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Dmitri Shostakovich’s Viola Sonata

History and analysis
Abstract

In this thesis I’m writing about Dmitri Shostakovich’s only Viola Sonata. I’ve read about Shostakovich life and analysed the sonata. Shostakovich’s Sonata is one of the first pieces from the composer that I have listened to and gotten familiar with. It’s one of the most played viola sonatas and a one of a kind in Russian modern music. The purpose is to dig deep into the music and to understand it. Questions like “why am I playing this like this?” or “how should I do this?” regarding the interpretation of the music is the core of this study. The research is also trying to be of help to get an image of viola music overall and what is the place of Shostakovich’s Viola Sonata in this world. How the piece was reacting to the world around it and how it was affected by the history of viola music and what is its position in the future.

Keywords: Dmitri Shostakovich, viola sonata, viola, music history
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1 Introduction

Dmitri Shostakovich’s *Viola Sonata* is a connective bridge between early and late 20th century viola music. Written as late as 1975 it makes sense for continuum from Paul Hindemith’s viola sonatas (1919-1939) and Béla Bartok’s *Viola Concerto* (1945-49) to such works as Krzysztof Penderecki *Cadenza* (1984) and Sofia Gubaidulina’s *Viola Concerto* (1996). Being the last work Shostakovich ever wrote it creates an interesting aspect of how to approach the piece. The sonata is written in three movements – *Moderato, Allegretto, Adagio* – and there’s no tonal centre nor key. For many years it was known as the first and only piece Shostakovich wrote for viola, but a new piece, *Impromptu* (1931) for viola and piano, was discovered in 2018.¹

1.1 Aim

Does analysing a piece and knowing its background make it easier to do an independent and reasoned interpretation? This thesis is aiming to be of help in building an interpretation of the sonata as well as to explain and justify certain intuitive interpretative decision that might be automatically made by a musician.

Without knowing anything about Shostakovich, late 20th century music or viola music, how would my interpretation differ from my before- and after-this-research interpretation? A lot, I have to say. I wouldn’t recognise those dark colours of Shostakovich’s and almost all USSR’s music. I wouldn’t reflect my knowledge from Bach’s *Cello Suites* to Ligeti’s *Solo Sonata* and couldn’t set Shostakovich’s *Sonata* to the timeline or to the right perspective of other styles around that time.

It’s critically important to know these things and realise the significance of music research. This research is going to be of help in understanding Shostakovich’s *Viola Sonata* from a musical as well as a historical perspective. It’s trying to give a better and larger picture of the work than in just an overview or normal analysis of any given work. It’s going to give answers to the questions “Why am I doing this?” and “How should I do this?”

¹ *A new work for viola by Shostakovich discovered in Moscow State Archives*, The Strad
1.2 Method

True-proof and exact information about Shostakovich life is harder to find compared to other composers of that time. I’ve read Shostakovich’s biograph written by Pauline Fairclough. She – knowing the difficultness of writing about a composer from the Soviet Union – for example never forgets the fact that we actually don’t know exactly what Shostakovich’s political standing was. Fairclough refers also to other Shostakovich biographies continually, so the reader can trust the information or struggle with the conflict that the other sources make.²

Analysing the piece was a challenge. It is hardly following an old tradition of the sonata – although it has a sonata formed first movement. There are no defined keys or tonalities, but melodies and harmonies are based on different intervals instead of tonal systems. For example, the second subject is not in the dominant key in the exposition or in the tonic key in the recapitulation. Also, the third movement is more like an improvisation than well-structured music. However, it was rewarding to analyse and solve the complexity of the work.

²Fairclough Pauline, *Dmitry Shostakovich*
2 Background

2.1 Shostakovich’s life

Dmitri Shostakovich was born in 1906 into a wealthy family and started to play the piano in 1915 when he was 9 years old. He began his professional studies at the Petrograd Conservatory at age 13, a couple of years after the Bolshevik Revolution. Because of the inflation, caused by the Bolshevik regime, and difficulty of finding jobs Shostakovich’s family suffered from poverty. However, Shostakovich graduated in 1926 with the First Symphony as his graduation piece. Along composing – actually as his main subject – he studied also the piano and performed as a concert pianist until 1965.³

Shostakovich composed very modern and even atonal music, including the first four symphonies and the opera Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District, up until 1936 when Joseph Stalin wrote an article in Pravda where he claimed that Shostakovich music was “Muddle Instead of Music” (“Sumbura vmseto musïka”). There are conflicting stories but maybe because of that the premier of Fourth Symphony was delayed from 1936 to 1961. There was also a complaint from the musicians of the Leningrad Philharmonia.⁴ Stalin started the Great Purge in 1936 which made Shostakovich think more carefully about the musical and other political influences he exhibited. This political terror made many of Shostakovich’s friends, Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsk for instance, loose their lives. Stalin said in a conversation about Shostakovich’s music:

“—all our composers have to start creating music that is clear and comprehensible, not enigmatic, in which any sense of order perishes. And so, it is necessary, so that people are able to use melodies. —”⁵

³ Fairclough Pauline, Dmitry Shostakovich

⁴ Laurel Fay, Shostakovich: A Life

After the Fourth Symphony Shostakovich returned to a more “melodic” style in his Fifth Symphony. In the same year, 1937, he started to teach at the Leningrad Conservatory. During the Second World War he composed his Seventh Symphony, “Leningrad”. It was premiered in Leningrad, despite of Nazi’s encirclement, at terrible conditions. Weakened musicians of Leningrad Symphony couldn’t even play the piece entirely through before the actual performance. Horrors of the war are audible in Shostakovich’s music like in so many other composer’s music after the Second World War.

His style stayed rather similar until the Tenth Symphony where he started to use many quotations for example DSCH (d, e-flat, c, b-natural) which is musical motif for Shostakovich himself. The same motif and style are noticeable in his Eighth String Quartet which was written at the same time as the symphony. At the time, 1960, Shostakovich also joined the Communist Party, probably under public or private pressure – or maybe both. He took part in the Party’s events but didn’t appreciate it much. Shostakovich wrote his Eighth Quartet in two weeks after that and said to Isaak Glikman that

“I wrote this ideologically flawed quartet which is of no use to anybody -- The title page could carry the dedication: ‘To the memory of the composer of this quartet’.”

In the quartet Shostakovich quotes himself a lot: First, Eighth and Tenth Symphonies for instance. But there are also quotes from Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony and Wagner’s Siegfried’s funeral music. This same quotation style he is using in the last movement of the Viola Sonata.

In the Fourteenth Symphony Shostakovich, in his early sixties, began his late style. It is dark and soul-searching and seems never to be forgetting that the composer’s death is near. He continued to compose in the same style until his death. The Viola Sonata’s first and, especially, last movements are great examples of the darkness and meditation of the style. The sonata is the last piece Shostakovich ever wrote. He died on the 9th of August 1975 and the Viola Sonata is the only piece of his that he never heard premiered, as its first performance was on the 1st of October.

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6 Fairclough Pauline, Dmitry Shostakovich

7 Service Tom, Music in the post-war world

8 Isaak Glikman, Story of a Friendship: The letters of Dmitry Shostakovich to Isaak Glikman with a Commentary by Isaak Glikman
3 Analysis

The *Viola Sonata*, opus 147, was dedicated to Fedor Druzhinin, the violist of the *Beethoven Quartet*. The sonata’s first movement is in sonata-form. Its main theme is peaceful and filled with deep thoughts while the secondary group is furious.

The second movement of the sonata has a lot of material from the never-finished opera project *The Gamblers*. It is a scherzo-like movement with a loose ABAC structure. The movement feels like shortened opera: Characters are changing fast, tone is rich and the viola part is virtuosic like the violin part in Sarasate’s or Waxman’s *Carmen Fantasy*.

In the last movement, Shostakovich quotes all of his own symphonies as well as Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*. Shostakovich has said that the last movement is an “adagio in memory of Beethoven”. The structure of the last movement is more or less chaotic. It’s balancing between Beethoven’s Moonlight motif and more lyrical long-lined motifs. The music grows to the viola cadenza and fades away after a fortissimo explosion.

*The Viola Sonata* ends in C major after a long searching section, similar to the third movement of *Tenth Symphony* or *Eighth String Quartet*.

3.1 First movement

![figure 1]

The viola starts the first movement alone with a mysterious pizzicato motif (figure 1). Shostakovich gives the tempo marking “*Moderato* =104”. It’s rarely played that fast in any recordings as fastness tends to break the atmosphere. The opening motif doesn’t give a clue in which key the sonata is because the strong notes on the first beats are c, a, d-flat and c again and building two chords: c¹, g¹, d², a² and d-flat¹, g¹, d², c³. But a character for the whole sonata is set. After a four-bar viola solo, the piano makes an entrance that is at least as mysteriously as the one of the viola.

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9 Fedor Druzhinin, The Story Behind the Painful Birth of Shostakovich’s *Viola Sonata* Op. 147 for Viola and Piano – the Composer’s Final Work
While the viola is repeating its pizzicato motif, the piano plays the second motif (figure 2) of the main theme of the exposition. This motif, as well as many other motives in the sonata, is descending which gives it a sorrowful ambience. The left hand of the piano sounds the first bass line, but it soon grows into a counterpoint like melody that makes the main theme go floatingly forward as the melody bundle rises and dies away to the end of the main group and transfers to the second theme group with the viola’s opening motif (figure 3).

The second subject group starts a more moving part of the movement. The theme is based on triplets and the music is more hectic than before. In many recordings, players choose a faster tempo in this section. The music is going crazier and crazier until suddenly the triplets change to semiquavers in the piano while the viola is playing double-stops. The triplets return as well as variations of the main theme – the development part starts all of a sudden. It feels like the exposition part doesn’t reach its end before the development part starts. The development is very short and in the end of it, the music calms down to the pizzicato motif of the introduction which is now played by the piano. The recapitulation feels like a denser version of the introduction, a little bit more relaxed and shorter, and it leads to a viola cadenza which also stars the coda. All motives are played one more time in the coda and the movement ends in a long open c; the same note as it started with (figure 4).
3.2 Second movement

The second movement’s structure is a loose ABAC where the C is also a coda. The given tempo is almost the same as in the first movement: “Allegretto ♩=100”. It contains many different characters and they are changing rapidly. The material for this movement is from an opera “The Gamblers” which Shostakovich had composed earlier but abandoned and then reused in the viola sonata.

In the beginning one can feel the country in which the first act of the opera was going to take place. Music is dance-like, cheerful and contains a lot of fast notes and appoggiaturas.
Somehow the “dance” is still dark and heavy. The harmonic procession is giving the movement a dragging feeling: two bars b-flat and d-flat minor third and then two bars b-flat and e-flat fourth (figure 5). There is not much happening but still the melody is vivid. Another motif from the A part of the scherzo consists of syncopated rhythms with an even piano accompaniment (figure 6). These two motives are fighting to be heard until section B.
The B section is ghostly (figure 7). There is the same kind of stillness, as in Shostakovich’s previous opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, which is implicating that something bad is going to happen. Are there men playing cards and someone is losing more than he owns? Is somebody going to kill someone? Or is it, like in *Lady Macbeth*, a woman waiting her lover to come by?

Section B ends in burst of fast ascending scales but before that there is a similar false end which continuous with the syncopated motif until the B sections pesante takes the lead and shows the way to the real ending. Before section A starts over there is a viola cadenza. The musical material of the cadenza derives from the last movement which starts with a similar solo part (figures 8 and 10). Actually, the inversion of the motif is already played in the first movement (figure 9) and it is related to the pizzicato motif from beginning of the whole sonata. The cadenza of the second movement could be some kind of false start of the third movement as there was a false start of the A section before.
The repetition of section A is filled with signs of the monotonous B motif and at last comes the coda where these motives are played simultaneously. The music is once again fading away like in the first movement. The difference is that the scherzo movement is ending very suddenly and in a dissonant chord.

That begs the question: Should it be attacca to the third movement?

3.3 Third movement

The third movement is, if possible, the darkest of the three movements of the sonata. It is very calm: Adagio $\text{I}=80$ being the tempo marking but, as in the first movement, it’s usually played in slower tempo than the metronome marking in order to achieve an adagio feeling. The third movement starts with a viola cadenza (figure 10) and descending fourths. This passage might be representing death. Most of the thematical material of the last movement is introduced in the cadenza which ends with pizzicato chords and where the piano starts to imitate to Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata (figure 12).
Shostakovich-like, the key of the movement is faded despite of *Moonlight Sonata* quotation. The music is floating on with the similar pattern: The piano plays an accompaniment part reminiscent of the *Moonlight Sonata* while the viola performs the dotted melody and plays little improvisations from time to time during the pauses of the piano. Shostakovich is borrowing material also from the other movements. Then comes a long section where the piano is playing quaver arpeggios while the viola remains still playing double stops. Tension rises a bit only to be dropped again with a new warm but sorrowful *pianissimo* colour where the *Moonlight* accompaniment motif goes to the left hand of the piano with the right-hand playing chords. The movement then comes back to its initial mission to repeat *Moonlight Sonata* and improvisations. However, one of the impro sections grows into the viola’s cadenza trying to solve musical material.

The cadenza is somehow causing more problems than solving them. It functions as a development part as it is using the same material as the cadenza had in the beginning but at
the same time it’s loading energy which explodes after seven repeated upbeat e quavers (figure 13). This section ties up the piano’s motif, from the movement’s introduction cadenza, and the viola’s motif which seems to be related to the pizzicato motif from the first movement. The piano’s motif is going to be more precious towards the end of the sonata.

![Figure 14](image)

The music calms down with the viola’s upgoing motif and then returns to the atmosphere of the beginning. One sign of that is that the motif with fourths is played in half-tempo (figure 14). The recapitulation slides towards a coda unconsciously with the same style as the whole movement: one part *Moonlight Sonata* and one part improvisation-like *cadenzetta*.

![Figure 15](image)

As an ending tone, the viola is landing from an Ab major arpeggio via C major to the note e, the third of the C major chord (figure 15). However, the ending chord can still wait while the piano is playing the two main themes of the movement – first in double tempo (bars 184-185) and then in a low register (bars 186-187). The music comes to the last “heavenly” C major chord not from the usual dominant but in the bass line from d-flat to c and in the middle voice from f-sharp to g.
3.4 Similarities between the movements

As I already pointed out in 3.2 analysing the second movement, there are some very interesting similarities between the different movements during the sonata. These similarities are holding the structure tightly together. So, the main motif from the last movement (figure 10) is already played in the second movement’s cadenza (figure 8) and it is actually growing from the first pizzicato motif (figures 1 and 9) of the whole sonata.

The obligato subject of the last movement’s second theme (figure 13, bar 115) is also related to the pizzicato motif with all its strings crossing arpeggio feeling. The movement is just never coming down, but it is connected to the third movement’s first motif. As in the first movement’s motif of fourths the motif was inverted when comparing to other movements and so is a motif of seconds (figure 16) which is easiest to detect from second movement’s quiet section (figure 7) and the motif is also placed at the end of the third movement before the coda in the viola part (figure 17).

Common to all movements’ structure is that all of the movements have a cadenza. In the first movement it is in the “right” place where cadenzas used to be placed in concertos. It has also a similar mission – maybe not tonality wise – to lead the movement from recapitulation to coda. In the second movement the cadenza appears in the middle of section B and A to avoid misunderstanding of the false beginning of A and it has an important role of introducing the final form of the first theme of the third movement (figure 10). However, the last movement has a cadenza purely for developing reasons.

In all movements, the viola finishes with a long note (figures 4, 11 and 15). In the first movement a C, in the second an F and in the last movement an E. Only the last movement lands on a chord. In the first movement the piano plays a motif from the second subject and arrives on the note C from a Db. Similar endings with very long “out spelled” notes are also noticeable elsewhere in Shostakovich’s music, for example in his eighth, tenth and eleventh string quartets.
The viola was not considered to be a solo instrument before the beginning of the 20th century. It was not high pitched enough for the popular trio sonata group during the Baroque period. In the trio sonata form there were two treble instrument, two violins for example, and basso continuo and the viola didn’t fit into this group. That started a development where there weren’t so many viola players, actually violinists were usually playing viola, and violas were not made as many as violins. That started a period with a very small viola repertoire. There are a couple of concertos from the Baroque and Classical periods but not even near as many as there are violin works.¹⁰

The string quartet during the Classical period rose the viola a bit so there were more violas made and more players needed for these chamber music groups. But still there were very few solo pieces composed. Until the end of the 19th century the viola was considered to be a clumsy instrument that weren’t good for the virtuosic solo repertoire which was in fashion. Richard Strauss even wrote the piece *Don Quixote* for cello soloist and orchestra where the viola is representing his even dumber armour bearer Sancho Panza.¹¹

Things started to change in beginning of the 20th century when viola virtuoso Lionel Tertis encouraged composers to write pieces for viola. Lionel Tertis was together with Oskar Nedbal one of the first viola soloist in the world. For instance, York Bowen’s *Viola Sonata* Op. 18, Ralph Vaughan Williams’ *Suite for Viola and Small Orchestra* and William Walton’s *Viola Concerto* were dedicated to Tertis.¹¹

Two other main characters making the viola a better-known solo instrument were William Primrose and Paul Hindemith. Hindemith was a talented violist and composer who composed over ten viola pieces. William Primrose is considered being the greatest violist in the 20th century. Benjamin Britten’s *Lachrymae* was dedicated to him and he commissioned a *Viola Concerto* from Béla Bartók. Primrose developed the viola technique writing method books and doing transcriptions from violin schools and technique books to viola. Primrose was worried about the level of viola playing worldwide and he was speaking for a professionalism standard on the particular instrument. Here is a famous quote from Primrose talking with David Dalton:

¹⁰ David Dalton, *Playing the Viola: Conversations with William Primrose*

¹¹ Nelson Sheila, *The Violin and Viola: History, Structure, Techniques*
“Primrose: But there are still too many violinists playing the viola these days as more or less a hobby. And they are doing it in public. I’m sometimes doubtful that this situation will ever change, partly because the average person doesn’t know what to listen for in a viola. I remember an occasion where I was in a home, and a fiddler essayed on the viola playing Hindemith’s Der Swanendreher. It was a horrible performance, disgraceful. But the listeners impression was not “That person’s a bad player.” Rather, “The viola is not a good solo instrument.
Dalton: What is the answer to this dilemma?
Primrose: I’m not quite sure. Perhaps shoot all violinists who play viola publicly.”

With the arrival of Bartók’s Viola Concert the viola technique climbed to the same level as other solo instruments. Primrose wrote to Bartók that he could compose an as difficult piece as his violin concertos. Shostakovich’s Viola Sonata is the same continuation. For instance, the second movement is mostly directly taken from Shostakovich’s opera score without making any compromises about the technical difficulty. Shostakovich didn’t write what violists could play but the music which was inside of his head. That made the viola technique progress even more with all the fast passages, high pitches and double stop glissandos.

One can thank Shostakovich for taking these technical tasks one step further, therefore viola music nowadays is what it is. For example, Sofia Gubaidulina’s Viola Concerto starts with a quote from the third movements cadenza of Shostakovich’s sonata. Also, the style of the music is similar to serious Russian music. One big reason to be thankful for Shostakovich is because he wrote the sonata in the first place. That might have inspired other composers such as Ligeti and Vasks to get enthusiastic about the viola’s dark tone – without just thinking about abilities that the violin has – but composing something very unique for this warm and capable instrument called viola.

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10 David Dalton, Playing the Viola: Conversations with William Primrose
Performing Shostakovich’s *Viola Sonata* is musically a difficult task to do. Not only for its technical difficulties but for its complexity. Analysing the piece was more rewarding for the result than analysing, for example, Bach or a classical concerto. I got a lot of perspective for the sonata after analysing; I started to understand why some themes were played in a particular order and I got an overview for the whole sonata. In the first movement it is allowed to choose a slower tempo than the metronome marking is giving because the first subject of the sonata form is calm and slow-going, like the last movement. Maybe that is the idea of tempo marking “Moderato” – not too slow, not too fast. However, the second subject is much more furious and that’s why many violists nowadays are increasing tempo there. The cadenza is very free and there is room to take the tempo back to the coda. Overall, the whole movement offers the musicians a freedom to change tempi the way they want to.

The most important thing to remember in the second movement is that it is an opera. Characters are – and must be – very obvious. Despite its fast tempo and virtuosity, it must sound seamlessly easy. The middle part is again from the dark side of Shostakovich’s music and I got my inspiration from the opening scene of his previous opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* where the main character Katerina is complaining about her loneliness. The other important thing in the second movement is the cadenza which is the leading bridge to the third movement. I think that the ending of the second movement must be in tempo to the very end with a sudden silence which actually starts the third movement. It makes sense if the second movement goes *attacca* to the third as the cadenza in the second movement implicates that Shostakovich prefers to combine the movements like Sibelius did in his last symphony. It is necessary to take a slower tempo than in the metronome marking, as in the first movement, to achieve the *adagio* feeling. Also, to point out the *Moonlight Sonata* theme, the movement should be played in the same tempo as the first movement of Beethoven’s piano sonata. Short solo passages can be played freely as well as the cadenza. In many recordings, violists are increasing the tempo towards the end of the cadenza and playing the upcoming *fortissimo* passage in a faster tempo. I think the slowness gives power to the passage and makes it easier to connect to the rest of the movement. The last chord is giving an impression of a happy ending, so the viola’s *e* note should be sustained and faded away together with the piano’s *bass* note.

Knowing the history of the Soviet Union, Shostakovich and the sonata is giving tools to interpret the sonata. It would be hard to do without imagining oneself to that time with all the adversities of Shostakovich and the poverty within the Soviet Union. The climate for composers such as Shostakovich was not propitious in the Soviet Union at that time. Luckily, the climate changed to the better for Shostakovich even though it wasn’t as free as it should have been in a utopic world. But maybe because of the difficult times Shostakovich had, he became the composer he was and therefore composed pieces like the *Viola Sonata*, so that we can enjoy them now.
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*A new work for viola by Shostakovich discovered in Moscow State Archives*, The Strad, 26 September 2017