



performers

*on Shostakovich*

# INTERVIEW WITH SEMYON BYCHKOV



*Semyon Bychkov was interviewed by Henrietta Cowling, Assistant Producer, BBC Music and Arts, for an interval documentary feature during the live transmission from the Proms of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony on 3rd August 1991. The transcript of the full interview (only excerpts were broadcast) appears here, for the first time, by permission of Mr Bychkov and Ms Cowling.*

**HC:** What is your reaction to the theories of Volkov and Lebedinsky that Shostakovich began composing the Seventh Symphony before the war broke out, and that the theme in the first movement describes Stalin rather than Hitler?

**S.BYCHKOV:** I think it is totally convincing as an explanation. First of all, we know that, physically, Shostakovich composed the first movement in one month and this took place very soon after the war had started. And knowing also that he would first compose the music in his mind before he put down anything on paper, then it's no wonder he would make a statement like that.

Also, it would certainly answer many other questions about the significance of the piece and the meaning of it, and whether the fact that the march is Hitler's theme, as it has been called many times, or if it's Stalin's theme, or if it's an "evil" theme. But the question of the date of the composition is only important so far as it allows a listener to get rid of the politicisation of the piece that has taken place during the early part of its life when it was only beginning to be performed. Throughout the years, the legend has grown and the piece has been covered with various explanations and theories, and after that we were stuck with the music alone and concerned ourselves with various ideological and political statements that suit various people.

**HC:** Do you feel that propaganda has got in the way of this symphony?

**S.BYCHKOV:** Yes, I think that is the case with the Seventh Symphony, as it is the case with a lot of music of Shostakovich. You see, first of all you are dealing with a composer who lived in a very particular society, a very particular time of the life of his country, which is very different to the way of life and sense of values of the western world. So one needs a lot of explanation. And secondly, a lot of statements about his music have been attributed to him which, taken at face value, would lead towards misunderstanding and [Communist] politicisation of his music. The Seventh Symphony is a typical example.

**HC:** Do you feel there is a problem in the way that the West appreciates his music?

**S.BYCHKOV:** I think that if one thinks of the way the public responds to the music of Shostakovich in western Europe and in America, you would see how clear people are about his music. They respond to it for what it gives them.

They are not trying to politicize his music.

They feel that this is a work of art that touches them very profoundly, and after hearing it they're able to imagine the music being written in the kind of country they have read or heard about. So today, in a way, it's an example of a work of art produced in a particular place and a particular time. I think what hurts the image of this music is the intellectualising of the so-called experts that has gone on for decades and that takes either the words of Shostakovich at their face value or tries to interpret the music





by forgetting its meaning. I mean that these experts try to interpret this music without having known the life of those whose life is addressed and expressed in this music. You see, in a way Shostakovich is a spokesman for his people and for their life. He is also a historian. He observes what happens and he records it in musical sounds. He's not a politician and his great gift was being able to associate himself with the pain and with the suffering of millions of people who have either perished or were persecuted physically, emotionally, spiritually, in many different ways. And he's someone who has the talent not only to identify with that suffering but also to be able to express it in his chosen field, which happens to be music.

*HC:* Can you tell us more about how important his music was for his people and how he was able to identify with them?

*S.BYCHKOV:* Well, the interesting thing is that all these misunderstandings about his music among music writers in the West never existed in the Soviet Union. His music was always understood by his public there, precisely what it was trying to tell them, because they all spoke the same language. In a way, one could compare his music to street music because it is so tied to life. And one could almost put the words behind the music and know exactly what it is trying to say. For example, they used to talk in that country about creating Homo Sovieticus. - That's a famous expression.

They made it known at the outset of the Soviet Union after the revolution of 1917 that they wanted to create a new type of man, quote unquote. And they certainly have succeeded in many ways. The only thing they couldn't succeed in is completely destroying human nature. So the Russian language itself had suffered tremendously, as well as the people who had spoken it. It became full of various slogans and simplifications. So the music of Shostakovich is very clear to the [Soviet] public because, as one would use a slogan in a very serious way and everyone will understand that that person doesn't believe one word of what he is saying, in the same way the public would respond to the sounds of Shostakovich's music knowing full well what he's really trying to say.

*HC:* Going back to the ideas put forward in *Testimony*, do you feel that it's possible to draw a parallel with Akhmatova's *Requiem*, which she wrote in a similar context and at a similar time? Do you think, in other words, that the Seventh Symphony is a work in which he expressed his grief for his friends who had been killed under Stalin?

*S.BYCHKOV:* One can see a parallel in the idea of Akhmatova writing her *Requiem* to the victims of inhumanity, of Stalin's regime, and Shostakovich writing his requiems. According to *Testimony*, he said that his requiems were in the Seventh and Eighth symphonies, but in hindsight we can see that in fact he wrote more than one requiem.

One can think of the Fifth symphony. Its slow movement is also a requiem. One can think of the Fourteenth Symphony: I was privileged enough to be at the premiere of the Fourteenth Symphony in Leningrad and I remember how my friends and I were very young at that time, studying music, and when we heard that piece and its poetry and its music, we said to ourselves this is really a requiem that he's writing for himself because we knew that he was at that time quite fragile and in very weak health. And so, in a sense, most of his music is a requiem, only of course it doesn't necessarily mean that the mood is always mournful. But there is this theme that goes throughout the great tradition of art in Russia, which goes back centuries: the tradition of compassion, of sympathy for the suffering - the tradition of remembrance of suffering and of those who suffered. Shostakovich is in direct line of that tradition. There are the famous words of Dostoyevsky, who said something to the effect of "How can I ever feel totally happy knowing that there is still a suffering soul in this world?". And I feel Shostakovich identified with that as much as Dostoyevsky, as Akhmatova. The way he expressed it was through music and I think that brings us to another important aspect of looking at his music. Sometimes people ask what it is he wrote that is really new. What kind of new techniques, in which way did he advance the art of music? I think the question in itself is a very empty one, because the Slavic culture, Russian culture in particular, be it music or literature or any other form of art, has rarely concerned itself with the technique of expression. It always emphasised the inner life of the work of art.







The inner process, the spiritual, the spirituality of art. Rather than art for its own sake. So for Shostakovich, for example, the play of sounds did not interest him. It did not interest him to create in new ways *per se*. He found them in order to satisfy what he was trying to say in music. He always regarded the rules of composition as simply the means. And in that sense he had total mastery of craft. His music is so well crafted. He practically never miscalculates and I can say that as a performer. We know that he was a very meticulous man and really prided himself on craftsmanship. But in the end the important question to us is: what is it that he is trying to say in his music? Only after that can we look at how he is saying that.

HC: Do you think it's possible to link the Seventh Symphony with his Eighth Quartet where he also uses fascism as a mask for him to express all sorts of other things that were burning in his inner being?

S.BYCHKOV: But, you see, all of his music is totally connected. One can make a parallel with the Eighth Quartet. One can make a parallel with the Eleventh Symphony. One can make a parallel with the Eighth Symphony. One can go back and make a parallel with the Fifth Symphony.

With a very few exceptions - where he simply had to write music to satisfy the government so that they would leave him alone and allow him to survive physically in those conditions - his entire output is about the same theme. It's about remembrance. It's about human suffering, it's about the genocide of a nation, of which he was one of the victims and which he shared with his people. So in that sense the Seventh Symphony corresponds to the quartets and it corresponds to most of the other things that he wrote.

HC: What would you say is the universal significance of the Seventh Symphony?

S.BYCHKOV: You know in this century, like in every other century, we have known evil. We have known Hitler, we have known Stalin, we have known Lenin, we have known people like this that brought an unbelievable destruction and suffering to humanity - usually under the guise of great ideals, the guise of humanity and humanism. And so, in that sense, I think the Seventh Symphony has universal significance in two ways.

It has significance as a work of art that can stand on its own. Because if you don't know anything, if you just listen to that music and don't know history or when it was written or any of the explanations of the piece, you still cannot fail to hear that this music talks. And if you are open enough, if you're really trying to hear what the music says, you will hear it vividly. He also wrote a lot of music for films and sometimes people make derogatory remarks to the effect that his music is film music. Well, there are some great films, there is nothing wrong with that. And, yes, this music contains the kind of sounds that one can visualise.

One can see them. And this music talks.

For example, in the first movement of the Seventh Symphony when the famous, infamous march starts, in one of the variations there is

a theme that's played by an oboe and then, just after the oboe has played, the bassoon starts it and repeats everything that the oboe has just said. Now imagine two human beings, one in a position of absolute power and the other one who is the humble servant whose life can be taken at any whim of the master. And whatever master says, the servant will parrot. That is the way in which this music talks - and that is its significance as a pure work of art. And, in another sense, it's important to us in the same way as the works of great writers are important to us. We cannot live without Shakespeare. We cannot live without the great writers of the twentieth century. And what do they concern themselves with? The human condition. So Shostakovich, too, concerns himself with the human condition.

HC: What do you say to those who have not been able to see the Seventh Symphony as a great work of art?

S.BYCHKOV: I suppose I'm the wrong person to answer this question because I'm committed to the entire music of Shostakovich. It is deeply important to me.

Obviously neither I nor anyone else can force another person to respond to a piece of music, to like it, to appreciate it. Everyone has simply to make a choice and it cannot be forced, cannot usually even be persuaded.

It's something one either feels or one doesn't.





To me, such questions simply don't exist, because to me Shostakovich is one of those composers who will stay for as long as human beings need to have music, in the same way Beethoven stays, in the same way Mozart stays, and Brahms and Mahler and all the other great composers. So I don't need to be persuaded that Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony is a great work of art. I take his entire creative output and there are some pieces to which I would feel especially attached to. There may be others that take me a longer time to have the same kind of affinity for. But it usually comes. It just takes time because he's a little bit forbidding sometimes. But as long as you realise that he says what he says with great wit, with great sarcasm, and with total honesty, and often tenderness, then you begin to relate to it. To me personally, the Seventh Symphony is a great masterpiece and I think the way the public respond to it when they hear it is the true judge. Who is there to play God, to say this is good and this is not so good, it's a little bit weak? No-one can or should be in a position to do that. The fact that the piece is played and heard means that there are musicians who believe in it and who feel it must be expressed and there are audiences that share the same commitment and the same curiosity and the same willingness to open themselves to what the piece is trying to say.

*HC:* Do you feel that the war was an opportunity for Shostakovich, having been persecuted under the Terror in the thirties, to express himself in a freer way?

*S. BYCHKOV:* I think that the war was a mechanism which allowed people to release what was stored inside them over the years prior to it. Then the government and the people were too busy fighting a common enemy to think about ideology. They just stopped thinking about all that. They just had to survive. And I'm convinced that, as for many people, it was for Shostakovich a chance to open up and express what was stored there for such a long time. And of course there's always a question: how does one survive what he went through? How did people manage to survive and still preserve their integrity? Because, you see, they didn't have many choices. Either they were persecuted and killed or imprisoned without any reason, or they would have to be very careful -which, in fact, they were, so as not to create the slightest

pretext for being suspected, arrested, and terrorised. Shostakovich himself was viciously attacked in the press in 1936 and one can imagine what kind of situation he was in, not knowing whether he would live to see another day. And the war itself was felt even before it started. Everywhere in Europe, people who were tuned in to what was happening felt that war was coming and I don't think someone like Shostakovich - a man of great intellect and a very astute person of tremendous intelligence - was surprised when the war started. And I think that prompted the release of the thoughts and emotions that had been with him for years prior to that.

*HC:* The citizens of Leningrad have just voted to change its name back to St. Petersburg. Do you feel there's a revival there of the spirit that was prevalent during the siege?

*S. BYCHKOV:* I was in Leningrad at the beginning of June and what struck me particularly was a feeling of tremendous spiritual revival which is happening now in Russia. Of course, I was only in Leningrad and cannot really say whether or not it is prevalent everywhere in the country. But as far as Leningrad is concerned, it's very touching to see those people struggling against a very difficult daily existence, against the feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and cynicism. And maybe that's making them try to look back and reassess the values which were important once before, and try to make something of their way of life and try to fight the past as it was, now that they are finally allowed to express themselves in a way they had never been allowed to and can say what they feel. And not only are they allowed, they just do it! They don't care any more. And they want to find a solution and one of the ways in which they're trying to do it is through the spiritual values which once again have become extremely important to them. So, in that sense, I think maybe here is the final victory for Shostakovich, just as it is a final victory for all humanity and for all those people who, over the years, fought against the most inhuman system ever imposed on anyone and which has finally declared itself bankrupt.

