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# Listening Guide

*Chamber Symphony in F major Op. 73a* by Dimitri Shostakovich (arr. Barshai)

*This listening guide will explore the historical, cultural, and musical factors that make Shostakovich's Chamber Symphony in F major Op. 73a unique. After exploring this listening guide, you will have a better understanding of the musical features of this emotional work.*

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## Description

*Chamber Symphony in F major Op. 73a* by Dimitri Shostakovich, exquisitely performed by the Regina Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Maestro Gordon Gerrard, aptly illustrates the composer's meditations on innocence, war, and death. The anxiety and tension that permeate this work respond to the oppression and uncertainty of post-war life in the Soviet Union. Chamber Symphony was originally composed by Shostakovich as *String Quartet No. 3 in F major Op. 73* and later arranged by violist and conductor, Rudolf Barschai, for chamber orchestra. Chamber Symphony is characterized by extreme contrast which sonically portrays a full spectrum of emotions leaving the audience contemplating the nature of life and death.



RSO Performance on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020 at Holy Rosary Cathedral.  
Credit Chris Graham Photography

## Historical Context

"Cynical, pernicious grotesquerie," wrote Soviet music critic Israel Nestyev in 1946 of Dmitri Shostakovich's latest symphony, "[a] tone of relentless mockery and ridicule, emphasis on the ugliness and cruelty of life, the cold irony of stylization."

Most musicians and artists understand the sting of a negative review; few, however, have felt the horror that Shostakovich and his contemporaries in the Soviet artistic scene felt at a poor review from exactly the wrong reviewer-- Nestyev, for example, or even Stalin himself. In 1946, the year during which Shostakovich composed the 3rd string quartet, the tides of official opinion were turning perceptibly against him.

His ninth symphony, premiered in late 1945, was officially censured for "ideological weakness,". This was the first event in a downward slide of governmental favour that would eventually culminate with his second official denunciation in 1948 and dismissal from the teaching post that had provided a large portion of his income.



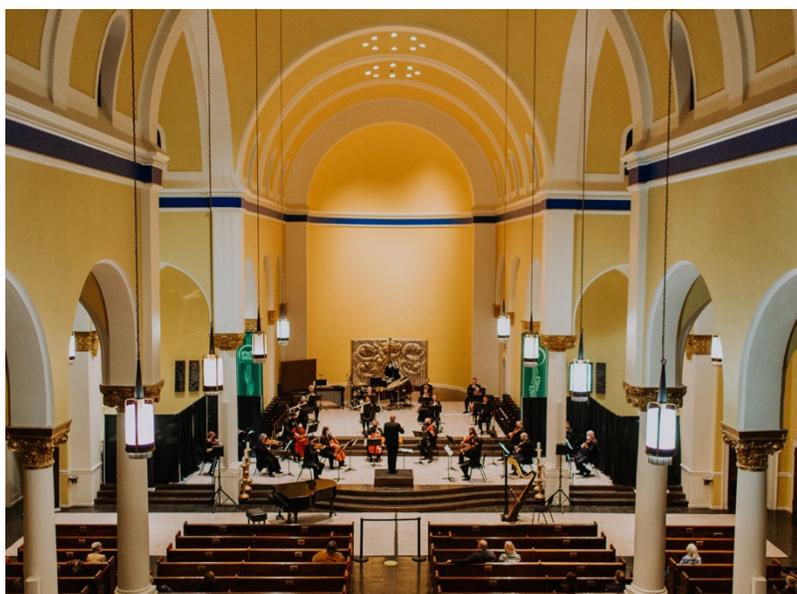
The atmosphere into which the third string quartet was written and performed was one of abject terror, reflected in the mystery surrounding its meaning and intention. The five-movement quartet originally came with programmatic subtitles, suggesting that Shostakovich intended the work to be a rumination on war: not the triumphant celebration of victory over the Nazi Germany that he originally promised (and failed to deliver) in the Ninth Symphony. String Quartet No. 3 is a more contemplative and sombre view of violence.

The first movement depicted "Calm unawareness of the future cataclysm," the second "Rumblings of unrest and anticipation," the third "The forces of war are unleashed," the fourth "Homage to the dead," and the fifth "The eternal question: why and to what purpose?" Perhaps it is the title of the fifth movement, a questioning of the machinery and object of war itself, that gives a clue as to why Shostakovich removed the subtitles almost immediately. He no longer had the latitude to make statements that could be read as putting "emphasis on the ugliness and cruelty of life."

"I have a burdensome and horrifying memories of the events I witnessed," said Rudolf Barshai of the period of Shostakovich's censure, during which Barshai was a student at the Moscow Conservatory. For all that government officials and the ignorant public abandoned and ostracized Shostakovich, however, he never lost the respect of his students: "All the pupils always regarded Shostakovich as a God. His advice in composition class was so wonderful, so precise, and so precious."

Barshai emigrated to Tel Aviv in 1977 to escape the constraints of anti-Semitism on his career in Russia, and his adoration for his friend and mentor "DD" (the students' nickname for "Dmitri Dmitrievich") is evident in his transcriptions of Shostakovich's string quartets. Barshai uses his experience both as an orchestral musician and a conductor (including as music director of the Vancouver symphony from 1985-1988!) to expand Shostakovich's moody, intensely personal quartets into the declamatory and outwards-facing genre of the symphony; drawing his burdensome memories of totalitarianism out of the darkness and into the light.

Program notes by Anna Norris



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Credit Chris Graham Photography



## Listening Guide

### I. Allegretto (a fairly brisk speed)

#### Musical Description

#### Where it happens in the recording

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Chamber Symphony opens with a lighthearted melody in the violins. This melody repeats numerous times in the first movement and is passed between various instruments. 2:31-2:54

Throughout the movement, listen to how this melody is passed between high and low instruments. At times, the melody will be difficult to hear because of the dense texture.

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A second musical idea is presented in the woodwinds, led by the flute. The second musical idea contrasts the first being lower and darker, foreshadowing that unrest and anxiety in the forthcoming movements. 3:31-3:49

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The second melody is passed between various instruments in the orchestra and is often interrupted by the first melody. 4:11-4:30



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## II. **Moderato con moto** (a moderate speed with motion)

<b>Musical Description</b>	<b>Where it happens in the recording</b>
<p>The second movement is a waltz contrasting the first with a more ominous tone. This movement opens with the violas establishing a dance-like feel.</p>	9:45-9:49
<p>The first violins enter with a tense melody which snakes up and down ending with a glissando or slide, like a final kick of a crazed dance.</p>	9:49-10:05
<p>Repetition gives this piece an uneasy feel. An example of two repeating figures that create tension are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. A sigh motive in the woodwinds and violins.</li><li>2. A bouncing driving motive in the cellos.</li></ol> <p>These two repeated figures work to create an anxious backdrop for the English horn and viola melody.</p>	10:29-10:45
<p>The second melody in this movement is military-like in nature reminiscent of soldiers marching. The string section performs short steady notes in rhythmic unison at a very soft dynamic. The sigh motive interrupts this march acting like a siren or warning.</p>	11:23-11:52



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### III. **Allegro non troppo** (fast and lively but not too fast)

#### Musical Description

#### Where it happens in the recording

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Any military or war implications in the second movement are confirmed in the third as chaos breaks loose. While the previous movements alternate sections of solo instruments and the full ensemble, the third uses the full forces of the ensemble for the entire movement.

15:18-15:23

The orchestra is used like a percussion instrument at the beginning of the third movement. The orchestra plays very loud short percussive notes establishing a rhythmic motive that will later accompany a violin melody.

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The flute, oboe, and first violins play a relentless frantic melody over the percussive accompaniment.

15:23-15:48

The meter in this movement adds to the chaos. Instead of staying in a consistent meter, like the waltz, the pulse changes regularly between groups of 2 and 3.



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#### IV. Adagio (slow)

##### Musical Description

##### Where it happens in the recording

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Adagio is the aftermath of the chaos of the third movement. This could be likened to the smoke clearing and a survey of the devastation. Key features of this movement include solo instruments, regular use of silence, and repetition.

19:21-19:37

Moments of full ensemble unison are juxtaposed long lyrical meandering lines performed by solo instruments. The unison strings in the opening of this movement establish a dark tone.

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This movement alternates between full ensemble unison and duo sections with melodies snaking around each other. The oboe and clarinet play a duet, followed by the clarinet and cellos, then English horn and cellos.

20:19-21:26

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The middle of this movement introduces a funeral march characterized by a low steady snare drum-like pulse in the strings.

21:26-22:05

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Adagio ends with a solo by the bassoon accompanied by the funeral march rhythm in the low strings. This ending is sparse with frequent use of silence.

23:00-24:24

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The fourth and fifth movement are performed *attacca* or without a break.

24:24



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## V. **Moderato** (a moderate speed)

<b>Musical Description</b>	<b>Where it happens in the recording</b>
Musical features from the previous movements culminate in the final movement as if Shostakovich is trying to reconcile his feelings about life and death. The primary character in this movement is anxiety characterized by a dark murky melody played in the cellos at opening.	24:24-25:05
While the general tone of the final movement is dark and uneasy, there are curious striking sections of optimism.  A jolly and light melody is introduced which quickly gives way to the murkiness and anxiety of the earlier sections.	27:24-28:43
At the end of the fifth movement there is an element of optimism. The string section sustains a major chord while the solo violin plays a very high uneasy melody.	33:25-33:39
The high violin melody is immediately followed by three major chords in the harp contrasting the violin melody. These harp chords bring peace and an angelic quality to the end of this turbulent symphony.	33:39-34:07



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## Further Listening

Title	Composer	Features
<i>String Quartet No. 3 in F major, Op. 73</i>	Shostakovich	<i>Chamber Symphony in F major Op. 73a</i> is an arrangement of <i>String Quartet No. 3</i>
<i>The Rite of Spring</i>	Stravinsky	<i>The Rite of Spring</i> also uses the orchestra in rhythmic unison, like a percussion instrument, similar to <i>Chamber Symphony</i> .
<i>Symphony No. 9 in E-flat major, Op. 70</i>	Shostakovich	Composed the same year as the third string quartet
<i>String Quartet No. 8 in C minor, Op. 110</i>	Shostakovich	This quartet was also arranged by Barshai for chamber orchestra
<i>Chamber Symphony in C minor, Op. 110a</i>	Shostakovich	This chamber symphony is an arrangement of Shostakovich <i>String Quartet No. 8</i>

Listening Guide prepared by Shawn Earle, RSO Manager of Education & Outreach