

Rolf Wallin:

Swans Kissing

The abstract paintings of Hilma af Klint, the Swedish visionary painter, predate Kandinsky's first abstract work by five years. As with many other abstract pioneers, her path was a spiritual one, coming from an urge to reveal the deeper truth that lies behind the reality we perceive with our senses. She never showed her paintings in public, and painted 'on commission' from spirits.

Her series of large paintings named *The Swan* (1914) is a set of increasingly abstract variations on a striking figurative picture: one white swan flying down from above on black background (the night sky?), and one black swan flying up from below on white background (a frozen lake?). Their beaks meet with a kiss in the middle of the picture. In the following paintings one can see echoes, in curves and shapes, of the original image.

Swans Kissing, just as these canvases, is split in two. Two bodies of music mirror each other exactly in some aspects, but differ vastly in character. The first body flows slowly and viscerally upwards, the second pushes downwards with a relentless pulse. They meet with a "kiss" halfway through the piece.

In these paintings, Hilma af Klint combines a strong, "masculine" constructivist geometry with "feminine" dream-like sensuality, resulting in visionary work of striking precision. This has inspired me to revisit an earlier path of my own, combining fractal mathematics and geometry with a playful, sensual attitude.

Programme note by Rolf Wallin

Shostakovich String Quartet No. 15 in E-flat Minor, Op. 144

“The whole of Shostakovich’s last creative period” writes annotator Eric Roseberry, “is summed up in his final quartet, String Quartet No. 15 in E flat minor, Op. 144 (to the end, the composer continued his original plan of writing a quartet in every major and minor key....) It completes a thematically interrelated cycle of late string quartets — a kind of *Winterreise* beginning with No. 12 — which through their dedications to founding members of the Beethoven Quartet were to become, in retrospect, elegies for close colleagues.”

This final string quartet by Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) — lacking any dedication — was, in essence, an elegy to himself, his own “Requiem,” completed in October 1974, slightly less than ten months before his death. A subtle reference to Beethoven’s late C-sharp Minor Quartet (Op. 131), which consists of seven movements joined without a pause, the six movements Shostakovich’s Quartet in E-flat Minor are likewise continuous throughout the work. *Unlike* Beethoven, however, Shostakovich gave each of his movements a title:

- [1] Elegy
- [2] Serenade
- [3] Intermezzo
- [4] Nocturne
- [5] Funeral March
- [6] Epilogue

Aside from the relative neutrality of “Serenade” and “Intermezzo,” these titles point undeniably toward death, its auguries, and its consequences. In essence, the composer had written his own musical eulogy.

The final years of Shostakovich’s life were far from happy and pain free, and we may hear his depression and pain in this chain of six Adagios. Russian music expert Richard Taruskin has called it “a racking medley of Adagios,” in which “he fashioned his personal pain and his pessimism into a tour de force.”

In *Music for Silenced Voices*, about all the quartets, Wendy Lesser offers us a profound, touching conclusion about the fifteenth:

What Shostakovich feelingly realizes, in this quartet, is that there can be no settling into comfortable resignation, no weak or even fearless embrace of death, because something in us always still wants to live. Hence the tugging back and forth in the Serenade section — because the Serenade reminds us what it is to be alive, to *not* want to leave this life, whereas the Elegy was almost ready to let it all go, to sink into timelessness. Having been softened by the Elegy, made lethargic and forgetful by the it’s-all-over-now quality of that first movement, we find we can be hurt again, in the Serenade, by the fact that death is the end of life.

... The quartet is pointing to itself as being *unlike* life. It is saying, This is what survives: not the body, not the spirit, not the individual, but these sounds, which can come alive over and over, for centuries.

Folk Music from Nordic Countries

Folk music is the music of all the small places. It is the local music, but as such it is also the music of everywhere and everyone. Like rivers, the melodies and dances have flowed slowly from region to region: Whenever a fiddler stumbled on a melody, he would play it and make it his own before passing it on. You don't own a folktune, you simply borrow it for a while.

We have borrowed and arranged a selection of tunes that are all very close to our hearts. We perform them as a string quartet, one of the most powerful musical vehicles we know of. The string quartet is a pure construct: Four simple instruments made of wood. But in all its simplicity

The string quartet is capable of expressing a myriad of colours, nuances and emotions – just like folk music. Our idea is to marry these two simple but powerful things; the folk music and the string quartet. Normally the string quartet has been reserved for the classical masters. Now we want to see what happens when we let the Nordic folk music flow through the wooden instruments of the string quartet.

Does it work? We hope so. And remember: We simply borrowed these tunes. They have already been returned."