



# DOCUMENTARY III

## BAKU, THE PHILHARMONIC AND SHOSTAKOVICH

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On January 27, 2004 a quite special event took place in Baku, Azerbaijan's capital: the Azerbaijan State Philharmonic Hall opened after seven years of complete renovation. A splendid ceremony was held in the presence of Ilham Aliyev, President of the Azerbaijan Republic and other dignitaries. Azerbaijan's State Symphonic Orchestra conducted by Rauf Abdullayev also performed works by local composers - big names of the twentieth century in fact - namely Uzeyir Hajibeyov, Kara Karaev and Fikrat Amirov.

Then came a solo performance by Mstislav ('Slava') Rostropovich of Bach's *Sarabande* from the Suite No. 3 followed by the premiere of a piece "Ithaf" [*Dedication*] by Azerbaijani composer Firangiz Alizade, conducted by the world-renowned cellist. Rostropovich can hardly be termed a guest in Baku - he was born and spent his early childhood in the city. Since 1997 he has been paying annual visits to Azerbaijan, playing in concerts and giving masterclasses at the Baku Music Academy (the former Conservatory). The *Sarabande* was performed as a tribute to the memory of Azerbaijan's President Heydar Aliyev who passed away in December 2003, a requiem filling this splendid new hall with a spirit of eternal harmony and wisdom. Slava asked that the audience not applaud after the performance, and played with his back to the audience, addressing his music to the President's portrait placed on the stage.

Baku Philharmonic, a splendid Renaissance-style building constructed in 1912, stands as one the most striking historical and architectural landmarks of the city. It is located in an elegant Baku downtown street, a street which has had no fewer than three different names, corresponding to the three very different historical epochs through



which Azerbaijan passed during the past century: *Nikolayevskaya* (in honour of the last Russian Tsar, Nicolas II), *Kommunisticheskaya* (each city or even a small village in the Soviet Union had a street named corresponding to the ruling party) and now *Istiglaliyyat* ('Independence', in Azerbaijani). The Philharmonic, too, played a part with various activities taking place through these three periods, each one with its own particular social and cultural realities: sessions of the Public Assembly in the Russian imperial times, official ceremonies and meetings held by Communist Party officials and finally with memorial services dedicated to the honoured citizens of the country.

It is only since 1936, when the Philharmonic Society was established in the country, that the building served as one of the prime symbols of contemporary musical culture in the country. All the successes and failures of the country's young music tradition, established in the early part of the twentieth century, were debated here in the white oval hall, with its glittering chandelier and incredibly beautiful bas-reliefs overlaying the walls and ceiling.

Students of the Azerbaijan Conservatory lived according to two equally important schedules: one was for classes and the other for concerts at the Philharmonic. "See you tonight at the Philharmonic!" were the most

common words heard at school at the end of each day. Baku Philharmonic had a reputation as one of the best concert halls in the Soviet Union. The beauty of its architectural design and interior, the perfect acoustics, the intellect and Eastern warmth of the audiences - aspects of Azerbaijani musical culture that benefited many outstanding guests such as: Mravinsky, Klemperer, Sanderling, Fedoseyev, Richter, Gilels, Oborin, Flier, Sofronitsky, Van Cliburn, Oistrakh, Kogan, Polyakin, Kremer, Spivakov, Bashmet, Rostropovich, Shafran, Arkhipova, Sinyavskaya, Kazarnovskaya and many others. And of course the name of Dmitri Shostakovich occupies a quite special place here.

Shostakovich is regarded among key figures who helped to establish and develop musical tradition in Azerbaijan. Kara Karaev stated in 1976 that, "Now Azerbaijan's Composers' School, the foundation of which was laid by Uzeyir Hajibeyov, rightfully considers itself a successor to Shostakovich's traditions." He continued: "Of course, it would be naive to assert that they are on the same level as the works of the great master; nevertheless the broad principles are being handed down, allowing us to rank ourselves among his heirs[1]."

Shostakovich's music and personality undoubtedly became a decisive factor in establishing symphonic culture in

Azerbaijan: the first national symphonies written by Kara Karaev, Jovdat Hajiyev and Soltan Hajibeyov in 1943, were created under the striking influence of Shostakovich's symphonic mastery. Thanks to Shostakovich or, more precisely, through a prism of his aesthetics and style, Azerbaijani composers made great strides in the field of twentieth century classical music, firmly considering themselves a part of the contemporary music and culture world.

Shostakovich loved Baku, often and happily visiting the city. The Philharmonic along with the Opera and Ballet Theatre, Conservatory and Composers' Union retain memories of Shostakovich's "Azerbaijani story"; his meetings with local musicians: Uzeyir Hajibeyov, the patriarch of the music tradition in Azerbaijan; Kara Karaev, Shostakovich's student who later became his close, life-time friend; Elmira Nazirova, the composer's muse whose name is forever embedded in the Tenth Symphony; Jovdat Hajiyev and Sultan Hajibeyov, who along with Karaev and Nazirova studied in Shostakovich's class at the Moscow Conservatory; Fikrat Amirov, Niyazi, Arif Malikov and other Azerbaijani composers whom Shostakovich supported and encouraged, naming them the "Excellent school of composers[3]". In March-April 1956, he spent many hours here, in this hall, as a guest at the First Assembly of Azerbaijani Composers' Union. In a concert at the Baku Philharmonic in March 1952, entirely devoted to his works, Shostakovich shared his recently created Preludes and Fugues with the Baku audience. He attended series of concerts in the Philharmonic during the 'Decades of Russian Art and Culture' festivals held in Baku in May 1964 and in October 1972. The last event was particularly remarkable: the festival opened with Shostakovich's Fifteenth Symphony - only the second city in the Soviet Union to have performed the symphony after its Moscow premiere. In the same year, the government of Azerbaijan awarded Shostakovich its highest artistic title, People's Artist of Azerbaijan - "for outstanding activities in the field of developing the musical culture of Azerbaijan and on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Azerbaijan Conservatory[2]".



All Shostakovich's symphonies and many of his chamber and piano works were often performed in the Philharmonic Hall. The first notable occasion occurred in August 1942, a critical time during World War II when German troops were about to overrun the Caucasus, and the Soviet Army was preparing to detonate the Baku oil wells. It was during those impossibly difficult times that the Seventh Symphony was played in the Philharmonic by a local orchestra consisting of musicians from the Azerbaijan State Opera Theatre, the Radio Committee and various military bands under Ashraf Hasanov. This proved to be the start of a State Symphony Orchestra tradition that is very much alive today: that of the performing of Shostakovich's symphonies. Both Niyazi, the country's greatest conductor who led the orchestra from 1938 to 1984 and Rauf Abdullayev, the current chief conductor, have very firmly adhered to this ideal.

It is not only through his own music that Shostakovich's spirit pervades the Baku hall's inner walls: numerous works by Azerbaijani composers have been dedicated to him, such as the String Quartet (1947) and *Musical Tribute for Piano* (1976) by Kara Karaev; the Third Symphony by Jovdat Hajiyev (1947) and the Second Symphony by Arif Malikov (1969). Karaev's piano piece is based on the DSCH motif and was included in the collection of 13 music tributes to Shostakovich authored by Boris Tishchenko, Andrei Eshpai (Russia), Miroslav Skorik (Ukraine), Daniel Lesur (France), Ronald Stevenson (Britain) and others on the occasion of the composer's 70<sup>th</sup> jubilee. This list includes only official dedications; the number of musical tributes to Shostakovich made by Azerbaijani composers is considerably greater.

On April 19, 2004, a special concert was held in the Philharmonic to celebrate Elmira Nazirova's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, including a performance of her Piano Concerto on Arabic Themes followed by Fikrat Amirov discussing the Nazirova-Shostakovich correspondence from 1953-56. On May 10, the State Symphony Orchestra presented the premiere of the Eighth Symphony (*Eternity*) by Arif Malikov, whom Shostakovich referred to as his "musical grandson".

The vast Soviet Empire no longer exists. Obligatory forms of inter-Soviet cultural exchange, along with a duty to proffer "brotherly help" to Russian composers have disappeared from our lives. Nevertheless it is undeniably the case that the 'Russian factor' did have an immense and long-lasting impact on the cultural psyche of Azerbaijan and certain phenomena, be they personalities or simply ideas, and have been definitively integrated into the nation's mentality, changing it forever. Dmitri Shostakovich undoubtedly stands among these phenomena. His music remains a part of the new history of Azerbaijani music, occupying a fundamental place in school and concert programs, scholarly activities and quite simply people's hearts. Musicians of an older generation treasure their memories of the great master willingly sharing his Baku stories with their younger colleagues—even Shostakovich's final in-life portrait, painted by the prominent Azerbaijani artist Tahir Salahov and recognized as among the best of its genre, can be seen in many music institutions throughout the country. The Baku Philharmonic, along with musical institutions all over the world, is looking forward to a centenary festival in honour of a great composer without whom the fate of Azerbaijan's music in this new century would have been entirely different.



#### Footnotes

[1] Kara Karaev. *Stat'i, pis'ma, vyskazyvaniia*. [Kara Karaev. Articles, letters, statements]. Moscow: *Sovetskii Kompozitor*, 1978, p.17.

[2] After visiting the First Assembly of Azerbaijan's Composer Union in 1956, Shostakovich published an article in *Druzhba Narodov* magazine naming it "Otlitchnaia kompozitorskaia shkola" ["Excellent School of Composers"] (1957, No.11).

[3] Karagicheva, L. *Pishite kak mojno bol'she prekrasnoi muzyky* ["Write As Much Wonderful Music As Possible]. In: *Muzykal'naia Akademiia*, 1997, No.4, p.202.