

DSCH NEWS

Kurt Sanderling and Karen Khachaturian



Born on September 19, 1912 in Arys, then a part of the German Empire (now Orzysz, Poland), Kurt Sanderling died on 17 September 2011 aged 98 in Berlin.



Kurt Sanderling

He most notably led the Leningrad Philharmonic and the (East) Berlin Symphony Orchestra during the Soviet era and was universally admired for his interpretations of Shostakovich as well as Beethoven and Sibelius. Sanderling was particularly well-known in the West later in his career as a guest conductor for orchestras in London, Los Angeles and elsewhere around the world. Educated privately, he began his career at the age of 18 as a répétiteur at the Berlin Städtische Oper, assisting Klemperer, Erich Kleiber and Wilhelm Furtwängler. In 1936 he left Germany for Moscow. After making his debut with the Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra Sanderling became its conductor until 1941, when he moved to the Leningrad Philharmonic as joint chief conductor with Yevgeny Mravinsky.

20 years later he returned to East Germany as chief conductor of the Berlin Symphony Orchestra. He visited Prague, Warsaw, Vienna, Salzburg and Leipzig as a guest conductor, and made his London debut in 1970 with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. He was chief conductor of the Staatskapelle Dresden from 1964 to 1967.

He was first married in 1941 to Nina Bobath, whose son is the conductor Thomas Sanderling. With his second wife, Barbara Wagner, whom he married in 1963, he had twin sons, Michael, a cellist and conductor, and Stefan, who in 2002 became music director of the Florida Orchestra.

Kurt Sanderling was interviewed in Lyon, France in October 1996 by Alan Mercer.

DSCH Journal: When did you first come in contact with Shostakovich's music?

Kurt Sanderling: When I came to the Soviet Union, it was in the beginning of 1936, I met a conductor – Nikolai Anosov – and it was with him that I played a lot of pieces for four hands. And we played the First Symphony of Shostakovich on the piano. I was fascinated at once. We repeated this experience several times. Since then, my love and interest grew for Shostakovich's music.

Was he well known at that time in Germany?

No, he was pretty unknown in Germany apart from, to a limited extent, *Lady Macbeth*, thanks to the triumph of 1935. And in some places, his First Symphony had been played already. But certainly to my mind, he was somewhat of an unknown composer.





When did you first perform his music in public?

I was the second conductor to perform his Sixth Symphony. That was when I was chief conductor in Kharkov, in 1939, very shortly after the first performance. This was in the Ukraine. There was a Philharmonic, and I had been in charge for one or two years. I had heard this symphony under Mravinsky in Moscow. I was deeply impressed and I put it on in Kharkov at once.

And was it long before you met the composer?

This must have been in Siberia in the war. I remember he once came to Novosibirsk to visit the Leningrad Philharmonic and Mravinsky. He had a good friend there, the artistic director of the orchestra, Ivan Ivanovich Sollertinsky – I'd say his best friend. I met him there.

What was your first impression?

That's hard to say. What can I say? I knew I was going to meet a genius. But, you know, even geniuses have to eat, to drink, to go for walks and sleep!

The events surrounding Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony – its journey to the West, attempts by various conductors in the United States to be the first to perform it there – all this was of great significance not only to Shostakovich, but also to Russia and the rest of the allies. Do you think it's a symphony that is nowadays as easy to interpret in a modern context?

I wouldn't like to offer a verdict regarding this question. Personally I've always felt less close to this symphony – like some of the others, for that matter. I was always more impressed by the "poetic" Shostakovich than by the epic one. I have to say though, that I would include the Fifth Symphony as being in the former category. No, I was never so impressed by the Seventh or Eleventh symphonies. So it's difficult for me to answer this question. As to the question of its survival, time will tell. I think the middle movements, the second and third, are very good.

You have recorded some of the symphonies - numbers 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 15 – but not others. Why not numbers 13 or 14, for example?

Simply because I had a conducting son [Thomas Sanderling] who lived in Germany. He was the first conductor of these symphonies in Germany and I didn't want to disturb him!

What's your opinion about the so-called "double meanings" of some of the symphonies? For example the Fifth, we understand now, had a double meaning which the Russian people were likely to understand straight away. And as for the superficially straightforwardly programmatic Eleventh, Shostakovich wrote in his memoirs that the people could hear exactly what the music was really about. As an interpreter, how do you come to terms with the fact that there are these varying levels, with ways of "reading between the lines"?

I think that for us contemporaries who knew and worked with Shostakovich, it has never been difficult to interpret his works, along with their double meanings. For us, it was all very clear. Shostakovich would have loved to be the "Soviet Musorgsky". And so he has shown himself as a teller of history in, for example, the Eleventh and Twelfth symphonies. Also, in the Fifth Symphony, with the so called "triumph" at the end – we understood what he was saying. And it was not the "triumph" of the mighty, those in power. There was no need for further explanation.

You worked with Shostakovich in rehearsals. Did he offer much in the way of advice, as regards interpretation? Or were his remarks principally technical?

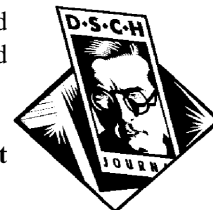
He was present at several rehearsals of the Fifth Symphony – and the Tenth, also. Most of the time, he limited himself to "acoustic advice". He asked that one could hear this or that a little bit more – but, as a matter of fact, in public as well as in private, he spoke rather seldomly about the content of his works. In his opinion, although he may have written the music, it was not his role to give a verbal interpretation.

But, I remember one of the first performances of mine of the Fifth Symphony in Moscow – he was there with Khachaturian. And I played the beginning of the finale a little bit more quickly, more aggressively than most of the other conductors of the time – as, in fact, Shostakovich actually asks for himself. And after the rehearsal, the two of them came to the conductor's room. Khachaturian had very friendly words in general, but he asked me: "Isn't the beginning [of the finale] a little bit too fast?" But Shostakovich interrupted him: "No, no, let him play it like that." So, you see that he was open to various different interpretations of his works. He was not stuck with one tempo or one style.

You knew that when he came around after the concert saying: "Wonderful, great!" and so on, you could be sure he didn't



really like it. But when he came and he said: “Good, but at this point I would have liked it to sound like this and at that point like that” – then you could be sure that he was really interested and he had enjoyed the performance.



You obviously knew Mravinsky very well. What did he bring to Shostakovich’s music? What was the nature of their relationship?

Yes, I knew him very well... Well, first of all, one has to say that he had the deepest understanding of the meaning and of the sense of Shostakovich’s music. To him, there was no doubt. At the end of his life, he played the symphonies he himself had premiered quite differently. Not in terms of content, but of form. Therefore the tempi, for example, that Shostakovich and Mravinsky gave for the premiere of the works, are no longer necessarily valid today. They have become sometimes a matter of heated discussion. Sometimes they are still “right” for us, but often we play them differently now. Look at my case: I played the symphonies – with the exception of the Sixth – about ten or twelve years after Mravinsky. And did them in a completely different way. That’s quite normal. There is no incompatibility. Perhaps I’d have played it like that myself if I had conducted the premiere and if I had been influenced by what Shostakovich had already played on the piano to me. In general, I’d say, each work needs the sound of the orchestra to find its balance. I don’t mean acoustic balance, I mean agogic balance. That’s the case for Brahms, for Beethoven, surely for Tchaikovsky and also for Shostakovich.

You obviously were aware that from 1962 Shostakovich and Mravinsky had a relationship that one could consider became “cool” following the events surrounding the premiere of the Thirteenth Symphony. Did they nevertheless maintain contact during the 1960s and 1970s? How did you see them together? Had the relationship changed?

That’s a difficult question. The relationship between Shostakovich and Mravinsky is a very difficult subject. There is no doubt that Mravinsky always worshipped Shostakovich. As for Shostakovich, he appreciated Mravinsky more as a marvellous interpreter of his symphonies than a personal friend. I think that in the case of the Thirteenth Symphony, Shostakovich was wrong by arguing that Mravinsky feared the political consequences of the premiere. I don’t think so. I rather believe something else: Mravinsky was, in fact, a man of fear. I would argue that he was afraid for the choir and the soloist and the possible problems that might have arisen by their playing this work. This was, in my opinion, a supplementary factor that made his decision not to play the work. I don’t think – and I knew him very well – that he was afraid himself of political consequences.

As for the conflict surrounding the Second Cello Concerto, at that time the Leningrad orchestra was just about to perform abroad – and this meant that, for two or three weeks, there were rehearsals only of these works which were due to be played during the concerts abroad. Mravinsky was not willing, at this time – indeed he was not capable – of thinking about several works at a time. And so, for Mravinsky, the question would have been: to go on tour with the Leningrad orchestra or not to perform the work at that special moment. In my opinion, when Shostakovich had finished a new work, everything else had to follow. But, that was a difficult, personal decision – and I don’t blame Mravinsky for it.

You also knew Kondrashin very well. How do you see his relationship with Shostakovich? Did he approach the music in a very different way?

I don’t know the degree of the personal relationship between them. This was after I had already left the Soviet Union. What I can say, is that I attended a deeply moving concert of Shostakovich’s Eighth Symphony in Amsterdam by Kondrashin. It was moving and really exciting. And after the performance, I went to see Kondrashin and we hugged and started to cry, both of us. I learned just a few days later that Kondrashin decided himself not to go back to the Soviet Union. Hence the exceptionally emotional performance of the work. Apart from that, I had the occasion to be at a performance of Shostakovich’s Sixth Symphony played by Kondrashin and his orchestra. I didn’t enjoy that as much, it didn’t really convince me. But you have to remember the best, and [referring to the Eighth Symphony] in this case, it was extraordinarily beautiful.

If Shostakovich had left the Soviet Union by, let’s say, 1945, would his music have sounded the same? Would it have been the same music?

No, it wouldn’t have been the same music. He and his music were conditioned by the world he was living in. By the way, he would never have left Russia – as Mravinsky would not. People seem not to understand. There is always a tendency to consider Russia and the Soviet Union as being the same thing. But that’s nonsense. A “true” form of Russian mankind and Russian culture existed which were themselves dominated during a long period of time by a Russian dictatorship. Mravinsky and Shostakovich were “true” Russians – though their family origins were Polish.





Which of Shostakovich's symphonies is the most important to you? Which have you enjoyed performing the most?

Today the Sixth and Eighth are the closest to me. And I like to play the Fifth, too, because it has become a kind of autobiography for me. I have experienced all that myself. I arrived in the Soviet Union in 1936, I didn't understand anything of what was going on politically and I had a lot of difficulty understanding the language, as well. The Fifth Symphony was the first contemporary work with which I was confronted, and I got the impression: yes – that's exactly it, that's our life here. And so I have a special affinity with this symphony. In terms purely of music, I prefer the Sixth and Eighth – the Fifteenth also. I think I am the conductor who has played the Fifteenth Symphony most times ever – it must be about eighty times all around the world. And I have recorded it twice. That's a work which is very close to me, despite the fact, by the way, that I wasn't particularly close to Shostakovich at that time he wrote the work. I had already been living for some time in East Germany. But we kept in touch, and he paid me several visits there. I was probably the only person there he could speak to; he could be sure of being understood. I think there is no other work of his as radically horrible and cruel as the Fifteenth Symphony. It's a horrific work about loneliness and death.

The Fifteenth Symphony remains for most people strange and ambiguous, with the quotations from outside of Shostakovich's own world. Did he talk to you about the "messages" of the Fifteenth Symphony?

No, he never talked about his works – the meaning of his works. Not to Mravinsky, not to Kondrashin, and not to me, And even in the case of his friend Glikman to whom he wrote the famous letters – and whom I knew very well – you can see that even to him he didn't mention anything about the meaning of the symphony.

Perhaps Maxim...

No, he'd know less than the others. To him, he said the least, for a very simple reason. You see, the education of children under a dictatorship is a very complicated affair. On the one hand, you have to teach them to be critical of what is happening, politically-speaking, and on the other hand you have to make them understand that one has to be careful when discussing such matters. And I think that he told him a lot less than he told, for example, his friends, because quite simply he didn't want to put him in any danger.

What are your thoughts on the book *Testimony*?

I have no doubt that it's true. Shostakovich himself told me a significant number of things that appear in the book. If I had any doubts, they would be with reference not to the events he lived out himself, but rather to stories told to him by others. It might be that, in these cases, there were things he wanted to believe. For example: he tells, in a very explicit way, that his private enemy, Khrennikov, pissed in his pants from fear during an audience with Stalin. I can well imagine that someone else told him this story and – even if it was not true – he found it so wonderful he wanted to believe it.

In 1949 you gave the first performance of a Shostakovich work following the terrible events of 1948 – the Zhdanov decree and so on. Was the concert your idea? Was it your will that finally reopened the door of Shostakovich's repertoire to the public?

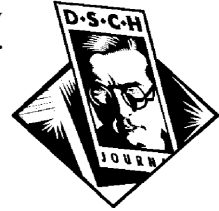
I have to give the credit to the right person. I can't say it was on my initiative that it happened. But it was decided, somewhere among the upper levels of the government, that it was time to play Shostakovich again. And so it happened with the Fifth Symphony, which seemingly had the appropriate "apologetic character" required. The question became: where should it be played and by whom? They didn't want a great maestro to perform it – in Leningrad, Mravinsky; in Moscow, Ivanov; and Rakhlin in the third important city, Kiev. So they had this idea: well, there is this co-conductor in Leningrad, who is rather well liked by Shostakovich, let's have him do it. This was for me, of course a great honour, I was moved, and thanked fate that I had been chosen to perform this "first performance". So, I can't say it all happened because of my initiative. By the way, Shostakovich didn't attend this concert himself. He stayed away despite the fact that he was in Moscow at that moment. Instead, he listened to it on the radio.

What was the atmosphere like in the hall?

Unbelievable, and after the concert there was a kind of demonstration. The public had understood – and was deeply moved. I must say, it was primarily Shostakovich fans who attended the performance; people who had wanted to be present when Shostakovich was played again officially. It was an unbelievable atmosphere. Kondrashin had a similar experience when he conducted the premiere of the Thirteenth Symphony in Moscow. He told me, too, about this very special atmosphere.



Composer Karen Surenovich Khachaturian, nephew of Aram Khachaturian died on 19 July 2011 in Moscow. He studied from 1945 to 1949 at the Moscow Conservatory under Shostakovich, Shebalin and Myaskovsky.



Karen Khatachurian

Despite his Armenian heritage, Karen Khachaturian was born on 19 September, 1920 in Moscow, where his father Suren Khachaturian (brother of the better-known Aram), a student of Stanislavsky, founded the Armenian Drama Studio; his mother was a theatre designer. Karen's musical education began at the age of eight where he attended the renowned Gnesin School and in 1938 he began piano and composition studies at the Moscow Conservatory School of Music. Three years later he entered the Conservatory proper but was quickly drafted into the NKVD Song and Dance Ensemble where he wrote wartime morale-boosting songs and instrumental pieces.

He returned to study in 1945 under Shebalin and Shostakovich, who supervised his first major work, the Violin Sonata in G minor (1947). The piece won him first prize at the World Youth Festival in Prague and was recorded by violinists including Heifetz, David Oistrakh and, with the composer at the piano, Leonid Kogan.

Two of his ballets – *Cipollino* and *Snow White and Seven Dwarfs* were staged in Moscow Bolshoi Theatre. He authored a number of symphonic compositions, music for plays, films, cartoons as well as – rather unexpectedly perhaps – the National Anthem of Somalia. Amongst his works:

Four Symphonies (1955, 1968, 1982, 1984); Sonata for violin and piano in G minor opus 1 (1947), Suite for orchestra (1948), *In Mongolia*, children's suite for orchestra (1948), *Blossom and Prosper*, Youth, cantata (1948), *Sinfonietta* (1949), *Youth Overture* (1949), *By a Solitary Widow*, cantata (1950), *The New Year's Fir*, children's suite for orchestra (1951), *Friendship*, overture for orchestra (1959), *The Simple Girl*, operetta (1959), Sonata for Cello and Piano (1966), String Quartet (1969), *A Moment of History*, oratorio for narrator, chorus and orchestra (1971), *Cipollino*, a fairy-tale ballet (1973), Concerto for piano and chamber orchestra (1974), Introduction and Fugue for organ (1976), Children's music for piano (1978), Trio for violin, horn and piano (1981), Concerto for cello and orchestra (1983), String Trio (1984), *Epitaph* for string orchestra and percussion (1986) and a variety of music for the theatre and cartoon films, music for children.

As a pianist Khachaturian premiered his own 1966 Cello Sonata with its dedicatee Rostropovich. His string quartet is dedicated to the memory of his father and particularly praised by Shostakovich whereas the String Trio (1984) and, like his uncle, a trio for horn, violin and piano (1981) pushes in more modernist directions.

On August 10 2011, Stepan Petrosyan, the Deputy Minister of Diaspora handed over the score of *Cipollino* to the Aram Khachaturian House-Museum. Karen Khachaturian had bequeathed the score to Armenia before his death. On the original score Karen Khachaturian left a note which read:

“I donate the score of my *Cipollino* ballet to my dearest Armenia and I hope great joy and happiness it will bring to dear junior friends of mine. Karen Khachaturian.”

