

# Tempo

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

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This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Bartók, whose six quartets were perceptively declared by Gerald Abraham at the time to be possibly the most important series of quartets since Beethoven's. In the subsequent quarter of a century, if frequency of performance is any criterion, they have been generally accepted and recognized as such, and still show no sign of being seriously challenged, in popularity with chamber-music audiences or in the esteem of musicians, by any other quartets since Debussy and Ravel.

The reasons for their posthumous success are clear enough, but it is not so easy to offer a ready answer as to why the substantial series of quartets by Schoenberg, Hindemith, Honegger, and now Shostakovich, have not yet found a secure place in the repertoire. Of the four it is Shostakovich, who began to work in this medium as Bartók's production in it was coming to an end, and whose contribution to the quartet literature now vastly exceeds that of any major composer since Schubert, who now seems likeliest to join Bartók among the ranks of the public's 'favourite' quartet composers. He indisputably deserves to do so, particularly on the strength of the quartets (see p. 6) he has written since, and including, his Seventh; and his latest example will for many listeners place him decisively among the great masters of the quartet.

It is not the first time in his quartets that Shostakovich has made overt allusions to Beethoven: anybody who listens to the first movement of the First Quartet is as instantly struck by the reference to the third movement of Op. 130 as in the Twelfth Quartet he will be struck by the likeness in the opening theme to the first movement of Op. 59 No. 1. Nor, of course, is it the first time in this medium that Shostakovich has acknowledged the existence of Schoenberg: as long ago as 1946, in the Third Quartet, isolated but conspicuous twelve-tone melodic statements appeared, and they have cropped up intermittently in numerous works since. The somewhat more systematic use of twelve-note writing in the new quartet adds to the force of Mr. Keller's argument that the form of the work is derived from Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony, though Shostakovich might well have reached the same goal by another of the several routes leading from Beethoven in the same direction. What is more important however than the mastery of form, and what more readily strikes the listener (as in Bartók's equally masterly forms) is the inventive quality and abundance of the material—as for instance in the opening of the second movement, a superbly original textural idea. Such a work can hardly fail to stimulate renewed interest in and reappraisal of Shostakovich's entire string quartet output, which it so magnificently crowns, but the lamentably small part played by chamber music in our general concert life provides desperately little room for this to happen—this is also undoubtedly one of the reasons for the neglect of the quartets of Schoenberg and Hindemith. Here is a situation that the Arts Council could well do something to rectify, with beneficial effects that might be much further-reaching, not least in relation to the present difficulties with orchestras, than would at first be obvious.