



DOCUMENTARY



The New Face of the Twelfth Symphony

Hidden depths in an unfairly neglected work

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Introduction to a conference dedicated to D. D. Shostakovich's music, September 25, 1996 at La Scala, Milan.

Despite the recent and still-continuing publication of Shostakovich's previously unknown letters, and the new attempts currently being made at interpreting his works, the Twelfth of his fifteen symphonies continues to be denied the proper rank it deserves. In her interview for the magazine *melos*, Marina Sabinina, author of *Shostakovich—simfonist* [*Shostakovich—The Symphonist*], asserted that "Symphony No. 12 was Shostakovich's most bitter compromise. Thank goodness that the movies and cantata have been long forgotten; the Twelfth is, however, listed among his symphonies and is included in programmes for solemn jubilees."

Was this symphony indeed the simple result of a compromise?

For a "classical" composer the symphonic genre has always been a "sacred ground", requiring the highest degree of artistry and professional craftsmanship. Together with the operatic genre, it is, one may say, an important reference point in appraising a composer's historical importance and artistic potential. The same standards should also apply in Shostakovich's case. In such an important genre, even if one were to discuss only one symphony out of fifteen, would the composer have really left posterity a legacy consisting of a mere programmatic piece satisfying the demands of the party heads? No, this hardly seems possible, and there has to be in the Twelfth Symphony some underlying subtext, some veiled message. My doubts regarding the "sanctioned" evaluation of this symphony have stemmed from such a premise.

From the subtitle "1917" [The Year 1917], given by the author himself, as well as from the titles he assigned to the four movements of the symphony ("Revoliutsionnyi Petrograd" [Revolutionary Petrograd], "Razliv"[1], "Aurora" [Aurora][2], "Zaria chelovechestva" [Dawn of Mankind], one can see that the historic process of the 1917 Revolution was being expressed here in the language of music. The two main themes of the first movement (let us call them Theme A and Theme B) appear in all four movements and thus create a cyclic form, on their own. Keeping in mind the title of the work, Theme A can be interpreted as being the idea of the revolution itself, and Theme B a representation of Lenin.

However, in addition to these two themes, there is another one, a three-note motif repeated often throughout the symphony: *mi-bémol—si-bémol—do* [e-flat, b-flat, c] (*Es-B-C*). Moreover, a recognizably defined pattern accompanies its emergence.

In the first movement, it occurs for the first time in measure 407, thereafter being heard seven times, invariably rendered by the strings in *pizzicato*, always in *mezzo piano*, and always escorted by the timpani which intrudes on and interrupts the musical flow. While Shostakovich seems to have made every effort to render it almost inaudible, the motif is rather noticeably singled out by being repeated twice in the last four measures of the movement (as is also seen in the score). In the second movement, it appears for the first time in measure 10, and is heard only five times, also in *pizzicato*; furthermore, it appears constantly in the form of an enharmonic substitution: *re-dièse—la-dièse—si-dièse* [d-sharp, a-sharp, b-sharp]; once again it is in *pizzicato*, and here, each time, it sounds harshly, as if dividing the musical flow into "before" and "after". This motif is totally absent from the third movement.

In the finale, the motif returns to its initial form: e-flat, b-flat, c (*Es-B-C*). After a massive twelve-fold insertion into the musical fabric (measure 184 et seq.), the motif sounds eight times in the Coda where, reinforced by the brass, the level rises to *ff*, and every note is marked *sforzando*. Finally, in the last measures of the symphony, the eighth statement is played *tutti* at the maximum dynamic level.

What does this motif signify? In the first movement, it is hidden in the shadows; in the second movement, changing its harmonic outline, it interrupts the general musical flow; in the finale, it subjugates the entire orchestra. Shostakovich, who has left us a number of enciphered messages, undoubtedly must have also wanted to convey something here. Were these notes, perhaps, someone's initials? I was quite unable to come up with an answer until the moment I read the Latin letters as Cyrillic letters and "Es-B-C" changed into E (or YO), V, and S. These letters happen to be the initials of "Yosif Vissarionovich Stalin." Incidentally, Es-B-C fully corresponds to the "motif of the police" in the seventh and eighth scenes of the opera *Lady Macbeth*.

Thus, in the first movement, the image of Stalin, almost muffled by the sounds of the timpani, could be said to correspond to Osip Mandel'shtam's famous poem: "My zhiviom, pod soboiu ne chuiia strany, / Nashi rechi za desiat' shagov ne slyshny." [We live, without feeling our country under our feet, / Our words cannot be heard ten steps away]. A little thought produces the following scenario: in the first movement, the voices trying to expose Stalin's criminality are barely audible.



In the second movement, it is forbidden to utter his name, except in an allegorical way. In the third movement, the accusing voices have vanished. And in the finale, everything concludes with the dictator's total victory and glorification. There could, of course, be another reading: the finale might be interpreted as the ultimate exposure of the crimes of the "cult of personality."



Notes

- [1] A hiding place of Lenin before the revolution.
- [2] Name of the battleship that gave the first shot leading to the revolution.

Supplement

At any rate, I am convinced that Shostakovich's description of the Twelfth as "a dedication to memories of Lenin" was nothing but an external cover: the music itself has a totally different content. If my conjecture is plausible, then one may understand what prompted the composer to leave this piece listed among his symphonic works. The present writer dearly hopes that ongoing efforts to put the record straight, to discover and investigate Shostakovich's manuscripts, will lead to the discovery of further motifs or other sorts of musical formulae which may signify much to researchers devoted to his art.

Lest one dismiss Fumiko Hitotsuyanagi's reading of the *E-flat—B-flat—C* motif as fanciful speculation, it is worth noting that Shostakovich's longtime friend Flora Litvinova finds this play on a name "Yos[if] V. S[talin]" entirely in character for the composer. She also reports that the highly respected Russian musicologist Leo Mazel also finds Hitotsuyanagi's ideas "plausible."

This suggested analysis of a single motif from the Twelfth permits us to see another facet of this work - yet it is only one such example of this. Further thorough study of Shostakovich's musical texts is likely to unveil a number of still undecoded messages secreted in his works by this amazing composer.

Several score examples, not included in the original article, will underscore the prominence of this three-note motif, which stands out as a result of repetition, articulation, accompanying figurations, and being surrounded by rests, as if to put quotation marks around the name.

As Hitotsuyanagi points out, the motif first appears in the first movement in measures 407-408 (Ex. 1). There, and in the later statements (mm. 431-432, 464-465, 482-483, 487-488, 490-491, and 492-493), it is accompanied by the same *pizzicato* articulation, *mp* dynamics, and timpani and drum accompaniment.

English Version by Véronique Zaytzeff and Frederick Morrison

Ex. 1: Symphony No. 12, I, mm. 406-409.



The closing of movements I (Ex. 2), II, and IV with the same three-note motif also suggests it has some special significance.



Ex. 2: Symphony No. 12, I, mm. 488-493 (percussion and strings only).

In the second movement, the motif appears five times (mm. 10, 27, 82, 171, and 178-179), always *pizzicato* and spelled, because of the new key, enharmonically (Ex. 3).

Ex. 3: Symphony No. 12, II, mm. 10-14.





In the finale, the motif appears more prominently than ever: twelve times between measures 184-200 (Ex. 4), five times between measures 216-219 (Ex. 5), and eight times in the Coda (mm. 335, 337, 348, 350, 379, 382, 385, and 392), pounded out *fortissimo* by the bassoons, trombones, tubas, and strings (Ex. 6) and eventually the full orchestra.

Ex. 4: Symphony No. 12, IV, mm. 179-201 (strings only)

The musical score consists of four systems of staves for Violins (Viol.), Violas (Vla.), Cellos (Vc.), and Double Basses (Kb.). The first system shows the initial entry of the motif. The second system includes the marking 'pizz.' (pizzicato) for all parts. The third system shows the motif continuing with some rests. The fourth system shows the motif being played by all string parts.

Ex. 5: Symphony No. 12, IV, mm. 214-219 (strings only).



a tempo

acceler.

Viol.

Vla.

Vc.

Kb.

ff

dim.

Ex. 6: Symphony No. 12, IV, mm. 333-337.

333

Picc.

Fl.

Ob.

Klar.

Fag.

K. fag.

Hr.

Trp.

Pos.

Tb.

Ph.

Triang.

kl. Tr.

Beck.

Viol.

Vla.

Vc.

ff cresc.

ff espr.

