

Editorial: ‘Philosophical Research Excellence’: A (True) Musical Parable

1962 was a time in Russia when safe spaces were places where those *opposed* to current orthodoxy could speak freely. That year Shostakovich was in London, for various concerts, along with members of the now legendary Borodin Quartet. The quartet’s cellist Valentin Berlinsky met Shostakovich by chance when both were strolling in Hyde Park. Though within listening distance of the Soviet Embassy, for the cruelly harassed musicians, it would still have seemed a safe space.

In Berlinsky’s words (reported in Elizabeth Wilson’s *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*), the following conversation ensued: ‘I spoke to him of a recent meeting in Venice with Luigi Nono, who had promised to write us a quartet... Dmitry Dmitriyevich suddenly went glum. Then he said, ‘Tell me, have you played all the Haydn Quartets?’ ‘No, Dmitry Dmitriyevich, of course not.’ ‘Well, please play all the Haydn Quartets, then all the Mozart Quartets, then all of Schubert’s Quartets. Only then should you play Luigi Nono’s music.’

Luigi Nono, a revolutionary Marxist and member of the Italian Communist Party, was the darling of the musical avant-garde of the day. In 2019 his works surface in concerts only occasionally, while Shostakovich is probably second only to Mahler among twentieth century symphonists in number of performances. Haydn wrote 68 string quartets, Mozart 26, and, Schubert, if we include the two lost ones and the *Quartettsatz*, 18. And this is to say nothing of the quartets of Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich himself, in all of which the Borodins steeped themselves, to great acclaim. As far as we can see, they did not play Nono’s only work for string quartet, which was not written for them and did not appear until 1980.

In one sense, then, Shostakovich’s shade need be glum no longer, and, from this distance and in another era, we can smile at the oblique way he expressed his view of the wealthy Venetian maestro and his music, a technique no doubt honed by struggling to survive through several decades of totalitarian censorship and lying. But if Shostakovich is vindicated on the particular case, do his words suggest a more general truth? Is he teaching us a lesson which applies to many areas, including academic philosophy itself, bent as the profession is in discerning, and rewarding, what it takes for the instant to be progress, impact and work with a cutting edge?