

8. DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH – STRING QUARTET NO. 11, OP. 122 IN F MINOR: MUSICAL LANGUAGE AND EXPRESSIVENESS

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Abstract: *Composed in 1966, Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 11, Op. 122, is dedicated to the memory of Vasily Shirinsky, the second violinist of the Beethoven Quartet, who passed away in 1965. The premiere occurred on March 28, 1966, at the Glinka Hall in Leningrad, performed by the Beethoven Quartet with Nikolai Zabavnikov on second violin. Quartets No. 11 through No. 14 are collectively known as the "Quartet of Quartets," each dedicated to a member of the Beethoven Quartet. With Quartet No. 11, Shostakovich embarks on a new compositional chapter, showcasing his relentless pursuit of novel expressive means. While not an innovator per se, he was a masterful architect and builder of sonic structures.*

Key words: *Dmitri Shostakovich's oeuvre, 20th-century music, chamber music*

1. Introducere

This work comprises seven interconnected movements: Introduction – Andantino, Scherzo – Allegretto, Recitative – Adagio, Étude – Allegro, Humoresque – Allegro, Elegy – Adagio, Finale – Moderato.

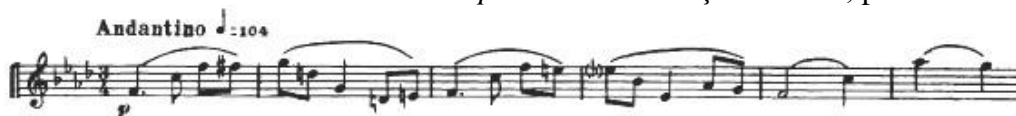
2. Movement I – Introduction

This part has the following musical characteristics – Tempo Andantino, Key F minor, Time Signatures 4/4, 3/4, 3/2, Tristrophic form Lied with a coda.

Section A

Begins with a slippery, cold, and distant phrase in the first violin, characterized by sudden modulations and a tonal center that serves as a point of repose. The phrasing flows smoothly through abrupt modulations, such as G major in measure 2 and E-flat major in measure 4. The violinist should use minimal bow, playing between the middle and tip, with the bow contacting the string midway between the bridge and fingerboard. Vibrato should generally have low frequency and amplitude, intensifying only when phrasing demands.

Ex. no. 1 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Șostakovici, part I



Section B

Features imitation between the cello and violins, with the violins presenting an augmented thematic head compared to the cello. The viola and cello also imitate the thematic head, with the viola's theme being augmented and isorhythmic with the violins', positioned a perfect fifth below the second violin and a perfect twelfth below the first violin. This section exhibits heterophony, a technique rarely used by Shostakovich, originating from ancient music traditions. The passage is modal, with the violins in the Phrygian mode on C-sharp and the viola and cello in Phrygian on F-sharp.

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Ex. no. 2– *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Şostakovici, part I



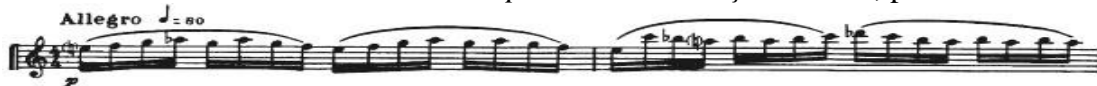
Section C

Introduces a distinct phrase in the first violin, centered in G major, imparting a unique optimism. The accompanying eighth notes in the second violin, viola, and cello add a cheerful air. The transition to section A' prepares for the ensuing somber atmosphere.

Ex. no. 3 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Şostakovici, part I



Ex. no. 9 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Şostakovici, part IV



Phrase A (mm. 9–16, rehearsal mark 25) is played in octaves by the second violin and cello, with the viola positioned a minor third and major sixth apart from the others (Ex. no. 10). The tonal center is D-flat minor. The dynamic is piano, but the passage should not be played too softly. Vibrato should be of medium frequency and small amplitude. Special care must be taken not to slow the tempo in the name of expressiveness, to avoid desynchronization with the first violin, which plays sixteenth notes.

3. Movement II – Scherzo

This part has the following musical characteristics - Tempo Allegretto, Key F minor, Time Signatures $\frac{2}{4}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, Tristrophic form Lied with a coda derived from section A in fugato style.

Section A

Opens with a 16-measure fugue theme in the first violin, centered in E-flat minor. The bowing should be at the tip, with slight impulses on each eighth note, reminiscent of the eighth notes in Bach's Fugue in A minor from the Second Sonata for solo violin.

Ex. no. 4 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Şostakovici, part II



The answer is in Br. (m. 17-34, marker 8) (Ex. no. 5), in the tonal center and flat minor, while V.I enunciates the phrase A, which has a martial character, even though the piano nuance is written. The dotted eighth notes from V.I are very short and dry,

and those from Br. are similar to those in the Subject.

Ex. no. 5 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Şostakovici, part II



The theme reappears in Vlc. (m. 39-54, marker 9). The dotted eighths are made in the same manner as in the similar passage in V.I and Br. The answer, incomplete this time, is in V.II (m. 60-71, marker 10+5). Vlc. enunciates the phrase Av (m. 55-70, marker 10).

Section B

Does not introduce new thematic elements but transitions from the fugato, highlighting variations of phrase A in the first violin. The second violin's eighth notes, marked with dots, should be played in a semi-spiccato manner below the middle of the bow, closer to the bridge.

Ex. no. 6 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Şostakovici, part II



Section Av

Reintroduces the fugato theme in the first violin, followed by the response in the viola, leading into the coda that transitions to the next movement.

4. Movement III – Recitative

This part has the following musical characteristics - Tempo Adagio, System Atonal and tonal, Time Signatures 3/4, 4/4, 5/4, Form Tristrophic.

Section A

Begins with a combative phrase in the second violin, viola, and cello, culminating in a cluster chord. The first violin interjects with battle signals, featuring consonant harmonic intervals of major sixths and perfect fourths.

Ex. no. 7 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Şostakovici, part III



Section B

Presents a painful, delicate, and expressive phrase, with a broad vibrato of medium to low frequency. The passage is harmonically isorhythmic and polytonal, centered in D-flat minor for the first violin and cello, and B-flat minor for the second violin.

Ex. no. 8 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Șostakovici, part III



Section A1

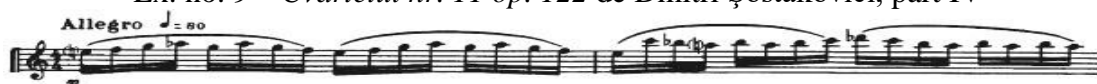
Features battle signals in the cello, gradually fading in the first violin, ending on an atonal chord comprising D-G-E-flat-A-flat, leading directly into the next movement.

5. Movement IV – Étude

This part has the following musical characteristics – Tempo Allegro, System Atonal and tonal, Time signatures 3/4, 4/4, 3/2, Monostrophic form. It begins with an Introduction (mm. 1–8, rehearsal mark 24) played solo by the first violin (Ex. no. 9). The passage must suggest a swarm of bees. The sixteenth notes should be as connected as possible, avoiding audible shifts in position or bowing. The dynamic should remain consistent (piano), with only slight expressive fluctuations that follow the melodic contour. These fluctuations should be mentally projected rather than explicitly executed, so as not to exaggerate the phrasing beyond what the passage requires.

This Étude is essentially a play on whole tone and semitone modes, widely used in 20th-century music. Over a D-flat minor harmony, the melodic line flows in mixtures of sixths and thirds. Particularly interesting is the play of timbres, a technique often employed by modernists: the cello, in its high register, plays an octave above the second violin, while the viola provides a bass line. This tonal-semitonal game returns over a C major harmony.

Ex. no. 9 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Șostakovici, part IV



Phrase A (mm. 9–16, rehearsal mark 25) is played in octaves by the second violin and cello, with the viola positioned a minor third and major sixth apart from the others (Ex. no. 10). The tonal center is D-flat minor. The dynamic is piano, but the passage should not be played too softly. Vibrato should be of medium frequency and small amplitude. Special care must be taken not to slow the tempo in the name of expressiveness, to avoid desynchronization with the first violin, which plays sixteenth notes.

Ex. no. 10 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Șostakovici, part IV



Phrase B (mm. 17–28, rehearsal mark 26) is played with full force. The eighth notes in the second violin, viola, and cello should be as short and percussive as possible, even with bow strikes against the string to add harshness. This technique is also found in: The final movement of Beethoven’s String Quartet Op. 132 in A minor, The final movement of Brahms’ String Quartet Op. 51 No. 2 in A minor and The Coda of Schubert’s Death and the Maiden Quartet. From measure 34 (rehearsal mark 28-4), the sixteenth notes move to the cello, gaining more force and aggression, followed by a slight diminuendo leading into the next movement.

6. Movement V – Humoresque

This part has the following musical characteristics –Tempo Allegro, System atonal, Time signatures 4/4, Monostrophic form. The Introduction (mm. 1–4, rehearsal mark 30) begins in the second violin (Ex. no. 11). This figure become an ostinato pedal that continues until the end of the movement. The bow stroke should be semi-spiccato, initially gettato above the middle of the bow, then shifting toward the frog until the Coda, where it returns to the tip. These transitions require great control of the right hand, as the bow spends more time in the air than on the string, with zones shifting as the uninterrupted phrase is articulated. This passage requires extensive practice and self-control.

Ex. no. 11 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Şostakovici, part V

The image shows the first four measures of the musical score for Ex. no. 11. The tempo is marked 'Allegro' with a metronome marking of 80. The time signature is 4/4. The score is for a string quartet, with staves for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The first violin part starts with a series of eighth notes, while the other instruments have rests.

Phrase A (mm. 5–9, rehearsal mark 30+4) is played by first violin and viola, with a distinctly heroic character (Ex. no. 12). A reduced amount of bow should be used, in the area between the frog and middle, with frequent and wide vibrato.

Ex. no. 12 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Şostakovici, part V

The image shows a musical score for Ex. no. 12. It is a passage for the first violin and viola. The score is in 4/4 time and features a series of eighth notes in the first violin part and a series of quarter notes in the viola part.

Phrase B (mm. 9–13, rehearsal mark 30+8) is presented by the cello, with sharp and dry “battle signals.” Phrase A1 (mm. 27–33, rehearsal mark 32) is played by first violin and viola. In this passage, the amount and speed of bowing increase, to cover the rhythmic units over a longer bow length. Although bow pressure decreases, the dynamic is compensated through increased downward force, ideally with a relaxed arm. Despite the relaxed posture, this passage demands muscular effort, which will fatigue the right hand—hence the need for conscious relaxation while playing. Vibrato and dynamics increase significantly. The Coda (m. 39, rehearsal mark 33-5) leads into the next movement.

7. Movement VI – Elegy

This part has the following musical characteristics – Tempo Adagio, Key D-sharp minor, Time signature 4/4 and 3/4, Monostrophic form. Phrase A (mm. 1-8, rehearsal mark 33) is played in octaves by the cello and viola (Ex.no. 13). Although titled Elegy, this phrase sounds more like a funeral march, rhythmically and melodically reminiscent of Beethoven’s Funeral March in the Eroica Symphony (No. 3). Another funeral march can also be found in Shostakovich’s Quartet No. 15, Op. 144. Vibrato should be ample and wide, with low-to-medium frequency. The right arm should remain relaxed and heavy for dotted eighths, quarters, and halves, but tense for sixteenths with articulation marks. The tonal center is D-sharp minor.

Ex. no. 13 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Şostakovici, part VI



Phrase B (mm. 27–37, rehearsal mark 37) appears in the first violin (Ex. no. 14). This extremely delicate, calm, and sweet phrase should be played with short bow strokes between the middle and tip of the bow. Vibrato should be small in amplitude and medium-to-low in frequency. The right arm should be as relaxed and suspended as possible to preserve sound quality. The dynamic must be very soft, without exaggeration. The tonal center moves from D-sharp major to D-sharp minor, with quasi-atonal moments in between.

Ex. no. 14 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Şostakovici, part VI



The Coda (m. 70, rehearsal mark 43) is played first by the first violin, then by the second violin, preparing the entrance into the final movement.

8. Movement VII – Finale

This part has the following musical characteristics – Tempo Moderato, Key F major/minor, Time signatures 4/4, 3/4, 3/2, Tristrophic formă.

Section A

Begins with Phrase A in the first violin (mm. 3–14, rehearsal mark 44+2), preceded by a calm and luminous introduction in the second violin (Ex. no. 15). Phrase A is the subject of the fugato from the second movement, Scherzo. Whereas in the Scherzo, the absence of dots over the eighths evoked the style of Bach’s Fugue in A minor (Solo Violin Sonata No. 2), here the dotted eighths add a mysterious, crystalline sound. The compositional technique is polytonal: the tonal center in F (second violin, viola, cello) contrasts with E-flat minor in the first violin. The dotted eighths must be played as short as possible and in the softest audible dynamic.

Ex. no. 15 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Șostakovici, part VII

The response appears in the viola (mm. 26–35, rehearsal mark 46+2) in pizzicato (Ex. no. 16). The earlier mystery turns grotesque. The pizzicato response creates a strange, eerie texture. The tonal center is B-flat minor, and Phrase A overlays it in the first violin, with a subtle martial tone in C major. This is another example of polytonality, joined by an implied F major (second inversion) in the second violin and cello.

Exemplul nr. 16 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Șostakovici, part VII

Section B

Belongs to the cello, presenting Phrase B (mm. 41–48, rehearsal mark 48; Example no. 17), a variation of Phrase A from the beginning of the first movement. The tonal center, though not yet shown in the key signature, is F minor. The tempo shift to *Meno mosso* introduces a sense of revolt, helplessness, and unfulfilled desire. To express these states, vibrato should be medium-to-high frequency, with low-to-medium amplitude, increasing phrasing tension. The emotional state of longing and powerlessness is conveyed by maintaining a medium dynamic, with expressive swells. A challenging technique is used here: the left hand vibrates as if playing fortissimo, while the right hand maintains a piano/pianissimo pressure, creating an emotional paradox. This requires full independence between the hands.

Ex. no. 17 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Șostakovici, part VII

Phrase C (mm. 49–56, rehearsal mark 49; Ex. no. 18) brings back the heterophonic thematic head from Movement I, now in F minor. Voice distribution differs from its initial occurrence (Phrase B of Section B in Movement I, mm. 13–20). The key signature now aligns with F minor, and the tempo returns to *Moderato*. Second violin, viola, and cello do not vibrate, and the dynamic is extremely soft, frozen, lifeless. The first violin plays dotted eighths as short and soft as possible, aiming for crystalline clarity.

Ex. no. 18 – *Cvartetul nr. 11 op. 122* de Dmitri Șostakovici, part VII



Section Av (reper 51-1)

Reintroduces the fugato theme from the Scherzo (mm. 61–83) in octaves between second violin, viola, and cello, with short interludes in the first violin. The atmosphere evokes mystery, sadness, and pale colors. Bowing should be as soft and short as possible, ideally *gettato*, slightly above the middle of the bow. The final phrases Cv and Cv1 (mm. 84–100, rehearsal mark 53 and 53+5) end the quartet sorrowfully, lifelessly, in octaves between second violin, viola, and cello, while the first violin sustains a pedal tone on C.

9. Conclusions

In String Quartet No. 11, Shostakovich innovates through its seven-part structure, with each movement offering distinct expressivity and unique technical and interpretative challenges. The composer breaks with the traditional quartet format, introducing unusual structural and expressive elements.

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