In 1940 most of Europe had already plunged into war. The Soviet Union, though ostensibly protected by a non-aggression pact signed by both Stalin and Hitler, was already beginning to face the certainty of conflict, though no one could imagine the actual brutality of the Great Patriotic War, which was to come. Yet the country was quiet, like the proverbial calm before the storm. The Red Terror of the early years after the revolution of 1917 had passed. The collectivization of the peasants in 1929 and 1930 had been completed (albeit at the cost of famine and starvation and the death of millions). The purge trials of 1935 and 1936 and the mass arrests that engulfed the entire country in 1937 and 1938 were complete. Shostakovich himself had almost succumbed to personal political terror in January of 1936 when Stalin and his minions walked out of a performance of the opera Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District. After an article entitled "Muddle Instead of Music" was published in Pravda ("things could end very badly for this young man"), Shostakovich withdrew public performances of his work. The Fifth Symphony, Op. 47 (1937), rehabilitated him in the stern eyes of the regime, i.e.: Josef Stalin.

As with much of Shostakovich’s music the piano quintet is a historical reflection of its time. It is a gravely serene piece marked by a simplicity of texture, especially in the piano writing: lines are doubled two octaves below, and there is little complex inter-part composition. All of this provides clarity, and an ample accessibility reflected in the popularity of the work immediately after its premiere. Rostislav Dubinsky, original first violinist of the Borodin Quartet recalls in his book, Not By Music Alone: "For a time the Quintet overshadowed even such events as the football matches between the main teams. The Quintet was discussed in trams, people tried to sing in the streets the second defiant theme of the finale. War that soon started completely changed the life of the country as well as the consciousness of the people. If previously there was the faint hope of a better life, and the hope that the ‘sacrifices’ of the revolution were not in vain, this hope was never to return. The Quintet remained in the consciousness of the people as the last ray of light before the future sank into a dark gloom."

The work is cast in five movements. The Prelude opens in the style of a Bach prelude, and foreshadows the remarkable preludes that Shostakovich was to write in the Preludes and Fugues for Piano, Op. 87 (1950-51). The stirring entry of the piano is answered by the quartet, after which the mood changes and a related idea is developed until the opening reasserts itself. The Fugue begins gently and slowly and builds to a furor of lyricism. The Scherzo returns to Shostakovich’s irrepressible sense of irony and humor, and is utterly brilliant. This side of the composer’s personality is never restrained; there are dazzling and profound scherzos scattered throughout his work. This one is reminiscent of the Polka from the Age of Gold, or moments from the Cello Sonata, Op.40 (1934). The Intermezzo, tinged with regret and tranquility, leads to a finale in which triumph is flung in direct opposition to darkness. This is the theme that Dubinsky recalls, and it appears before and after a thunderous, descending group of onrushing chords on the piano, the emotional core of the work. The Quintet finishes with wit and whimsy, contrary to the opening, in which the music spins off to a quiet conclusion.

Shostakovich and the Beethoven Quartet premiered the Quintet on November 23, 1940, at the Moscow Academy of Music. Shostakovich was an accomplished pianist and performed the piece many times with the Beethoven and later, the Borodin Quartet. Incidentally, Dmitri
Dmitreyvich was an anxious performer and his resulting fast tempi are recognizable in recordings of his performances. Valentin Berlinsky, cellist of the Borodin Quartet, recalls in Elizabeth Wilson’s book *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* that the composer would say "Let’s play it fast, otherwise the audience will get bored.” He would particularly rush the fast movements. The players would beg him to slow down, saying "but your metronome mark is such and such!” The composer replied, "Well, you see my metronome at home is out of order, so pay no attention to what I wrote."

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