the upbeat to state the DSCH monogram on different pitches, in ascending order of the register. The cello starts with the notes on the original pitch, after which it retreats to the position of harmonic support, to allow the affirmation of the motif at the immediately superior voice (example 1).

Violino I

Violino II

Viola

Violoncello

Largo $\text{♩} = 63$

Example 1. *DSCH* monogram, mm. 1-7.

A frugal look at the intervallic sequence that composes the monogram motif is suggestive in outlining a valid perspective on the affective meaning it carries: $2m\uparrow$, $3m\downarrow$, $2m\downarrow$, $2m\uparrow$ – therefore, only negatively charged intervals, anxious, even gloomy, juxtaposed in a predominantly descending melodic profile. Measures 11-12 reiterate the motif on the original sounds, within an ambitus spread over three octaves, in cello and violins (example 2).

11

12

13

dim.

sfpp

dim.

pp

dim.

pp

dim.

pp

Example 2. *DSCH* motif reiteration on original pitch, mm. 11-13

Until measure 18, each voice is assigned in turn the role of *ison*, when it does not expose the motif at hand. The following is the citation from the first Symphony

(example 3a) between measures 16-21, citation shared fragmentary between the first violin and the viola (example 3b).

Allegretto. $\text{♩} = 162$

1 Flauto picc.
 2 Flauti.
 2 Oboi.
 2 Clarinetti in B.
 2 Fagotti.
 I
 II
 4 Corni in F
 III
 IV
 2 Trombe in B.
 1 Tromba in F
 C-Alta.

Example 3a. *The First Symphony*

11
 20

Example 3b. citation from the *First Symphony*, mm. 16-21.

This intervention leads, through a final reiteration of the DSCH motif from the incipit of the part, with dynamic emphasis on the leading-tone, to the first explicit cadence in the tonality of the work, C minor, under measures 23 to 26 (example 4).

The image shows a musical score for four staves. The top staff is Violin I, the second is Violin II, the third is Viola, and the bottom is Cello/Double Bass. The key signature is C minor (two flats). The time signature is 4/4. The score starts at measure 20. Measures 23-26 are highlighted with a red box. In these measures, the upper staves play a melodic line with dynamics *mf espress.* and *f dim.*, ending with a *pp* dynamic. The lower staves provide accompaniment with dynamics *mf espress.* and *f dim.*.

Example 4. *mm.* 23-26

Between measures 28-47, the first violin proposes a lamento built on all 12 chromatic sounds (example 5), which stretches spectrally over an ison in the lower register on the degrees I and V. The rhetorical figure pathopoeia is resorted to here. Thus, between each of the sounds of the lament in the first violin and the continuing ison of the other three voices, intervals with a pronounced affective charge are formed, which tilts once again the balance in favor of an anguished, anxious perspective. Also, the absence of a defining degree for the quality of the mode (major or minor) within the ison only enhances the tonal ambiguity and, at the same time, the ambiguity of the proposed affective resort – one of the distinguishing marks for Shostakovich's music. It is worth remembering the interrogative motif (example 6) built on the sounds of an Augmented triad (measures 32-33), and of a Minor triad, respectively (measures 37-38).

20 *pp sempre* *mf espress.* *f dim.* *pp* *pp* *pp*

mf espress. *f dim.* *pp*

mf espress. *f dim.* *pp*

20 *mf espress.* *f dim.* *pp*

30 *V*

9816

238

41 *pp* *p*

poco rit.

1 2 3 4

Example 5. *mm.* 28-47

V

Example 6. *mm.* 32-38

The rhetorical figure anadiplosis, found in the measures 39-40, prepares and draws attention to the climax of the theme, located in *sectio aurea* ($24 : 1,618 = 14,83\dots$; 24 represents the number of measures of the theme). It is opportune to note that Shostakovich proposes us a negative climax, confirming once again the introspective and distressed character of this theme (example 7).

Example 7. *mm.* 39-40.

On measure 55, the first violin exposes a new phrase of eight measures, this time intertwined with the countermelody of the second violin. The viola and the cello keep their role as harmonic support by maintaining a pedal on C, with the only exception of measures 67-70, where it shifts to the dominant G. This phrase would be incomplete without underlining the complementary role of the second violin, which emphasizes the contradictory potential of the phrase in relation to the previous lamento. In measure 62, the second violin introduces in the harmonic context the third degree augmented, E natural, which helps manifest the C minor – C Major progression (example 8).

Example 8. *mm.* 55-62

The heard and felt effects produced by this insertion shows a potential rhetorical role of refuting the argument previously represented between measures 28-49 (lamento). The phrase is repeated three times in the preparation of the actual climax of the part, which takes place in *sectio aurea* in measures 79-84 by reiterating in *ff* the monogram motif to all voices, with the C minor cadence (example 9). Finally, the short recapitulation (the return of the incipient sections) is prepared at measures 99-101 by a *passus duriusculus* in the cello, then continued in measures 102-103 by the first violin (example 10). As mentioned before, the end of the part carries in the substance of the last two measures the implication of a subsequent *Allegro molto*.

Example 9. mm. 79-84

Example 9. mm. 79-84

Example 10. mm. 99-103

Example 10. mm. 99-103

4. Conclusions

Thus, we can conclude that Part I of Quartet No. 8 fits to a large extent on the principles of musical analysis from a rhetorical perspective. We have already established that the incipit structured in fugato manner is equivalent to the Exordium section of the classical rhetoric stages identified by Quintilian. Next, we can appreciate that the quote from the First Symphony exposed to the viola replaces the Narratio stage. As for the lamento theme, built on the chromatic sounds, we can attribute to it the role of Propositio – the proposed argument. As follows from the architecture of this passage, it is clear that the proposed argument favors the pessimistic ontological perspective. In contrast, the phrase repeated three times from the first and second violins, through that unexpected major insertion made by the second violin, appears as a counterargument in relation to the previous musical events – so we are dealing with the Confutatio stage. Since the part in question, Largo, is not completed by any final harmonic or structural conclusion, we consider it devoid of Conclusio, and to the small recapitulation we can attribute the function of Confirmatio. Following the coordinates of interpretative-analytical thinking rendered above, a contour with a great potential for rhetorical realization is clearly presented – after all, we must not forget that the purpose of a rhetorical approach lies in the last stage, Actio, in the actual interpretation of what would otherwise stagnate in the sheet music as a mere graphic unfolding.

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