

DOCUMENTARY II

Shostakovich and Mahler



Franco Pulcini

translated by H el ene Bernatchez

All of Shostakovich's symphonies represent extraordinary sources of interest and almost all of them have an exceptional artistic value. The composer constantly evolved in this respect and his 15 symphonies all project originality and poetical subtlety. At the same time their diversity sees them defined as 'epochal' – the Fifth, the Seventh, the Eighth are all strong examples. A perfect case of this phenomenon is the Tenth Symphony, written by Shostakovich almost eight years after the Ninth, and after the news of Stalin's death. It is a milestone in Shostakovich's oeuvre – here he fully exposes the artistic nature of a dark and neurotic musician who was able to superimpose his own subjective perceptions upon the collective and national drama of Soviet dictatorship.

Even though the work is grounded in Russian and in particular Soviet history, Shostakovich used a somewhat curious Mahlerian quotation in the Tenth Symphony. The beginning of the theme on solo clarinet – four bars after rehearsal 5 in the Boosey & Hawkes score – is an exact melodic reproduction of a theme sung by mezzo-soprano in *Urlicht*, the fourth movement of Mahler's Second Symphony, *The Resurrection*. Whilst there remains the possibility that this is an involuntary quotation, I would argue not. The poetical text used by Mahler (taken from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*) begins with the verses 'Der Mensch liegt in gr o ter Not! Der Mensch liegt in gr o ter Pein!' ['Man lies in deepest need, Man lies in deepest pain.']. If indeed the quotation is not involuntary, the slow tempo with which Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony begins could well have these desperate verses as some form of dedication in

that they explain the dark and terrible situation of the people under the Soviet regime. If Mahler used these verses to exult eternal life through poetry, Shostakovich used them to describe, with this slow tempo, his country in the grip of terror. Stalin dies and he quotes the *Resurrection*... Resurrection of what? Of the country? Of the tyrant? I would argue of the country, of course, but the ambiguity remains as a shadow.

This well-concealed reference to the Germanic world is no isolated case: even the composer's initials ('DSCH'), from which the closing theme of the Tenth is constructed, is based on German spelling and musical notation. Thus, the neighbouring theme from the *Resurrection* would be no isolated case, in that the composer thought of writing an opera on Katyusha Maslova, the female hero of Tolstoy's well-known novel.

Here I would like to emphasise aspects of the expansive stylistic flow that Shostakovich owes to his great predecessor. The Russian musician's love and admiration for Mahler is well known, and Shostakovich is widely considered as Mahler's talented disciple, his true heir. Moreover, I see not only formal or stylistic affinities between the two great masters of the symphony, but also, as we will see, a common way of confronting the eternal themes of existence.

Although critics refer to Mahler's influence on Shostakovich's later symphonies, especially from the Fourth and the Fifth onwards, it is possible to identify traits in Shostakovich's First Symphony, which was completed in July 1925. In the ten years spanning 1922 to 1932 all of Mahler's symphonies were performed in Leningrad, where the young Dmitri lived, with the exception

of the Sixth and the Seventh. In 1932 Ivan Sollertinsky, the intellectual who was instrumental in acquainting Shostakovich with the world of the Austrian composer, wrote a short essay on Mahler[1]. Shostakovich and Sollertinsky had been good friends since 1921, and Mahler was certainly a frequent subject of conversation between them. It is possible that some of the critical thoughts published by Sollertinsky had, in fact, been inspired by the young Shostakovich. (Regarding the exchange of musical opinion on the subject of Mahler, Sollertinsky expressed unequivocally a view also shared by Alban Berg, concerning the first part of Mahler's Ninth Symphony, which both claim to be his best symphonic movement. It is not certain whether Leningrad musicians spoke about Mahler with the author of *Wozzeck* during meetings in 1927 on the occasion of the performance of the opera, but it seems probable that they did, given Berg's admiration for Mahler.)

Sollertinsky's perception of Mahler, which he developed in studies such as *Historical types of symphonic dramaturgy* (Leningrad, 1941)[2], was impregnated with a Marxist vision of art: a form in which the spectacular decadence of imperial Europe is reviewed. Shostakovich's tragedy was that he also rapidly became the symphonic cantor from within a society whose aspirations were dashed through authoritarian degeneration, terror and through the tragedy of war. Whereas Mahler, the poet of *Finis Austriae*, had been the voice of an obsolete and declining society, the young Shostakovich was initially a promoter of the Bolshevik Revolution, giving artistic form to a young and burgeoning society. However, he only needed a few years to depict, notably through his symphonies, an attitude of disillusion with that world in which he





had believed. If we limit our view of art to serving as a mirror of society, then Shostakovich's music might be seen as more 'political' or 'denunciative' than Mahler's, who, although possessed by a tearing pessimism, does not renounce all, but rather spreads some illusion of hope in his works.

For political reasons, Shostakovich never made much musical noise in the Soviet Union about his Mahlerian faith, notably because of the general condemnation of music from the West; however, he did make exceptions, in particular regarding the 'Great Patriotic War'. There are no important written commentaries from Shostakovich about Mahler, only a few, small and mostly insignificant passages. These include, from 1964, the preface to a book by Inna Barsova[3] and another from 1946[4]. However in his composition classes, Mahler's scores were constantly present. Also, in musical circles, the reputation of a 'Mahlerian' Shostakovich was so obvious that, for example, after Schoenberg had turned down the offer to complete Mahler's Tenth Symphony, Shostakovich was asked to undertake the project. (Ultimately, however, Shostakovich also declined the opportunity.)

Mahler was, for Shostakovich, an enduring love. The Russian composer's pupil Denisov related that during his final days, which he spent in a hospital, Shostakovich listened repeatedly to a gramophone recording of *Das Lied von der Erde*, until he knew it by heart. He considered the final song – *Abschied* – as the most original piece in the entire history of music. Shostakovich's inspiration for the idea of a "Lieder Symphony" is embodied in his Fourteenth Symphony, a work that contains a great diversity of character, based on an anthology of poetically-inspired texts on the theme of death.

Shostakovich's fondness for Mahler's music was probably heightened in the aftermath of the censorship in 1936 of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (which itself presents stylistic particularities that can be traced back to Mahler) and the following year he composed his Fifth Symphony, the most Mahlerian of Shostakovich's symphonies. Indeed, after this personal trauma, the composer wrote no other serious stage works, becoming, in a sense, a Mahlerian symphonist with a destiny to surpass the fateful number of nine symphonies – in contrast to Mahler, Beethoven, Schubert, Dvorak and Bruckner. To affirm moreover that the choice of a gigantic Mahlerian symphonic-scale within Shostakovich's works might correspond to a psychological reaction to persecution, in that the texture of the gigantic Fourth was completed in the months following the *Pravda* attacks, provokes in this writer no contention whatsoever.

The common elements between the composers are numerous but have to be limited in this paper to little more than a list. For instance, both developed a symphony imbued with internal 'programmes' (often reconstructed through musicological research), which were often absent from the published score (at least, when such explicitness was not convenient). Mahler was perhaps the more literary, more philosophical, more poetical, being steeped in a sensuous and bucolic world, albeit rich in misery and sadness, whereas Shostakovich grappled with social realities, with rich and deep experiences of life and death, tracing the history of the most dramatic century of humanity. But for both, the laic and social ritual of the symphony became the artistic medium through which both musicians could express themselves... Mahler was a man of faith and a sentimentalist who compensated existential spiritual suffering through the invention of imaginary landscapes, whilst Shostakovich was a rational atheist who protested – not always openly- but always with an absolute moral rigour – against a

world with which he did not agree.

Both musicians had a curious relationship to Hebraism: Mahler was a Jew who converted to Catholicism in an anti-Semitic society; Shostakovich was an agnostic with a deep interest in Jewish culture and fought actively against anti-Semitism in an anti-Semitic society. It should not be forgotten that 'Hebraism' as an archetype bears in itself the principle of persecution, of prejudice and ignorance towards anything different, a thematic that is related to the psychological state of the artist who feels misunderstood and rejected.

Inspired by the aesthetic of Mahler's symphonies, Shostakovich employed forms that included a number of major musical facets that held on to a classical tradition inherited from Beethoven. In a few cases (the Second, Third, Fourth and Sixth Symphonies), in contrast with Mahler, Shostakovich employed fewer than four movements. One should remember that the grotesque in Shostakovich's music also comes from Mahler – as noted for instance by Eric Roseberry in his article 'Shostakovich and his debt to Mahler.'[5] Grotesque passages of Mahlerian inspiration include the scherzo from Shostakovich's Fourth Symphony with that from Mahler's Second, based on the song *Saint Anthony's Prayer to the Fishes*. More generally, Shostakovich took from his predecessor his taste for waltzes and *Ländler*, and for banal music that is deformed, artistically.

The relationship to popular songs is quite different in the works of the two composers, but remains of significance. They share the idea that a movement of a symphony may originate from a song or a poem, but through the temporal distance separating the two composers, the difference in the spirit of popular songs employed is obvious. The world of the Lied, associated with a feeling for nature, was Mahler's musical oxygen, and he also preferred popular poetry. In Shostakovich's music, popular

songs were partly imposed by the political authorities, and even in such a case as in the Eleventh Symphony, in which he makes a most admirable use of them, his association with popular songs was not entirely serene. While Mahler often tried to retain the essence of a song within his soft and singing linearity, Shostakovich had a natural tendency to deform melodies, often impregnating them with his own caustic temperament.

Mahler died in 1911, before either the Bolshevik Revolution or the two World Wars took place – events that marked Shostakovich's work in such a massive way. All the same, Mahler's works are obsessively pregnant with the themes of war and death. His symphonies, just like Shostakovich's, are full of 'military marches' and 'funeral marches'. And it is exactly these themes of war, of death, and of the origins of human suffering that both musicians have in common, that made them develop a strong respect for fellow artists. Mahler composed the *Kindertotenlieder*, those transcendent songs for dead children; and a large part of the texts from the *Wunderhorn* are based on military themes. Military drums and trumpets announcing battles, slaughters and executions fill Mahler's works. Quotations in the Second Symphony are dedicated to the theme of 'resurrection', with tombs that open themselves up and screaming skeletons. The Ninth, *The Song of the Earth* and the incomplete Tenth constitute a kind of symphonic trilogy of death, written in the years in which Mahler knew he was condemned to his grave through his heart ailment.

Shostakovich's symphonies describe violent war scenes or revolutionary motives: the Seventh imitates the marching of the Nazis towards Leningrad and of the Soviet resistance; the Eighth depicts the massacres of World War II; the Eleventh, the slaughter of the peaceful crowd that dared protest against the Tsar's regime in 1905. Shostakovich's death-obsessed Fourteenth is a dismal reflection on the essence of death, far from any decadent, Romantic notion of its

inevitability. One may say that in Mahler's work, death remains, especially in the *Lieder*, a moment of sentimental introspection, whilst in Shostakovich's work, cold indignation in the face of the death of masses dominates, or that the meditative and rational are presented in a caustic fashion, without hope and treated without sentimentality.

It is typical that Shostakovich, in his page on Mahler, expressed in his introduction incredulity regarding the negativity with which Mahler's music was received during in his lifetime. Shostakovich was especially concerned with this theme, and this was to become one more mutual aspect of the two composers' fragile psyche. Each reached a quasi-pathological level of insecurity and depression – like two gigantic neurotics. They reached the summit of careers hiding their incurable inner wounds, retaining the deepest respect towards other musicians, and being bound to their private lives. It is not rare that artists tend to internalise their own anguish whilst expressing artistically the tribulations of the world. And the sense of death that the music of both composers express is not simply a Romantic and grotesque 'dance macabre', but rather the constellation of the infinite aspects that death implies, in addition to the negation of life. Two of the most tangible musical metaphors for death, among the numerous examples of extinguishing and images of vanishing, are the final movements of Mahler's Ninth and of Shostakovich's Fourteenth. In the first case, the subtle threads of life become thinner and more inconsistent; in the second a crescendo, seemingly rising towards an abyss, is brutally stopped in its tracks.

In addition to this psychological suffering and tragic vision of the world, there is a sense of rhetoric emptiness that assumes a superficial optimism, especially in the finales. The illusory sense of triumph that is perceivable in the last part of Mahler's Seventh, although very different, can be coupled with the sense of catastrophe that

is traversed with perceived jubilation and celebration in the finale of Shostakovich's Fifth; here the magnificent ostentation of a symphonic finale written by a depressive composer who was striving to rise once more finds his origins in Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony (notwithstanding the earlier composer's fear that this might be perceived as 'lack of sincerity.')



Sollertinsky had already made a rapprochement between Tchaikovsky and Mahler, an evident link that has been always inexplicably ignored by Mahler's critics. We could continue to ponder the common points between Mahler and Shostakovich – and along with the analogies, also find profound divergences in their styles, their poetic and their personal motivations. This reality leads to an interesting reflection on the part of the first crucial interpreter of Shostakovich's music, the conductor Nikolai Malko, who wrote in his memoirs, observing the natural influence that Mahler had on Shostakovich, especially regarding their common disposition to grotesque, that they resembled one other as musicians and as persons, "but maybe more as persons than as musicians"[6].

ENDNOTES

- [1] I. Sollertinsky, *Gustav Mahler*, Leningrad, 1932.
- [2] In E. Roseberry, 'Shostakovich and his Debt to Mahler', in *Gustav Mahler. The World Listens*, by Donald Mitchell, TEMA Uitgevers, Haarlem, Holland 1995, p. 113.
- [3] Gustav Mahler. *Pis'ma, vspominanja*, by Inna Barsova, Moskva 1964, 2 ed. 1968.
- [4] D. Shostakovich, 'I. I. Sollertinsky (ko vtoroj godovščine so dnja smerti)', *Sovetskaya muzyka*, 1946, n. 2-3, pp. 90-95.
- [5] Eric Roseberry, Op cit., p. 115.
- [6] *ibid*, p. 116.

Paper given at the Udine Shostakovich Conferences, Italy 2005

