
CLASSICAL IN SEATTLE

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Shostakovich's final thought

By Zach Carstensen

When Dmitri Shostakovich wrote his viola sonata, he was going blind, suffering from painful arthritis, and fighting advanced lung cancer. Death was imminent. In fact, this sonata would prove to be his final work. Days after completing it, Shostakovich died of heart failure assisted by his cancer.

Like many of Shostakovich's pieces, the viola sonata is full of contradictions. At times, it conflicts with itself and the composer. When Shostakovich relayed the sonata's program to a friend, only a month before he died, he described the work as "bright, bright and clear." Yet, an air of resignation permeates throughout the work. Perhaps not "bright," but not mournful either. The music is sparse, undoubtedly due to the composer's failing eyesight. However, this simplicity creates an unsettling complexity begging to be resolved.

The contradictions extend further. The first movement begins with a slight pizzicato followed by an even more subtle piano entry. The music floats along, barely tethered to the viola until another subtle pizzicato foreshadows a vigorous, harmonically dense middle, only to have the movement fade away as simply as it began.

The second movement resembles a scherzo. It is vigorous and much more buoyant than the first movement, but also tinged with bitterness. Counterbalancing the bitterness are allusions to Russian folk music and Shostakovich's own unfinished *The Gamblers*.

The final movement begins sullenly on the viola. Here the instruments communicate their intent quietly but purposefully. Once again, the music almost floats away, as violist and pianist refer to Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata. The violist and pianist hang on to the movement just long enough for it to honor the final thoughts of the dying Shostakovich.

Tuesday evening, I was privileged to hear the University of Washington's own Melia Watras perform Shostakovich's viola sonata as part of a faculty recital. Watras teaches viola at the University of Washington, and is a founding member of the magnificent Corigliano Quartet. Watras shines as a soloist. In addition to

Shostakovich's masterpiece, she offered the Meany Theater audience works by Kreisler, Bach, Visconti and Wieniawski.

Watras and her accompanist, the Seattle Symphony's Kimberly Russ, ably navigated the challenging terrain of the viola sonata. Russ played the perfect counterpart to Watras, allowing the viola to dominate, while also retaining the accompaniment's significance and relevance. This is no small feat with such a rich and sometimes unassuming piece of music. I was impressed with Watras' precision and genuine subtlety. In her hands, each note was significant. I cannot underscore the significance of this technical precision. The little, barely audible notes often are lost in recordings of the sonata. Yet it is these little, barely audible notes which, strangely, fill out an otherwise sparse work.

In addition to the Shostakovich, Watras also offered the audience three (essentially) "show pieces" by Kreisler, Visconti, and Wieniawski. All were played extremely well. Kreisler's *Recitativo and Scherzo* was a pleasant surprise. The piece requires the same virtuosity as his other showpieces, though this piece (to paraphrase the program notes) was much darker in tone. Although written for solo violin, the viola gave the piece an adult voice. Also worth noting was the young composer Dan Visconti's *Traveler's Jam*. With its references to blues and folk music, and virtuosic playing by Watras, it was an enjoyable choice to begin the recital.

If these pieces weren't challenging enough, Watras also performed Bach's Suite No.6 for cello, transposed obviously for viola. The work is no less challenging on the viola as it is on the cello. Rostropovich once described the work as a "symphony for solo cello." Under Watras, the work sounded naturally suited to her instrument. The third movement a *courante* sounded especially fresh on the viola. The movement danced under Watras' bow.

As Tuesday's recital demonstrated, Seattle and the University of Washington are lucky to have Melia Watras. There is more to this story, and in the next few days I will be writing more about Watras and her quartet.