

Sinfonia
Concertante
around the
fact that it
was written
shortly after
his mothers death.



The same way as is possible with some of
Beethoven's or Brahms music.

This is naturally very interesting - especially to
musicologists!

But what is equally essential is the way in which
music communicates certain pure human emotions
such as love, tragedy, desperation and so on. In
this way the listener can take the sentiments he
draws from the music and apply them - even
unconsciously - to his own *raison d'être*.

And so as an interpreter of music I don't regard it
as being crucial to know which bar is intended to
signify the loss of a close friend or an important
political event and so on. The music communi-
cates these things all by itself. Take Beethoven's
Eroica Symphony - this is great music - influ-
enced by history of course. But it's equally power-
ful - equally great - even if you never heard of
Napoleon.

DSCH: How would you place Shostakovich
alongside other 20th century composers?

I.OISTRAKH: He is clearly one of the great com-
posers of the century and to my mind this isn't
only because of the quality of his music as music,
but also because of the aesthetic honesty of his
music and of his personality.

[Disc references:]

*Shostakovich's 1st Violin Concerto, played by Igor
Oistrakh; the All-Union Radio and Television
Symphony Orchestra conducted by Maxim
Shostakovich. LP - MELODIYA CM03941-2, reis-
sued in France on Chant Du Monde - LDX 78576
K (LP).*



Recent Commentary on Symphonies 1-5

Since 1989, much material about
Shostakovich has emerged from the former
Soviet Union, some of it historical, some in
the form of new articles, some of it given in inter-
views. This is a digest of such commentary on the
first five symphonies. Digests of commentary on
symphonies 6-15 will appear in the future.

Symphony No. 1 in F minor, Opus 10 (1924-5)

The composer's life during the composition of the
First Symphony was stressful; he was often ill and
frequently depressed. Shostakovich's letters to his
girlfriend Tatyana Glivenko supply an outline of
his view of the composition of the First
Symphony. On 1st February 1924 (eight months
earlier than hitherto supposed), he writes to Tanya
that he has begun to compose a symphony and has
"already done a bit". (He was then 17.) Four days
later he reports himself "very busy with my sym-
phony", adding that he's been to see
Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* "about ten times"
and is immersed in Dostoyevsky. He notes the
approach of the second anniversary of his father's
death and speaks highly of him. On 26th February
1924, he tells Tanya that he has started to com-
pose the "third part" of his symphony. As part of
his work for Maximilian Steinberg's form/compo-
sition class, he has submitted the scherzo, which
Steinberg has "ripped to shreds": "What is this
enthusiasm for the grotesque? There were
grotesque passages in your Trio (Opus 8), all your
cello pieces (Opus 9) are grotesque, and finally
this scherzo, too, is grotesque! Probably there will
be some critic in Leningrad who'll say this is bril-



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liant, this is wonderful, and that'll be the end of you!" (In a letter to the pianist Lev Oborin dated 4th December, Shostakovich repeats this story, conceding that "it would be more fitting to call this work Symphony-Grotesque".) Despite his disapproval, Steinberg tells his pupil to continue with his symphony.

Around March–April 1924, Shostakovich becomes disillusioned with Petrograd.¹ In a letter dated 22nd March, he tells Tanya that he's decided to move to Moscow (where she lives) and take up his studies at the city's conservatory. He is fed up with the backbiting in local musical circles, some of which is directed at him. On 23rd May he mentions a purge at the Leningrad Conservatory (which "doesn't concern" him). A fortnight later, he notes that the purge has "got rid of" his best friend. A letter dated 13th May states that he plans to write some "patriotic" music during the summer.² By June 1924 he is convalescing in a Crimean sanatorium and forbidden to play the piano. (This reminds him of his similar sojourn in the Crimea the previous year when he met Tanya.) On 11th July, he mentions plans to finish the Scherzo, Opus 7 ("begun recently"), plus "two violin pieces" and the Fugue, Opus 11. No further mention of the First Symphony occurs in Shostakovich's letters to Tanya Glivenko until 1st October, when he announces—quite as if he has never mentioned it to her before—that he is composing a symphony! (Whether this is the work he refers to in his letters of February is unclear, although presumably the scherzo is the same.)

On 6th October, he tells Tanya that he is so fed up with the poverty of his family that, in November, he will start playing the piano in a local cinema. This, he says, will simultaneously allow his mother to stop working thirteen hours a day (!) as a cashier and be an easier way to earn money than giving concerts, which always makes him so nervous. On 7th November, Shostakovich again announces, as if for the first time, that he's writing a symphony (his conservatory task for the year). It is, he says, "quite bad, but I have to write it so that I can have done with the conservatory this year, since I'm sick of it and don't feel like writing a symphony now." On 10th December he reports having written two sections of the symphony. A week later he is having to do twice as

long in each cinema session (four hours) and is finding it very tiring. His creativity has "died" and he has still only completed the first two parts of the symphony. In a letter dated 19th December, he describes himself as neurotic, irritable, insomniac, fed up with his cinema work, and on bad terms with God; all in all, he is not in the mood for writing the third movement. A fortnight later Shostakovich is writing the third movement, and confessing that the work will be a weight off his shoulders when it's finished. He finishes the third movement on 12th January 1925: "In my view it's turned out very well, the most substantial of my works." He adds that he fears that it'll never be performed—or performed only after he has died: "And it'll be performed badly since I won't be there to show them how it should go."

In January 1925, Shostakovich's sister Maria secures a position giving dancing lessons. Able now to drop his onerous cinema job, he is free to complete the symphony and his spirits rise. On 28th January he reports himself "blissfully happy" composing the finale. By 16th February, however, times are tough again. Still only 18 years old, he is suing the owner of the Bright Reel cinema—Akim Volinsky, "a well-known person used to respect"—for unpaid wages. ("People are shocked that I'm taking such a distinguished person to court.") He's hungry, suffering from bronchitis, and finding it difficult to write the symphony's finale. On 4th April he reports meeting the musicologist Boleslav Yavorsky, "the only real musician in Moscow and Petrograd, the only ray of light in the darkness of the modern musical world." Yavorsky has shown him that his music is "infected with conservatism"; he is trying to get rid of this. Shostakovich's next letter, a week later, is unhappy. His friend, the poet Volodya Kurchavov, is dying. As for himself, he's ill and thinking about suicide. Six days later, he writes about this to Lev Oborin, complaining of the difficulty of finding digs and describing his love-hate relationship with Moscow: "Its teeming masses make a horrible impression on me—its low houses, the crowds on the streets—but nevertheless I yearn to go there with all my soul. Doubts and problems, all this darkness suffocate me. From sheer misery I've started to compose the finale of the Symphony. It's turning out pretty gloomy—almost like Myaskovsky, who takes the cake when



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it comes to gloominess.”³ Next day he writes to Tanya, telling her he’s in “sweet ecstasy” when composing, which he does till four in the morning. Though he tried to hang himself, he didn’t have the guts to kick away the chair. He describes hallucinating. On 1st May, he announces that he finished the symphony on 26th April, is very pleased with it, and has dedicated it to his friend Mikhail Kvadri.

In contrast with Shostakovich’s practice as an adult, his First Symphony was not composed into full score as he proceeded. Thus, he had to go back and score the work, movement by movement, during June 1925—hard labour that made him ill again. On 23rd June, he writes to Tanya informing her that his friend Volodya Kurchavov has died. By July, he is telling her all about the Octet (Opus 11) he’s writing. (“I’m gradually becoming more of a modernist.”) On 12th November he tells her that Malko will conduct the symphony; meanwhile he’s busy writing out the orchestral parts. On 16th January 1926, he is correcting scores (and again, unlike his adult self, complaining about this drudgery). 1st April finds him fretting over a second round of corrections to orchestral parts. On 20th April he tells Tanya that there will be only three full rehearsals: 6th–8th May. Though Shostakovich reckons Malko a good conductor, he fears that he is incapable of presenting the symphony the way it should be. (“Even the slightest deviation from my wishes is painfully unpleasant.”) On 28th April posters for the concert go up and the composer is having cold feet. After the premiere on 12th May 1926, however, he is able to bask in his glory—and relax a little. He writes to Tanya on 21st May that he is “amused” by the reviews of the symphony in “the red press”. As for her, she is taken completely by surprise by the work’s success. Sofia Khentova relates that, on 20th March 1925, Tanya had attended a recital of music by Shostakovich which included the Trio (dedicated to her), as well as the *Fantastic Dances* for piano, the Suite for Two Pianos, and the Opus 9 pieces for cello:

“The performances didn’t go well, as the better Conservatoire students refused to have anything to do with this unknown music by an equally unknown composer. Afterwards, Tanya did her best to comfort the ‘sobbing’ composer. If any-

thing, this experience gave him the impetus to finish his First Symphony and, in early May 1926, Glivenko came to Leningrad for the première. Sitting in the Great Hall of the Philharmonic with Shostakovich’s sister Maria, she was stunned by the work’s triumphant reception. They were quite shy women and as a souvenir they secretly took a poster from the artists’ dressing room.”⁴

As for interpretation, Leningrad pianist and musicologist Mikhail Druskin sees the First Symphony as an expression of the two contrasting sides of the composer’s character. On the one hand, we hear his “youthful charm... abundant sense of humour... keen eye for the ridiculous, often noticing the absurd where others paid no attention.” On the other hand, there is Shostakovich’s tragic sense: “In his adolescence, he experienced hardship: he lost his father early, suffered deprivation and ill health, and had to take mundane jobs to help the family. These sufferings were reflected in his First Symphony, with its dramatic collisions.”⁵ The composer’s son Maxim hears the symphony in vivid illustrative terms:

“You must conduct it two ways. In the first movement, the happy, young Shostakovich is running down the Nevsky Prospect on a Sunday. In the second movement, it is a rainy, gray, cold day. Both are Quixotic adventures... The opening should be compared to *The Nose*. Wake. Yawn. Stretch. The trumpet is the opening yawn... Others may have a different interpretation. No one knows. That’s what musical life is about.”⁶

Maxim pictures the first movement as a march, “the beginning of a journey”. The second movement is “‘On the Road’, as if from an old fairy tale (the pianist seems quite nervous); back on the road; fairy tale music, very grand.” The third movement he hears as “one long phrase”. As to the finale, he echoes his father in preferring it to the other three movements: “There is no room for cuts or for changes. I like it very much. It works very much like a film. The fast material means a lot of time is passing quickly. With the sound of the timpani, you’re back to real time...” Maxim conceives the First Symphony as a *jeu d’esprit*, a work of youth looking back on mixed but generally better times: “In his Piano Sonata No. 1, ‘October’ [written next after First Symphony] he



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showed he was aware that the good wouldn't last."⁷ Others hear something deeper already present in this symphony. Violinist Yakov Milkis sees it as "the first chapter of a book where you know that a great drama will unfold. Your interest has been captured, and you remain in suspense awaiting the terror that lies ahead."⁸ Lev Lebedinsky goes considerably further, describing the work as "an alarm, a forecast of the terrible future."⁹ Speaking to Elizabeth Wilson between 1988 and 1989, he amplified this: "As a true democrat, he [Shostakovich] deeply detested the communist system, which continually threatened his very life. In his first major work, his First Symphony, he already challenged the forces of evil. I was the first to note that the timpani in the last movement sound like a depiction of an execution on a scaffold. When I remarked to Dmitri Dmitryevich, 'You were the first to declare war against Stalin,' he did not deny it. Already, from his early ears, Shostakovich understood what was going on in our country and what was to come."¹⁰

Symphony No. 2 in B major, Opus 14 (1927) — "To October"

Shostakovich's Second Symphony is usually said to have been composed early in 1927, the year of the 10th anniversary of the October revolution for which it was commissioned. However, in a letter to Tanya Glivenko dated 21st December 1925, he informs her that he has already begun composing his Second Symphony: "I'll finish it in 1926. Maybe it will be performed." It is impossible to tell whether this "Second Symphony" bears any relationship to the work he eventually catalogued under this title.¹¹ The first reference to the Second Symphony as we know it is in a letter to Tanya dated 21st March 1927: "As for the music for the 10th anniversary of the October revolution, I already have some ideas. At the very end I've decided to introduce factory hooters tuned to a certain key." While writing the symphony he keeps breaking off to compose additional pieces for his *Aphorisms*, Opus 13. On 20th March he is sarcastic about the conductorless (and thus "politically correct") Persimfans orchestra's chances of performing his First Symphony: "It will probably be very unpleasant to be present at their rape of my symphony." Of the Second Symphony, he

reports that he has started to compose it and that the beginning is "very difficult—I cannot play it. Today I, one of my friends, and my mother, all three of us, somehow played this section. It sounds good. It's a continuous din." On 28th May Shostakovich is "in a terrible hurry" to finish the symphony. It has to be ready by 28th July—another two months (indicating that his progress with it has not been rapid): "I'm tired of occupying myself with it... Because of it I've lost my peace of mind. [Alexander] Bezymensky has written abominable verses for it. I'm afraid that I won't be able to handle them." He adds that if he doesn't manage to finish the symphony, he'll send her a telegram to this effect so that she can come and bid him farewell—whereupon he'll hang himself! After finishing the Second Symphony, Shostakovich met Nina Varzar at Detskoye Selo and wrote no more letters to Tatyana Glivenko until 1930–1.

When she spoke to Elizabeth Wilson in 1989, Tanya Glivenko confirmed that Shostakovich had considered Bezymensky's propagandist poem for the Second Symphony "quite disgusting".¹² Nikolai Malko, who conducted the première on 5th November 1926, speaks similarly of these verses: "Shostakovich did not like them and simply laughed at them. His musical setting did not take them seriously, and showed no enthusiasm whatever."¹³ This, of course, casts doubt on the usual assumption that in the Second Symphony Shostakovich was manifesting a sincere expression of Communist faith.¹⁴ Manashir Yakubov, who claims that Shostakovich wrote "compositions quite crystalline in ideological respect", gives only one example of this: the Second Symphony. Confusingly, he contradicts himself by saying that the work cannot, even retrospectively, be categorised as Socialist Realist: "Probably he hoped that people would hear behind the generalised pictures of violence and the groans of the people something different from what Communist ideologists wanted to hear."¹⁵ Daniel Zhitomirsky, who later became an admirer of Shostakovich, disliked the work when, as a RAPM musicologist, he heard Shostakovich play it to Nikolai Zhilyaev in the winter of 1927: "The musical language seemed to be artificially complex, and the composer made no concessions to the tastes and the habits of the 'proletarian listener'." Later



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Zhitomirsky disliked the work for other reasons: “The aim which motivated the composer (or had been instilled in him by official propaganda) to glorify the October Revolution was a false aim. It was a child of our illusions of the 1920s... The picture of revolution depicted in the symphony was extremely schematic; it did not originate out of contact with real life, but out of the Marxist textbooks of the time.”¹⁶ In answer to whether the Second and Third symphonies reflect “an idealistic Leninist period” in Shostakovich’s life, his son Maxim concedes—obscurely, since this has always been the critical assumption about these works—that “It is becoming a popular scholarly posture”. He adds, in explanation, that: “Leninism, in a nutshell, is the imperative of the good to destroy everything in its path. He [Shostakovich] believed in the sanctity of human life. Shostakovich did not think much of his Second and Third symphonies.”¹⁷

Symphony No. 3 in E flat major, Opus 20 (1929)—“May Day”

Nothing of significance has emerged about this controversial work since 1990. In general the period 1928–34 in Shostakovich’s life is badly under-documented. He is known to have disliked this symphony, though precisely when he arrived at this feeling is unknown. His son Maxim recalls: “Once when I wanted to conduct the Third, he looked at me and said, ‘Couldn’t you conduct something else?’”¹⁸

Symphony No. 4 in C minor, Opus 43 (1935-6)

There is no source for the composer’s inner view of his work after his letters to Tatyana Glivenko. Most of what we can glean about his last thirteen symphonies derives from observations made by those who knew or worked with him. Probably the most important misconception about the Fourth Symphony is that Shostakovich withdrew it voluntarily, either because he was afraid of the consequences of it being played during the developing Terror of 1934–9, or because he was unhappy with the way rehearsals were going, or because he was dissatisfied with the work itself. Writing in 1990, Daniel Zhitomirsky gave a different version:

“Following the publication of the *Pravda* piece [28th January 1936], articles viciously condemning Shostakovich appeared all over the country. It was this condemnation that sealed the fate of the Fourth Symphony, finished later that year and immediately put into rehearsal with the Leningrad Philharmonic under Fritz Stiedry. According to a friend of the composer, the atmosphere during these sessions was ominous: ‘A rumour had been spreading in musical and extra-musical circles that Shostakovich, ignoring his critics, had written a diabolically clever symphony crammed with formalisms. One day, during rehearsal, we received a visit from the Secretary of the Composers’ Union, V. E. Iokhelson, accompanied by another important figure from the local Party HQ. Shortly afterwards, the director of the Philharmonic, I. M. Renzin, politely invited Dmitri Dmitryevich to his office. On the way home, Shostakovich was silent for a long while, finally saying in an even but toneless voice that the symphony would not be performed; it had been withdrawn on Renzin’s recommendation.’”¹⁹

The “friend of the composer” to whom Zhitomirsky refers was Isaak Glikman, whose introduction to his *Letters to a Friend* is the source for this account. The notion that Shostakovich feared Fritz Stiedry would be unable to cope with the demands of the Fourth is denied by Glikman and by Mark Reznikov, a violinist from the Leningrad Philharmonic of the time. On the other hand, Alexander Gauk’s anti-Stiedry line has been reiterated by Flora Litvinova with her recent claim that Shostakovich himself was unhappy with Stiedry’s approach. Another Leningrad Philharmonic violinist, M. S. Shak paints a picture of a tense relationship between Shostakovich and Stiedry during rehearsals.²⁰

The composer’s son Maxim adopts a modified version of the anti-Stiedry line (“The orchestra was nervous because of the difficulty”), but diverges from Glikman in maintaining that Shostakovich voluntarily withdrew the work.²¹ As for the composer’s belief in the Fourth Symphony itself, Kyriell Kondrashin testifies as follows:

“During the war, when everything was burned for heating, the score was thought to have been lost. Fortunately it proved possible to reconstruct it,



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and I asked Shostakovich whether he had any interest in having it performed. (The task was complicated by the numerous errors the existing score contained; I needed his advice.) Shostakovich took the material and studied it for a couple of days before announcing that he was still pleased with the symphony and happy to have me perform it.”²²

Issak Glikman confirms that Shostakovich expressed great satisfaction with the Fourth Symphony upon re-examining it in 1962: “It seems to me that in many respects my Fourth Symphony stands much higher than my most recent ones!”²³ As for the work’s alleged “grandiosomania” of which Shostakovich had spoken in the 1950s, his son Maxim responds with irritation: “No. No. It’s a bad rumour. It’s not true... He was very happy when Kyrill Kondrashin performed it. He was *very* happy. It’s a great symphony. One of the greatest of his symphonies. Show me one bar you could take off. I couldn’t find any one bar in the symphony, any cut. Because he is a great master of form, of the whole. The construction of the Fourth is fantastic! Big thing: he needed a big symphony for his big ideas. But everything is in place.”²⁴ Shostakovich’s revisions to the text of the Fourth as reconstructed in 1962 were, as Maxim’s view suggests, very minor. Kondrashin records that he asked Shostakovich numerous questions during the rehearsals: “Whenever something went wrong, he waited for a pause, and asked the orchestra and the conductor to excuse him, blaming himself for the faults. All his observations were very precise. “I wrote that *piano*, but it’d sound better *mezzo-forte*”—that sort of thing. All these nuances went into the official edition.”²⁵ (Maxim adds: “I have so much faith in my father’s musicianship and genius that I feel that the revisions in *Lady Macbeth* and Symphony No. 4 have to be improvements. Therefore, those versions are preferable.”²⁶)

Shostakovich is known sometimes to have lost confidence in himself and his work under pressure. However, his estimation of the Fourth Symphony in 1962 was so high that claims that he lost faith in it in late 1936 (and that this prompted him to withdraw it) are ostensibly weakened. That he feared the symphony’s reception in the context

of its time is more plausible. Apart from being formally incompatible with the demands of Soviet symphonism under Socialist Realist *diktat*, the work was too obviously at odds with “Soviet reality” itself. “When you listen to the Fourth,” says Maxim Shostakovich, “you feel the breath of his time...”²⁷ Interviewed by Louis Blois in 1989, Maxim was more explicit about this, describing the Fourth as “dedicated to [evidently meaning a portrayal of] the policies and apocalypses of the Soviet regime”.²⁸ According to Maxim, his father “thought it [the symphony] would be his end”. The work is, in his view, “absolutely devoid of happy resolution—which has no relation to pessimism... The Fifth is less pessimistic than the Fourth. In the Fourth, there is no exit... The finale is dark.” Vladimir Ashkenazy compares the Fourth and Fifth as follows:

“I think there is a distinct border, a watershed, between the Fourth and Fifth. My guess is that... there was a spectacularly talented young composer in the Fourth Symphony. And I think in the Fifth Symphony there is already a man who has suffered a lot, who developed a way of expressing himself. In the Fourth it is not yet self-expression. It’s just the reaction of a very interested individual to the world around him.”²⁹

The question of whether Shostakovich withdrew the Fourth Symphony voluntarily or was ordered to do so cannot ultimately be resolved in the absence of official documentation of the affair, which may or may not exist. Clearly Shostakovich was aware that the work sailed dangerously close to the wind. Speaking to Flora Litvinova on the occasion of their last meeting, he reportedly told her: “You ask if I would have been different without ‘Party guidance’? Yes, almost certainly. No doubt the line that I was pursuing when I wrote the Fourth Symphony would have been stronger and sharper in my work. I would have displayed more brilliance, used more sarcasm, I could have revealed my ideas openly instead of having to resort to camouflage.”³⁰ Given the circumstances in the other arts in Russia at the time, it appears on balance to be most probable that the Fourth Symphony was effectively forbidden by the authorities, as Glikman describes and as both Zhitomirsky and Mravinsky³¹ believed.



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An interesting light is cast on the circumstances surrounding the Fourth Symphony by the First Symphony of Gavriil Popov, issued in a recording on Olympia (OCD 576) in 1995. Originally composed between 1928 and 1932, this work faced a protracted peer review during which its composer waited a year for a verdict and spent a further year making alterations to it. Eventually the symphony was premiered in 1935, whereupon it was attacked by the head of the Leningrad Bureau for Control of Cultural Events and Repertoire as “reflecting the ideology of classes hostile to us”. The Leningrad Composers’ Union (at that time still a place where rival views could to some extent be genuinely debated) witnessed a succession of heated arguments about the political correctness, or not, of Popov’s First. The final outcome was a grudging rehabilitation that did not extend to any further performances. According to Inna Barsova,³² the effective banning of Popov’s First Symphony marked the beginning of the clamp-down on musical expression associated with Stalin’s Terror (1935–9): “Composers ceased writing serious music and turned to film music, theatre music, and folklore. The musical creativity of Shostakovich nevertheless remained free until 1936, both in his choice of concepts and in his musical technique.” Shostakovich, who confessed himself “a great and ardent admirer” of Popov’s First,³³ seems to have taken it as something of a model for his own Fourth Symphony, which bears several similarities to Popov’s work (e.g., the codas of the first and the second [12:27 et seq.] of Popov’s movements and bars 11–12 of the theme of Popov’s Largo [0:26–0:33]). Popov likewise admired the first half of the first movement of Shostakovich’s Fourth, which the composer played to him on piano at Detskoye Selo on October 31st 1935 (“very caustic, strong, and noble”).³⁴ In a sense, these two symphonies can be said to have been hand-in-hand in running full-tilt into Stalinist censorship during 1935–6, Shostakovich’s probably forced withdrawal of the Fourth echoing the fate of the work which had to some extent inspired it: Popov’s First.

On the subject of interpretive details, Maxim Shostakovich makes the unusual suggestion that “there is the prescience of war in Symphony No. 4, much like the bombers in Symphony No. 5...”³⁵ (See below, Fifth Symphony.) Vis-à-vis the

percussion at the end of the second movement, he thinks the intention is to show “the passage of time... A clock or heartbeat”.³⁶ Gennadi Rozhdestvensky offers an alternative view: “For me, and I think for Shostakovich, the association is prisoners tapping out messages to one another on the hot-water pipes in jail.”³⁷

Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Opus 47 (1937)

The central thrust of recent Russian commentary on the Fifth is the importance of placing the work in its historical context: 1937—the height of Stalin’s Great Terror. To greater or lesser extent, all of this comment assumes that the Fifth Symphony is concerned with experience, personal or universal, of the Terror. The most remarkable story recently told in connection with the Fifth Symphony is Veniamin Basner’s account (received at first hand from the composer) of Shostakovich’s interrogation by an officer of the NKVD in 1937. While this is probably spurious (see Journal No. 6 [Winter 1996], pp. 25–7), it is not to be dismissed as a wanton fiction. Several of his relatives and many of his colleagues were “purged” during this period.³⁸ An intensely sensitive man, Shostakovich may have so feared his imminent demise that he lost his ability to discriminate between what happened in fact and what only occurred in his tormented imagination. (This, again, was a common syndrome under the Terror.)

Despite his presumably terrible fear after Tukhachevsky’s arrest—a time when, as Maxim assures us, the composer sat up at night with a suitcase waiting for the NKVD to come for him—he still managed to go on composing the symphony: specifically, the *Largo* and the finale.³⁹ Of the *Largo*, Israel Nestyev, often allied with Shostakovich’s enemies in the Composers’ Union, has recently said: “Even now I perceive this music as a requiem for the millions of innocent victims of Stalin’s regime.” He also acknowledges Shostakovich’s unique and heroic achievement: “Not a single other artist—no painter, dramatist, or film-maker—could think of using their art as a means of expressing protest against Stalin’s Terror. Only instrumental music was able to express the terrible truth of that time.”⁴⁰ The violist Fyodor Druzhinin of the Beethoven Quartet



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adds (with reference to the Fifth Symphony):
“People who lived in Shostakovich’s epoch have no need to dig in the archives or to marvel at the evidence of repressions and executions and murders. It is all there in his music.”⁴¹

Maxim Shostakovich has outlined his interpretation of the Fifth Symphony. With regard to its subtitle and the effect of his father’s public disgrace in 1936, he is unequivocal: “Critics felt he was ‘corrected, improved, and clarified.’ On the contrary, he chose clearer language to insure clear communication. The Fifth Symphony is his ‘Heroic Symphony’.” For Maxim, the symphony’s opening measures are “stormy” and “intense”, as if the composer is saying: “Listen to me! I am going to speak now!” (This is “deep melody, not song. He is thinking about the time he is living in.”) Maxim’s account of the work continues as follows:

“Fig 9: More intimate musical language. All develops very slowly. The theme requires much time to show the atmosphere of that time... Fig 17: Stormy allegro intrudes. Attack of evil. Music preceding is human, warm, kind. It asks ‘Why aren’t we kind to each other?’ With the allegro, the attack of negative forces begins and grows. Not as much as Fig. 27. It climaxes at Fig. 36, the hero being torn apart. After Fig. 39, everything is a requiem for that man who would have lived a different life if he did not attack the evil... The critics call the 2nd movement a Mahlerian waltz. I strongly disagree. Mahler was in his tradition, but this is not a waltz. It is the aggression of a soulless negative force. A machine of destruction... Fig. 57, violin solo, is a child’s voice from beneath a soldier’s boot. It is not a waltz. The flute repeats the solo, a defiant fist still raised... Fig. 61, the force begins again, and the movement finishes with the victory of evil...⁴² 3rd Movement is the highest achievement of lyricism in all of Shostakovich’s work. Very intimate. Shostakovich divides the violins into three parts to increase the number of voices... It is the last night at home of a man sentenced to the gulag; but the problem is eternal! It could be a man before his execution! I see a man who spends his last night before execution with his family. He hears his children breathe. He feels the warmth of his wife. But he does not cry! Fig 89. The regret of a strong man, ‘Why! Why me!’

Compare it with the ‘Sonnets of Michelangelo’—When, O Lord?”—but there are no tears! It is a question of a strong man. Shostakovich was not sentimental. He was masculine. Strong. His range of feelings was tremendous... Fig 90, the ‘celli solo breaks your heart... Fig 92, climax... The story of the hero’s feelings subsides. He is still, and his family is sleeping next to him... The finale. An intruding storm. Different associations. A struggle in which the hero wins. This movement is built on forward accelerating motion. It cuts off at Fig. 112. The intrusion of a lyrical episode comparable to the 3rd movement... It’s not really quiet. There is the premonition of something... Fig. 121, prediction of war. Drums and low horns are low-flying bombers... Conclusion: If it is not military, then it is something evil threatening Shostakovich personally... Fig 128 to the end. It says again and again, ‘No. You will not be able to do anything to me.’ It is not happiness. It is not victory. It is the determination of a strong man to BE...⁴³

Maxim points out an important misprint in the coda to the finale: “Fig 131: eighth note equals 184; not quarter note. It is very useful to look at and think about. And guess that it is not right.... It should be eighth note! Slow!” This fact—recently corroborated by Sir Charles Mackerras⁴⁴—confirms that the effect Shostakovich meant to convey, rather than one of hectic triumph, was instead of the numbing unanimity of drilled crowds. Kurt Sanderling: “The enforced enthusiasm of the masses is meant as a gesture of defiance and self-affirmation—not as a victory for the regime, but as a victory against it.”⁴⁵ (Fyodor Druzhinin calls this a “tragic apotheosis”.⁴⁶) Another aspect of the finale was revealed by musicologist Gerard McBurney in an interval talk for Radio 3 in 1994. Quoted at Fig. 113 et seq., the song “Rebirth”—from the Pushkin cycle, Opus 46, written immediately before the Fifth Symphony—is also quoted in the first four notes (A-D-E-F) of the Finale—notes corresponding to the words “A barbarian artist” in Pushkin’s text: “A barbarian artist, with sleepy brush/Blackens over a picture of genius/And his lawless drawing/Scribbles meaninglessly upon it./But with the years the alien paints/Flake off like old scales;/The creation of genius appears before us/In its former beauty./Thus do delusions fall away/From my



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worn-out soul./And there spring up within it/Visions of original, pure days.” McBurney’s thesis is that Shostakovich used Pushkin’s poem, itself an Aesopian text written under conditions of Tsarist censorship, as a way of encoding the true meaning of the symphony’s otherwise inevitably debatable Finale. Stalin (or perhaps his cultural apparatus) is the “barbarian artist” who blackened over *Lady Macbeth* in the *Pravda* editorial of 28th January 1936 and in 1937 forced Shostakovich to veil his own intentions in the Fifth Symphony. Pushkin’s lines offer multiple resonances for Shostakovich’s predicament: the “lawlessness” of the barbarian artist’s drawing corresponds to the Stalinist justice system’s indifference to legal process⁴⁷; “original, pure days” can be heard as alluding to the pre-Communist era; “thus do delusions fall away” anticipates both the misunderstanding the Finale is bound to endure and its eventual correct explanation once the Pushkin allusions are grasped. (It is worth noting, too, that the word *chisti*—which means “pure” in the sense of having been cleaned and restored to its original state, and thus echoes Pushkin’s initial painting metaphor—is directly related to the Russian word for “purge”, *chistka*, now infamous in the term “ethnic cleansing”.)

Of course, no code of the foregoing sort would have been needed had Shostakovich been free to end the symphony in any other way than *fff* in D major. To Boris Khaikin, late in 1937, he said: “I finished the Fifth Symphony in the major and fortissimo. It would be interesting to know what would have been said if I’d finished it pianissimo and in the minor.”⁴⁸ As for the symphony’s reception, Kurt Sanderling, in the audience for the Leningrad première, speaks as follows:

“Probably this is the first time that Shostakovich addressed himself to the dominant theme of his life: anti-Stalinism... The audience was very receptive to Shostakovich’s message, and after the first movement we looked around rather nervously, wondering whether we might be arrested after the concert... The vast majority of the audience knew perfectly well what it was all about. Maybe this explains why it was such a resounding success. It faithfully reflected the sentiments uppermost in our minds.”⁴⁹

Mstislav Rostropovich describes the official reaction to the symphony: “The government would have been delighted to execute him [Shostakovich], but it so happened that the ovations after the Fifth Symphony lasted more than 40 minutes. They had never seen such an audience success. And of course the government knew that, so they put a face on it, saying ‘We’ve taught him and now he’s writing acceptable music.’”⁵⁰ Vladimir Ashkenazy: “In my humble opinion I think they hailed the Fifth Symphony only because of the D major at the end.”⁵¹ Nor was this official acceptance a foregone conclusion. Mikhail Chulaki, a composer who later joined the choir of condemnation of Shostakovich in 1948, recalls that early bureaucratic reaction to the Fifth revolved around the apparently sincere belief that the enthusiastic reactions the work was drawing must somehow have been “fabricated” by “wreckers” out to sabotage the People’s music.⁵²

Inna Barsova quotes also from Liubov’ Vasilievna Shaporiny’s diary for 21st November 1937 concerning the premiere of Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony: “The audience was beside itself and gave a frenzied ovation—a deliberate protest against the persecution to which poor Mitya has been subjected. Everyone repeated one and the same phrase: ‘He answered and he answered well.’ D.D. came out pale, biting his lip. I think he could have broken into tears. Shebalin, Alexandrov, Gauk came from Moscow—only Shaporin wasn’t there... I met Popov: ‘You know, I’ve become a coward. I’m afraid of everything. I even burned your letter.’” (Like Shostakovich, Popov began to drink heavily around this time.) Rostropovich puts all this into perspective: “Shostakovich was the uncapped historiographer of our lives. He made a mirror of all that happened to us. That’s why he’s so near to the heart of every Russian.” Had the composer expressed his thoughts in words, he adds, he would have ended up behind bars—“but music is too abstract, especially for idiots. That’s what it was, our government: complete idiots! But when you understand what our life was like under the theory of Communism, the abstract in Shostakovich becomes much more actual.”⁵³

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Footnotes:

¹ The city was renamed in honour of Lenin in February 1924, but Shostakovich refuses to call it Leningrad. On 2nd March he quotes Lenin's observation that film is the most useful of the arts, adding that he prefers the useless ones: music and ballet. On 26th April and 3rd June 1924, he gives his address as "Saint Leninburg".

² In the same letter he mentions having done some music for "the 10th anniversary" (of the October revolution). He wrote it "in a hurry" and wonders what people will think of it.

³ Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, p. 46. [Henceforth referred to as EW.]

⁴ Khentova, "A Russian Love Story Sold at Sotheby's", *Musical Life* (1992), No. 3. [See DSCH XXI.]

⁵ EW, p. 41.

⁶ "Notes by Maxim", transcribed by John-Michael Albert (1990), DSCH Journal No. 4. [Henceforth referred to as JMA.]

⁷ JMA.

⁸ EW, p. 314.

⁹ Interviewed by Irina Nikolska, *melos* 4–5 (Summer 1993). [Henceforth referred to as Nikolska.]

¹⁰ EW, p. 335.

¹¹ On 18th June 1926 he reports starting on a piano concerto.

¹² EW, p. 61.

¹³ *A Certain Art*, p. 204.

¹⁴ Apart from some pro-Lenin remarks made in letters to Tanya Glivenko early in 1924—and contradicted by other Lenin references later in the same year—there is little evidence of any political interest, let alone enthusiasm, in the Glivenko letters 1923–1931.

¹⁵ Nikolska.

¹⁶ EW, p. 72.

¹⁷ JMA.

¹⁸ JMA.

¹⁹ *Daugava*, 3–4. [See DSCH XVIII–XXI.]

²⁰ See EW, pp. 115–120.

²¹ JMA.

²² Interview with Pierre Vidal. [See DSCH XIII.]

²³ *Letters to a Friend*, pp. 10–13. (Glikman's Shostakovich always talks in this earnest and formal—not to say bowdlerised—way, as if dictating to posterity a harmless version of his views suitable for young adolescents.)

²⁴ Interviewed by John Riley [DSCH XVIII].

²⁵ Interview with Pierre Vidal. [See DSCH XIII.]

²⁶ JMA.

²⁷ JMA.

²⁸ DSCH XIV.

²⁹ Interview with John Riley, 1992 [DSCH XX].

³⁰ EW, p. 426.

³¹ EW, p. 139.

³² Barsova, Inna, 'Between "Social Demands" and the "Music of Grand Passions" [The Years 1934–37 in the life of Dmitri Shostakovich]', paper, University of Michigan, 28th January 1994.

³³ Per Skans' sleevenote to Olympia OCD 576.

³⁴ Barsova.

³⁵ JMA.

³⁶ Interview with John Riley, 1992 [DSCH XX].

³⁷ *The Independent*, 6th April 1991.

³⁸ In 1936, his former companion Elena Konstantinovskaya and the Shostakovich family friend Galina Serebryakova were arrested. In 1937, his mother-in-law Sofia Varzar, brother-in-law Vsevolod Frederiks, and uncle Maxim Kostrikin were arrested, and his sister Maria exiled to Frunze. The musicologist Nikolai Zhilyaev was arrested and executed soon after Tukhachevsky. During 1938, Boris Kornilov, author of words to "Song of the Meeting" from *Counterplan*, was arrested (and later done away with), as was Adrian Piotrovsky, author of *Rule Britannia* and librettist of *The Limpid Stream*. In 1939, Meyerhold was arrested, tortured, and executed.

³⁹ According to Grigori Fried (EW, p. 122), Shostakovich brought the first two movements to Zhilyaev's communal flat in Moscow soon after finishing them. (He was on his way back from a journey to the south and was due that evening to return to Leningrad.) Zhilyaev thought what he had seen "quite wonderful". If Shostakovich composed the *Largo* in June after Tukhachevsky's death, Zhilyaev, himself arrested around this time, could have seen no more of the score.



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Footnotes *cont.*

⁴⁰Nikolska.

⁴¹EW, p. 390.

⁴²Kurt Sanderling concurs: "This is not a boisterous scherzo, but a grim and biting parody." Interviewed by Hans Bitterlich, 1992. (Sleevenote, Berlin Classics BC2063-2.)

⁴³JMA.

⁴⁴*Classic CD*, November 1995. In DSCH Journal No. 6 [Winter 1996], Sanderling adds: "We understood what he was saying. And it was not the 'Triumph' of the mighty, of those in power. There was no need for further explanation."

⁴⁵Interviewed by Hans Bitterlich, 1992.

⁴⁶EW, p. 390.

⁴⁷See Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Vol. 1, pp. 229-431.

⁴⁸EW, p. 127.

⁴⁹Interviewed by Hans Bitterlich, 1992.

⁵⁰Interviewed by Edward Rothstein, *The Independent Magazine*, 12th November 1988.

⁵¹ Interview with John Riley, 1992 [DSCH XX].

⁵²EW, pp. 132-8. Richard Taruskin's alternative account of the reception of the Fifth Symphony ignores Chulaki's testimony altogether. (See Ian MacDonald, "Thoughts on David Fanning's 'Shostakovich Studies', DSCH Journal No. 5 [Summer 1996], pp. 10-29.)

⁵³Interviewed by Mark Pappenheim, *BBC Music Magazine*, [February 1995, pp. 16-20].

The Second Part of "Recent Commentary" - on the Symphonies Nos. 6 to 10, will follow in a subsequent issue. If you possess any interesting, but recent, articles (not reviews) on DS's symphonies, in any language, please write to the Editor of DSCH at :

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Quotations

Continuing the theme of less well known quotations from the previous edition of the Journal (once again, your own contributions are welcome):

... when we consider contemporary production, and the kind of music that is being written today by 'advanced' composers, one cannot but be conscious of a growing rift between the composer and his public. This may not be a healthy sign, and one result of the ever-increasing tendency to write music that is only intelligible to a small élite may be to drive the average potential music-lover, as a pis-aller into the arms of the purveyors of trashy mediocrity. This, incidentally, is one of the reasons why composers like Prokofiev and Shostakovich in Russia have now conformed to the official Soviet theory that it is better to write good music that is accessible to millions in a simpler idiom, than to limit its appeal to a few hundreds by making it too 'high-brow', with the result that the 'middle-brows', who want music they can understand, are driven to slake their thirst at less reputable springs.

From *Music in the Modern World*, by Rollo H. Myers: Edward Arnold, London. Second Edition, 1948.

... I finally heard your 5th [Symphony-Ed] - true, under rather dismal circumstances: it was at Sokolniki - locomotives were tooting in the distance, an accordion was whining away in the park and the mosquitoes were biting savagely. But Stasevich brought along the score, and I tried to fill in what I couldn't hear. I like many places in the symphony very much, although it became clear that they're not at all praising it for why it ought to be praised. They'll eventually figure it out properly.

May I fault you in one detail? Why so much tremolo in the strings? Just like Aïda. But that's of course for you to correct, if your point of view coincides with mine.

Letter from Prokofiev to Shostakovich, Moscow, June 5th 1938.

