

## **Strong, rousing opener for Pacifica Quartet's Shostakovich cycle**

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If the symphonies of Dmitri Shostakovich represent the composer at his most public, his 15 string quartets reflect his most private reflections: They are a diary of a life lived, for the most part, under terrible Soviet political oppression. Along with Bartok's six string quartets, the Shostakovich works are the greatest in that medium to be written in the 20th century. Yet integral performances are rare.

All praise, then, to the Pacifica Quartet, which will treat audiences this season to a survey of the complete Shostakovich quartets as the focal point of the 16-month, citywide Soviet Arts Experience festival.

The splendid ensemble launched its local cycle on Sunday under auspices of Roosevelt University's Chicago College of Performing Arts. Each of the four remaining programs is to be presented twice on the same day through February in Ganz Hall, and the quartets are to be given in chronological order.

The Pacifica is readying concurrent cycles for Champaign-Urbana and New York, as well as for London in 2011-12, by which time its recording of the cycle for Chicago's Cedille label should be on the market.

With its youthful dynamism, musical assurance and probing intensity, the Pacifica is eminently suited for this ambitious undertaking. Sunday afternoon's concert got the cycle off to a promising start with mettlesome readings of the First, Second and Third quartets.

Shostakovich did not begin writing quartets until after his Symphony No. 5 restored him to the good graces of the Stalinist apparatchiks. His String Quartet No. 1 in C major (1938), composed almost exactly a year after the premiere of the Fifth Symphony, heaves a palpable sigh of relief. Musically thinner than later entries in the series, it shows Shostakovich learning the ropes of string quartet writing and is interesting mainly for scattered pre-echoes of his mature style.

The composer found his distinctive voice with the Second Quartet in A major (1944), a four-movement essay of quasi-symphonic scope, rich with striking musical ideas forcefully developed.

First violinist Simin Ganatra sang the long recitative of the second movement with finely controlled intensity over the soft drone of colleagues Sibbi Bernhardsson, violin; Masumi Rostad, viola; and Brandon Vamos, cello. The ensuing waltz and theme and variations also elicited a winning fusion of energy, eloquence and spontaneity. This, for me, was the performance highlight of the afternoon.

Shostakovich composed his Quartet No. 3 in F major (1946) soon after his Eighth Symphony, which, incidentally, the Chicago Symphony will be performing next week.

The Pacifica's razor-sharp ensemble playing was a thing of wonder as members traced the banal little ditty that opens this moody masterpiece through various harmonic and canonic complications. The brutal march demanded and got the utmost in implacable ferocity of attack, set off by a mournful Adagio and a finale in which geniality and gloom danced an eerie pas de deux.