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Music for Silenced Voices

Chloe Veltman · Thursday, July 21st, 2011

Just finished reading Wendy Lesser's luminous book about Shostakovich's string quartets, *Music for Silenced Voices*. I recommend this to anyone who wants a starting point into the composer's life and work.

Lesser, who is the founding editor of the journal *The Threepenny Review* and lives in Berkeley, is not a professional musicologist and approaches the subject partly as a layperson who's simply caught the bug for Shostakovich's music and partly as a reporter/researcher, delving into archives to dig up information on the composer and interviewing a wide range of people who are familiar with his string quartets and other works. She often quizzes the members of string quartets that play the works for their input. Comments from the members of the Emerson, Alexander and other great contemporary quartets are one of the great delights of reading the volume.

As such, the book is very accessible as doesn't get bogged down in technical stuff about chord progressions and so on. When Lesser includes information about the music itself, she writes from a point of how she absorbs it as a careful listener, using everyday words. Here she is, for instance, on the Twelfth Quartet:

"The feeling of dissonance and dark, harmonically ambiguous tunelessness that Shostakovich uses elsewhere is present, but although it is not entirely pleasurable, it somehow feels less anxiety-ridden than in the earlier quartets."

If there's one overriding thesis that runs through the book, it's the simple yet compelling idea that the quartets provide a more powerful insight into the composer's life and approach to composition than perhaps any other of his works because they flew under the authorities' radar so weren't scrutinized as carefully....

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