

SYMPHONY NO. 15 IN A MAJOR, OP. 141
COMPOSED IN 1971

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

BORN IN ST. PETERSBURG, SEPTEMBER 25, 1906
DIED IN MOSCOW, AUGUST 9, 1975

Shostakovich was undoubtedly one of the greatest and most prolific symphonists of the 20th century: His 15 works in the genre seem to chart not only the history of the Soviet Union, but also his own fraught experiences as a brilliant composer living and working within a brutal system. What he wrote as a precocious teenager evolved from an almost entirely different world than the one he inhabited at the end of his life, when he created the last symphony we hear today. The heady, optimistic days after the Revolution had passed through the horrific realities of Stalin to the stagnation and dreariness of the Brezhnev era.

A SYMPHONIST'S PROGRESS

Shostakovich's dazzling First Symphony, premiered when the composer was just 19, made him famous overnight, extending his renown far beyond the Soviet Union as Bruno Walter, Furtwängler, Toscanini, and other leading conductors championed the youthful work. (Leopold Stokowski gave the American premiere with the Philadelphians in 1928.) The Second Symphony from the next year was entitled "To October—A Symphonic Dedication" and included a chorus praising the Revolution and Lenin. The Third Symphony, "The First of May," was another choral and political testimony (again given its U.S. premiere by Stokowski and the Orchestra in 1932). By the time of his Fourth, in 1936, the 29-year-old Shostakovich had run into serious difficulties with the Soviet government. Stalin's displeasure at his opera *Lady Macbeth of the District of Mtszensk* had resulted in a scathing reprimand in the official newspaper *Pravda*. Shostakovich was forced to withdraw the Symphony, a grand Mahlerian work that waited 25 years for its premiere, once Stalin had safely been buried. (The Philadelphians gave the first American performance, in 1963.)

The popular Fifth Symphony officially redeemed Shostakovich in 1937 and became his most popular and admired work, an instant "classic." And although the Sixth (1939) did not fare quite as well (Stokowski and The Philadelphia Orchestra gave the first performances outside the USSR, in 1940), the Seventh ("Leningrad"), written during the war and performed to great acclaim in Russia and in the West in 1942, secured his position at the leading Soviet composer. It landed Shostakovich on the cover of *Time*. Expectations were great about what he would do next and the Eighth (1943) generally disappointed in its pessimistic tone. Worse, the Ninth, composed as the German defeat was imminent in 1945 and Russian victory to be celebrated, was a modestly witty affair. The Tenth, one of his greatest, was followed by three symphonies with programmatic titles: "The Year 1905," "The Year 1917," and "Babi Yar," the first two ostensibly inspired by the revolutionary events of the years evoked in the titles, and the Thirteenth (given its first performances outside the USSR by Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphians in 1970) featuring bass and bass choir singing the words of poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko about the 1941 massacre of Jews near Kiev. With Shostakovich's health

declining, the searing Fourteenth Symphony from 1969 (given its U.S. premiere by Ormandy and the Orchestra in 1971) is a song cycle to death-haunted poems by García Lorca, Apollinaire, Rilke, and the Russian poet William Küchelbecker. Death haunts the other great works that followed: the Symphony we hear today, his Suite on texts by Michelangelo, the late string quartets, and his last work, the Viola Sonata. As with Mahler's late works, Shostakovich displays a variety of responses to the approach of death. While the Symphony No. 14, for example, confronted it with anger, the Fifteenth seems more serene and resigned.

THE FINAL SYMPHONY

Shostakovich wrote his final symphony in the summer of 1971. After four that either featured programs or texts, he returned to the more abstract presentation of the Tenth, written some 18 years earlier. Work on the Fifteenth Symphony proceeded quickly, although sometimes painfully, and it was finished by the end of July. In September Shostakovich celebrated his 65th birthday and a few weeks later survived a second heart attack. Illness delayed the premiere of the Symphony, the first one that he entrusted to be conducted by his son, Maxim, who led the first performance with the Symphony Orchestra of All-Union Radio and Television at the Moscow Conservatory in January 1972. Ormandy and The Philadelphia Orchestra led the American premiere later that year.

Many of Shostakovich's symphonies—some would argue most or all of them—seem to carry hidden meanings and messages that either have deeply personal resonances or that run counter to their announced intention. Is the Eleventh Symphony really about the “Bloody Sunday” in 1905, when the Tsar opened fire on a peaceful gathering in front of the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, or rather about the later Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising that occurred as Shostakovich wrote the work in 1956? Although the composer did not give a title to the Fifteenth Symphony, or include a sung text, he did insert various musical quotations that are immediately identifiable to listeners, most obviously Rossini's *William Tell* Overture in the first movement and the “fate motive” from Wagner's *Ring* cycle in the fourth movement. (A quotation from Glinka's song “Do not tempt me needlessly” in the finale will probably be less noticeable for Western audiences.)

A CLOSER LOOK

The appearances of the *Tell* Overture in the first movement (**Allegretto**) are so striking that one inevitably asks why Shostakovich inserted such a well-known piece. The composer himself divulged little, except that the first movement “describes childhood—just a toyshop, with a cloudless sky above.” Indeed, there is a largely playful tone to the movement, although the conductor Kurt Sanderling recalls sitting with the composer at the Berlin premiere and remarking that, unlike most of the audience, he found the first movement tragic. He reports Shostakovich replied, “You are not wrong. It is tragic, marionette-like: We are all marionettes.” There is, in any case, a contrast in moods over the course of the Symphony, from the shorter and often jaunty first and third movements to the longer and more ominous second and fourth ones.

The second movement (**Adagio**) is another of the composer's movements haunted by death, most explicitly in the funeral march heard within. The third movement follows

without pause—a scherzo (**Allegretto**) that has the grotesque qualities found in so many of his symphonies from the very beginning and that harkens back once again to his beloved Mahler. Shostakovich also includes, as in many of his later works, his own musical signature, the motto DSCH (spelled by the notes D, E-flat, C, B natural).

The finale (**Adagio-Allegretto**) opens with a brass and timpani quotation drawn from Wagner's *Die Walküre*, where it is associated with the so-called Annunciation of Death ("Todesverkündigung") in the second act as Brünnhilde tells Siegmund that he must die and be taken to Valhalla. This theme in the trombones and tuba segue into the first three notes from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, but then veer off into a playful waltz. In addition to a reference to the Glinka song, Shostakovich includes another musical spelling—of BACH, as well as extended allusions to the famous "invasion" theme from the first movement of his "Leningrad" Symphony. The haunting and miraculous ending of the work, dominated by percussion instruments, recalls the conclusion of his suppressed Fourth Symphony. Sanderling suggests a deathly image: "At the end when the percussion starts twittering and chirping, I always think of the intensive-care ward in a hospital: The person is attached to various contraptions and the dials and screens indicate that heartbeat and brain activity are gradually expiring. Then comes a vast convulsion and it's all over. The listeners feel this, too, or something like it, and are very shaken."

—Christopher H. Gibbs

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