

Shostakovich – String Quartets No. 1, 8 & 14 (2015)



String Quartet No.1 In C Major, Op.49 1 *I: Moderato* 4:31 2 *II: Moderato* 4:19 3 *III: Allegro Molto* 1:55 4 *IV: Allegro* 2:52 String Quartet
No.8 In C Minor, Op.110
5. *I. Largo* 5:37 6. *II. Allegro molto* 2:53 7. *III. Allegretto* 4:36 8. *IV. Largo* 6:50 9. *V. Largo* 4:28
String Quartet No.14 In F Sharp Major Op.142
10. *I. Allegretto* 9:08 11. *II. Adagio* 10:52 12. *III. Allegretto* 9:54
Two Pieces for String Quartet Op.36a
13. *I. Elegy* 4:38 14. *II. Polka* 2:40
Borodin Quartet: Ruben Aharonian (first violin) Sergei Lomovsky (second violin) Igor Naidin (viola) Vladimir Balshin (cello)

The current members of the Borodin Quartet, celebrating its 70th birthday this year, are of course not the players who forged such a close relationship with Shostakovich. Back then, though, the Borodins were not merely famous because of that association: ultimately it was their meticulous musicianship and highly honed technique and ensemble, qualities which so impressed the composer in the first place, which earned that quartet legendary status.

This is altogether a daunting legacy for their successors to fulfil. Though the present-day Borodin's technique and coherence of ensemble is faultless, it is evident, even before one makes any comparisons or consults the composer's score, that something is seriously lacking in these accounts of the First and Eighth Quartets. Quartet No. 1's opening suffers from having Shostakovich's specified dynamic contrasts – pianissimo to forte – toned down to a middle-of-the-road mezzo, while his repeated requests for 'espress.' are constantly ignored. The Borodins of the 1970s (recorded by Melodiya) meticulously follow these directions, and also bring out jarring countermelodies, so drawing the ear and making one eager by the movement's end to hear what happens next. Alas, the present line-up appears quite indifferent to the idea that the music means or expresses anything at all. Even the Eighth Quartet, once described as

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the composer's suicide note, is played as if being tasteful and occasionally 'effective' were the only qualities necessary. Quartet No. 14, mercifully, reveals some sense of quirky humour, but even in this work the Melodiya recording reveals more of its disconcerting qualities. ---Daniel Jaffé, classical-music.com

These live performances by the Borodin String Quartet have been released by Decca in celebration of the group's 70th anniversary, but more importantly, they mark the start of a new cycle of Shostakovich's string quartets, the most personal works he composed and the most closely associated with this Russian ensemble. The String Quartet No. 1 in C major (1938), the String Quartet No. 8 in C minor (1960), and the String Quartet No. 14 in F sharp major (1972), mark distinctly different periods in Shostakovich's writing, and the string quartets as a whole bear special significance, perhaps more than other works, because they contained his most private musical statements. Although the Borodin String Quartet has changed personnel several times since its founding in 1945, it retains much of the character and sound it has cultivated for decades. The group's historic work with Shostakovich and long identification with his music still can be felt in the intensity and seriousness of these performances, particularly in the String Quartet No. 8, which has become a touchstone for many quartets and the best known of the cycle. But the immediacy of the Borodin's sound is the strongest recommendation for hearing this recording, which practically brings the listener inside their vibrant music-making. ---Blair Sanderson, AllMusic Review

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