

DSCH REVIEW

SLAVA'S HAMMERBLOW



Amsterdam, 1st May 2003

Musorgsky (orchestration Shostakovich), from *Khovanshchina*

Act One: Prelude - Dawn over the Moscow River

Act Four: Dances of the Persian Slave Girl

Songs and Dances of Death

Lullaby

Serenade

Trepak

Field Marshal

Shostakovich - Fifth Symphony

Sergei Leiferkus was the soloist in the *Songs and Dances of Death* and Mstislav Rostropovich conducted the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

Rostropovich clearly arranged this programme with much care - in a sense it's astounding that he still has the urge to conduct Shostakovich's works so often. Indeed, one might wonder why. The conductor's choice of programme during his world tour (the war in Iraq was very firmly in our minds) saw the Fifth frequently included. And just as with Beethoven's Fifth this work appears timeless.

Worth noting was quite the "other side" of Shostakovich's musical personality we experienced this evening - embodied in two encores in which the composer's humour and wit are prevalent - in the arrangements of Youmans (*Tea for Two*) and Johan Strauss II's (*The Pleasure Train Polka*).

The unpretentious *Dawn* and *Dances* as curtain-raisers is a fine choice. From the outset the audience is immersed in the so-typical melancholic Russian atmosphere. Shostakovich's instrumentation is a joy to behold and Rostropovich knew perfectly how to draw out the impressive kaleidoscopic landscape of sounds that unfold from the score.

Baritone Sergei Leiferkus then performed the *Songs and Dances of Death* in which he showed himself to be the perfect narrator. Even if you don't understand the Russian language here is an artist with such a colossal presence that he is sure to thrill. Death and destruction, often central subjects in Shostakovich works are just as present in Musorgsky's *Songs* and Shostakovich's characteristic orchestration in each song is appropriate and admirable.

The orchestration of the songs reminded me of Schubert's *Die Winterreise* for piano and voice. As in *Der Leierman* for example where the composer embodies in his piano accompaniment the cyclic and monotonic nature of the organ-grinder.

The orchestra interpreted the *Lullaby* very touchingly and together with Leiferkus this death became a markedly sweet, soft, rocking death. Leiferkus expressed *The Serenade* with persuasiveness to the accompaniment of the orchestra's *ostinato*. This section reminded me of the passing of time, symbolised by a striking clock.

The *Trepak* is orchestrated in ink-black timbres laden with the mortal fear that surrounds the old man. The singer brings us under his spell. Here, rhythmical transitions didn't always pass smoothly, but on the whole this movement was of frightening beauty.

The final song symbolises destruction and deadly terror - this is a role Leiferkus expressed dramatically and yet very naturally, without being excessive. Shostakovich's repetitive rhythm played out on trumpet was quite, quite terrifying.

Finally to "Mstislav Rostropovich's" Fifth. If you don't know what Socialist Realism is, you can read about it. If you don't realize how ridiculous Socialist Realism can be, just listen to Shostakovich Fifth Symphony. The hammer (although without the sickle) is a truly Russian-socialist symbol. Slava's hammering out of Shostakovich's last movement statements is without any doubt one of the most grotesque manifestations of Socialist Realism.

Throughout, Rostropovich's rich variation in tempi, dynamics and accents offered up tremendous first and second movements in a way I hadn't heard previously. The oboe solos were particularly moving.

The weeping strings in the third movement relate unequalled grief and sorrow and were immediately followed by a savagely grotesque opening of the last movement in a way which reminded me of the Seventh Symphony. The army's boots crush as in a film, triumphing in death. The battle cry sounds: "Attack" and the hammer in Slava's hand affirms this motif repeatedly.

Rostropovich took the coda Moderato as did Mravinsky in 1969. With this tempo the rhythmic and dynamic aspects of each accent as well as their different colouring are clearly audible. Slava's Fifth is a deeply-felt reflection of Shostakovich's music and of Russian history - one and the same source.

Rostropovich's conducting was not always flawless and a few weak moments occurred in the third and fourth movements. Occasionally the tempo was taken too slowly and consequently every once and a while the tension collapsed. Nevertheless, the overwhelming sensation was as if I was hearing the Fifth for the first time, as fresh young leaves on a tree in spring.

If you have ever listened to this symphony but left it feeling that you never quite grasped Shostakovich's meaning completely: don't worry. Slava's hammerblows lend force to a firm and unequivocal appreciation of this masterpiece.

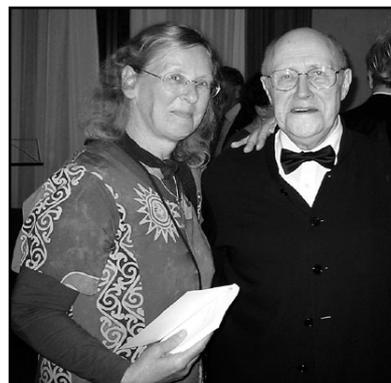


Illustration: M Rostropovich with DSCH's Henny van der Groep