



# PERFORMING ARTISTS

## Leopold Stokowski on record



by John Riley

Stokowski was famous for his advocacy of contemporary composers. Some benefited from a single performance of their latest work but others enjoyed a greater commitment and Shostakovich fell into this latter camp; perhaps Stokowski felt something in their shared (distant) Polish ancestry. Their musical relationship covered much of their mutual creative lives and he continued to programme and record the works after the composer's death in 1975, though there were several particularly intensive periods of recording; namely the years 1932-37, 1939-40, 1958, and 1968-69.

It started in 1928 with the Philadelphians' US première of the First Symphony just three years after its completion. It was typical of Stokowski's innovative programming though it was felt necessary to warn the audience of the music's difficulty beforehand.

The US première of the Third Symphony in December 1932 marked the beginning of the first of the intensive periods though the omission of the choral finale spared the audience the invocation to 'burn down the old to kindle a new reality.' In 1935-7 he gave several performances of his orchestration of the Prelude *Op 34/14* and the *Entr'acte* from *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (as the contemporary transliteration had it) and took the first of these into the studio though it would be another twenty years before the opera fragment joined it. He also conducted the US première of the First Piano Concerto and made the first recording of the First Symphony, programming both works several times both before and after the recordings.

In 1939 and 1940 he programmed and made the first Western recording of the Fifth Symphony (Mravinsky beat him to the première recording by one year), recorded the Prelude again and gave its US première, and also made the first recording of the Sixth Symphony.

1942 saw his tussle with Toscanini for the western première of the Seventh Symphony and in 1951 he recorded the Prelude again. 1958 saw his fourth recording of the Prelude, the US première and a recording of the Eleventh Symphony, and a tour of Russia where a performance was taped though it has only recently been released. He also took up once more the First and Fifth Symphonies in the studio and recorded some extracts from *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*.

Live recordings exist of the Fifth Symphony from 1961 and 1964 and the Tenth from 1966 but 1968 saw the beginning of the last intensive period with his second recording of the Sixth Symphony, his fifth (live) recording of the Prelude and, as a filler for the Symphony, the suite from *The Golden Age*. It is perhaps fitting that his last Shostakovich recording, from 1976, a year after the composer's death, was what might be called their 'collaborative piece', the sixth recording of the Prelude.

This article concentrates on his recordings of the symphonies taking them in numerical order, looking at the performances and commenting on the recording quality only in passing. As they have been released several times in different formats I will ignore the quality of the various transfers. Catalogue numbers are excluded for recordings listed in Derek Hulme's *Dmitri Shostakovich: A Catalogue, Bibliography and Discography* (OUP, 1991) even where they have been re-released since publication. Catalogue numbers are also available in John Hunt's *Leopold Stokowski: Discography and Concert Register*. The concert listing of this and the supplement (compiled by Frederick P. Fellers) provided details of Stokowski's performances. These two sources also give fuller details (soloists and venues)

### First Symphony

1933 Philadelphia Orchestra  
1958 Symphony of the Air

That Victor agreed to record the First Symphony in 1933 is testimony to Stokowski's persuasiveness. The symphony already had a reputation but to record nine 78 rpm sides of a contemporary work was a different matter, especially in the years following the Depression. In fact this seems to be the first recording of any work by Shostakovich. As it happened, the economic situation meant that Stokowski had to make do with a smallish orchestra and the strings consequently sound undernourished. Another problem is the occasionally somewhat approximate playing, many of the solo passages are cruelly exposed and retakes would have been limited. Against that the strings are often coaxed to give the famous Philadelphia sound and many of the woodwind solos are wonderfully characterful.

Largely ignoring Shostakovich's metronome marks, Stokowski brings it in at just over 34 minutes. The score suggests approximately 28 [1]. In fact, many recordings take over half an hour though this is one of the longer, if not the longest.

Within this relaxed tempo Stokowski takes a typically liberal approach to rubato. The trumpet's long-held opening C is given a little crescendo (none is marked but it has since become a tradition) but as soon as it is over the brakes are slammed on before we are jerked forward again. This could be inferred from the music but Stokowski intensifies it. Figure 8 - a lithe clarinet over quiet string crochets - marks the first key change and the music settles into a briskish walk (*allegro non troppo*) but this is undermined by Stokowski's slightly slow tempo though he gradually accelerates eventually reaching a comfortable pace. But it is at figure 13 - a flute solo in triple time - that Stokowski reveals his real view of this movement; that is, that it is balletic. At the time of writing it Shostakovich was an avid balletomane. The symphony's debt to *Petrushka* has been commented on and it is in this movement that it manifests itself most plainly. Whether or not one wants to be reminded of it is a personal decision but with Stokowski it is unmistakable.



The second movement is where Shostakovich really appears as himself and Stokowski characterises the grotesquerie very well but a couple of quibbles; at figure 6 pairs of woodwind play a curious, detached dance in fifths but Stokowski's speed robs it of any mystery. Try Horenstein (Carlton Classics LC 3007), or better still Kurtz, who sticks closely to the metronome markings. Also, I can't see the point of adding a cymbal crash to the first of the three piano chords at figure 22; it makes the moment more conventionally climactic, less threatening.

The third movement is the high point of this recording with its many poignant solos beautifully rendered; I'd particularly point out the oboe throughout the movement and the leader's wonderfully schmaltzy (but not too much) solo over tremulous strings at figure 16 smoothing the angularity of the clarinet's previous phrase. The finale opens with a sly single bar *allegro molto* followed immediately by the *lento* section and Stokowski plays the alternations of tempo and mood that riddle the movement for all they are worth. One is the (unmarked) string *glissando* at figure 5 that is almost literally dizzying and starts the preparation for the *allegro molto* a few bars later which is heralded by a wonderfully slithery clarinet. The performance is worth hearing for that but on the downside is the *rallentando* that he puts over the last five bars distorting Shostakovich's carefully calculated pause in the midst of a headlong rush. If it was not a copying error the decision may have been influenced by the alternating *accelerandi* and *a tempi* of the previous section which Stokowski takes extremely freely.

The 1958 recording with the Symphony of the Air opens with less rubato but much more of a crescendo; perhaps Stokowski was taking note of the convention. In both recordings the start of this movement is less cheeky than tentative - a cautiously opened door sometimes slammed shut but the later recording is heavier, darker, more sardonic - the violin solos have a harshness and the woodwind is often more perky. It is also a more militaristic reading; the opening of the finale is more ominous and the timps later in the movement are truly terrifying. Against this the more reflective passages tend to be less expressive and the whole is given an unfortunate 'bathroom'

acoustic. In the second movement the flutes in fifths at figure 6 are better than in 1933 but still lack mystery and the oboe solo at the beginning of the third movement is banal. He repeats the first recording's *rallentando* over the last five bars. In 1958 the more extrovert moments work best whereas in 1933 he found a better balance with the reflective passages; neither performance is perfect, they both lack the last degree

of fantasy needed for the work but they complement each other, and to have only one is to see only one side of Stokowski's view of the piece.

### Fifth Symphony

1939 Philadelphia Orchestra  
 1958 New York Stadium Symphony Orchestra  
 1961 Czech Philharmonic Orchestra Preludio PRL 2156 (c/w Lutoslawski's First Symphony)  
 1964 LSO Carlton Classics LC 3007 (c/w Op 10 RPO/Horenstein)

Perhaps the Shostakovich symphony with which Stokowski was most closely associated, certainly the one he conducted most often, is the Fifth. His one-time assistant Artur Rodzinski gave the American broadcast premiere in April 1938, just four months after its Leningrad debut under Mravinsky. The Russian was first into the studio, recording it between March 27th and April 4th 1938 and following it up with another recording in late 1938/early 1939 after his appointment as chief conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic, proving the Soviet musical establishment's regard for both him and the work [2]. Stokowski followed in April 1939 and would perform it regularly thereafter. From its premiere it was widely held to be Shostakovich's finest symphony to date and even those who did not concur accepted the description of it as *A Soviet Artist's Reply to Just Criticism* feeling that this was Shostakovich's intention but that he had failed to produce the goods. Gerald Abrahams went as far as asking 'But to what does it all amount musically? Surely not very much.' [3]. That the phrase was still being regularly trotted out for sleeve notes well into the 70s demonstrates how deeply it had become ingrained into the mythology of the work, indeed the notes to Olympia's 1987 CD reissue of Rozhdestvensky's recording quote it, in odd contrast to what one hears on the disc. In 1939 Stokowski would have had no reason to doubt the positive interpretation and his leftward leanings may have made him more sympathetic to it. Of course, these recordings are merely snapshots through a career in which he conducted it many times although a definite development can be perceived.

All the recordings open similarly with Stokowski encouraging impressive weight from the strings after which, pointing forward to the second subject, he pulls back the tempo almost immediately for the gently falling phrase of the violins. But the next theme (a long-limbed melody in the violins) sees a difference of emphasis. In 1939 it is almost matter-of-fact, by 1958 it had become more keening, but in 1961 and 1964 it is invested with a quality of chaste intensity. The first major change in the music comes with the entry of the second subject at figure 9.



Reminiscent of the opening whilst being almost completely different, this melody is *prima facie* evidence of Shostakovich's natural symphonic gift. At this point quaver = 76 becomes crotchet = 84 but many conductors take the second subject quite slowly, relying on the chugging lower strings to keep up the momentum.



Of course, in 1939 there was no performance tradition and Stokowski sticks quite closely to the score (in fact he's a notch or two quicker), making it less a moment of repose than a brisk but relaxed walk. At Shostakovich's chosen tempo the music has an ambiguity that could include both of these interpretations simultaneously. The Prague recording has a flexibility that it beautifully judged and foregrounds the woodwind's characteristic Czech sound [4]. When, in the run up to the development section the violas and cellos swap what will later be the march's piano line, the 1939 recording is spoiled by the violas coming in a bar early disrupting the slowly sinking violin line which comes to rest *morendo*. In fact the generally close adherence to the tempi makes me think that this was probably a copying error. The work was first published in 1939, though whether this was before or after Stokowski's recording I do not know. I have not come across it in any other recordings and it certainly does not happen in Mravinsky's 1938 version.

Stokowski follows the development section's tempo markings quite closely (crotchet = 92 rising at one point to 132); some conductors push it to around the 120 mark almost from the beginning and continue up from there. However, I have to admit to preferring a tempo slightly quicker than the marked one here, and so the later recordings are more to my taste. A highpoint in the 1964 account is the stabbing violin octaves at figure 23 which have a *Psycho*-ish quality - Hitchcock's film (scored by Bernard Herrmann) had appeared just four years earlier. Through this section there is a gradual increase in tension and tempo with only a brief respite at figure 27, when the side drum's insistent rhythm underpins the brass punching out the violins' quiet falling line from the start of the movement. Then the tempo slackens but the 1958 recording slams on the brakes far too hard, destroying the momentum. The theory that the Eleventh, rather than describing the year 1905, is about events in Hungary in 1956, could equally well apply to the 1958 reading of the Fifth at this point; one can hear the tanks rolling in. By figure 32 the page is a blur of dotted rhythms and all the recordings amply convey the frantic desperation of this passage that must, in some way, be a reflection of Shostakovich's state of mind as he fearfully awaited arrest with his suitcase ready packed. The symphony's fairly classical construction might seem to imply that figure 39 (a return of the second subject) should be taken at the original tempo. However, the development section has intervened and not only has our view of the material changed; it *has* been changed by previous events so that it contributes to (but is not) a resolution of the crisis one way or the other. Either the coda should be restful, or it should leave a feeling of unease; the one thing it cannot do is simply return to the original mood. The 1939 recording begins this section well; the slight dragging of the clarinet at figure 41 gives an appropriate feeling of unease, and this is followed by a desolate oboe solo though the spell is broken by the tempo picking up toward the end. The 1958 recording takes a relatively fast tempo and

maintains it to the end of the movement robbing the music of a sense of resolution. In 1961 he took exactly the opposite approach, slowing to the very brink of a dead stop and leaving us breathless for the celeste's last note (sadly predicted by an audience-member's cough). But the 1964 recording brings something very special; the funereal black brass merge into a tawny horn, giving way to solos from an unearthly flute and a violin that is just this side of sobbing. The mood of a return to a place that is simultaneously the same and different is perfectly caught [5].

The scherzo was proposed at the time as 'an ironic smile over the irrevocable past' - whatever that means [6]. In fact, what we have is perhaps Shostakovich's most publicly Mahlerian movement to date (the suppressed Fourth Symphony is even more so but would remain largely unknown until 1962). The 1939 horns galumph playfully or produce amusing farty noises but by the end we're pretty sure that it's all been nothing more than high-spirits. In 1958 the woodwind are harsher, the strings more clipped and the side drum at the end of the movement is like a volley of rifle shots. The Prague orchestra's woodwind mitigate the violence, the horns are exuberant (and occasionally inaccurate) and the very end isn't driven home so violently. But 1964 sees the greatest contrasts; the horns are coarse and peasantish, the violin solos most balletic (almost a return to the First Symphony), and it is all capped with the most violent coda.

The third movement, which, to Gerald Abrahams' disdain, was written in three days, also shows great variety between the recordings. Not surprisingly, in 1939 Stokowski gave it lots of *portamento*, especially at the opening. He toned it down, however, in subsequent recordings. Despite that, it's not such a heart-on-sleeve reading as either of Bernstein's, and this restraint in some ways makes it all the more moving. The solo playing, too, is uniformly excellent, the oboe plangent and the flute full of fantasy. Only the climax is spoiled by a tempo whose flexibility takes away from the stoicism of the moment, but thereafter it returns to its high standard - the tolling harp in the final pages is heralded by a heart-breaking *morendo* in the violins and followed by the most wonderful *portamento* in the violas.

1958 finds a reading that may be more objective or may simply be more cursory. The oboe is uninvolved and the playing of the New York Stadium Symphony Orchestra (the NYPO in disguise) is simply not good enough; important structural and emotional moments go for little and the playing is untidy. Symptomatic is the coda where the harp and celeste are not quite together. Perhaps this is why, in one incarnation, this performance appeared credited to the Cleveland Festival Orchestra under the baton of one Leopold Wise.

What had happened between 1958 and 1961 isn't clear but the *largo* is a completely different affair. Starting with a business-like tempo he slips down a gear almost immediately, concealing it with amazingly flexible conducting. But more than these details, the whole movement is filled with intense emotion without becoming gratuitous. Every part of the orchestra plays superbly, making this an outstanding rendering of the movement.

The 1964 opening is as urgent as the 1939 reading without what is, for me, over-use of *portamento*. Of course he had the benefit of conducting the London Symphony Orchestra whose strings sounds range from an intense drenched tone at the climax to a gruff barking in the basses. On a minor point, one of the important cells of the symphony is a repetition of three notes, often crotchets; in one manifestation it will become the violins' grotesquely hammering A's in the coda. Its first appearance in the third movement is *marcato* but Stokowski tends to underplay it in the earlier recordings, turning it into a dotted minim. By 1964 he had remedied this, though at the climax, where some conductors make it almost *staccato*, he maintains the line through the three notes.



In 1939 the finale runs into a problem straightaway. The engineers, fearful that the timps would overload the recording, put them behind baffles reducing them to a distant thump which is quieter than the surrounding brass; the problem is even worse in the coda where they become ridiculous plops in the background. A similar fate befalls the piano in the first movement which is neither *secco* nor *staccato* and other details are lost, notably the harp octaves in the quiet section of the finale. In the tradition of Russian concern over the success of symphonic finales, the last movement was seen as a problem almost from the day of the première. However successful Stokowski thought it was, he obviously tried to interpret it as joyful and, to the extent that it is possible, he does succeed. The opening of the coda has an open gaiety and the strings at figure 113 have a delirious quality. The coda is often the litmus test of a conductor's view of this work. Those who see it as positive often take it quite quickly, whereas adherents to the revisionist line prefer an ironic, grindingly slow speed. Mravinsky's recordings tend toward the latter view but as Stokowski takes it quite quickly (though he adds a large unmarked *ritardando* at the end), either he had not heard the Russian's recording or chose to ignore it in favour of an 'optimistic' ending. The 1958 version compounds the errors of the earlier movements, and the two live recordings, whilst not taking a particularly ironic view, are not wholly without darkness.

The paradox of the recordings of this work is that the first is closest to the score, but the last is closest to the spirit, leaving the 1958 as a transitional interpretation that feels as if he was struggling to cope with the revelations about the USSR and its treatment of the composer, not to mention the problem of a less-than-perfect orchestra. By 1961 he was reassessing things and in the slow movement completely inhabits the music. But the 1964 Proms account, perhaps because it's a live recording with Stokowski pulling out all the stops, of the symphony is by far the most rounded of these three interpretations and is a central part of the Stokowski/Shostakovich discography.

## Sixth Symphony

1940 Philadelphia Orchestra  
1968 Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Shostakovich's Sixth Symphony was just a year old when Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra gave the

US première in November 1940 and took it into the studio to make the world première recording (Mravinsky, who premièred the work, would follow six years later). As with the 1933 recording of the First Symphony, the economic circumstances mean that the Philadelphia's strings are undernourished. Some compensation comes from the wind choir, exhibiting a wonderfully grainy texture with supremely expressive solos -

try figure 8, the piccolo's quavering variant of the opening theme against gently walking violins and a chiming harp, or the beautifully flexible cor anglais solo from figure 14. However the highpoint is the flute solo over the strings' trilling tritone at figure 23 like the song of some Asian bird in a desolate landscape.

What is amazing is how Stokowski immediately saw through the work's apparent jollity. For all its having two fast movements this work, written as the Soviet Union began to plan for the forthcoming war, is one of Shostakovich's darker creations. Perhaps Stokowski was moved towards this interpretation by his own pacifism and foreboding about the future. Not only was the war looming but he knew that his relationship with the Philadelphia Orchestra was coming to an end. That mood might be expected in the long, opening *largo* but Stokowski sustains it into the second movement by taking it more slowly than the *allegro* marking might imply and having the low strings and woodwind play with a galumphing weight which denies everyone the opportunity to dance. The militaristic parts of this movement are played up and contrasted violently with the more pastoral parts in a way that, ironically, would be just as suitable in the more overtly programmatic Seventh Symphony.

Given a conductor who sees this as a dark work, the finale presents the problem: how to convey the irony underlying the surface. Some choose to push the tempo up, giving the impression of a machine out of control (the codas of the Fifth Symphonies by both Shostakovich and Prokofiev are thus brought to mind). Vladimir Ashkenazy gave a brilliant performance in this mould at the Proms though, sadly, he reined his tempi in when he came to record it in the studio. Alternatively one can slow it down and this is the approach that Stokowski takes. Thus the final *presto* might be better described as an *allegro* and the circus qualities are played down. Figure 96 - low strings and woodwinds spitting out a bitter waltz *ff marcato* - has a clunking clumsiness that gets stronger as it enters a passage of manic alternations of three and four time. Stokowski caps the performance with a coda whose terrifying relentlessness is exaggerated by the implacable tempo yet somehow he manages to combine mechanism with a flexibility that prevents it becoming merely metrical.

Twenty eight years later, when Stokowski came to record the work with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra he removed much of the darkness and the second and third movements in particular became much brighter. But a more fundamental change seems to have taken place in his view of the piece and he treats it as an orchestral showcase - a kind of concerto for orchestra. On one level all of Shostakovich's symphonies fulfil this role as they abound in taxing solos for many members of the orchestra, but to treat them as nothing more is to seriously underrate them.



It seems appropriate that its coupling on LP (recorded at the same time) was the *Age of Gold Suite* whose sardonic wit and playful wrong notes are a more extreme version of Stokowski's view of the symphony. Impressive as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's playing is, Stokowski's view of the piece in 1968 is not one with which I can agree; his interpretation seems not to have deepened over the years but rather to have become more shallow. I much prefer the earlier recording which may well be the highlight of his Shostakovich recordings.



If Stokowski's conducting is apparent in the string playing, the woodwind, always so vivid in the Philadelphians work, is generally less characterful here. Of course there are exceptions, the oboe and flute, and particularly the bassoonist who manages to find endless colours in his part. I have to admit that the bassoon can be annoying in some Philadelphia recordings as it is played with a horribly wide vibrato that, for me, borders on the parodistic. Against that the NBC SO's E flat clarinet in the second movement (figure 82A) really lacks the vitriol that this solo needs.

### Seventh Symphony 'Leningrad'

1942 NBC Symphony Orchestra Pearl: GEMM CDs 9044 (c/w Op 34/14 - orch Stokowski, (1935 recording), Op 10 (1933) and Op 47 (1939).

By 1942 Stokowski had been conducting Shostakovich's music for fourteen years so it was not surprising that he persuaded NBC to bid for the western première of Shostakovich's already famous Seventh Symphony. However, Toscanini felt that the NBC Orchestra was 'his' and wanted the honour of conducting the work. Both conductors' anti-fascist credentials were impeccable (such considerations must have come into play) but Stokowski was much more experienced in Shostakovich's music so it must have been a bitter blow when NBC gave the honour to the Italian. Five months later Stokowski conducted a broadcast of it.

Despite the NBC SO being 'Toscanini's orchestra', one of the notable things about Stokowski's reading is the characteristic Philadelphian string sound that he coaxes from it; ranging from a rich sheen to a chill whiteness, yet there is never any feeling of this being empty virtuosity - the colours are precisely calculated to bring out what Stokowski sees in the score. In a militaristic piece that later gained a reputation for bombast, the appropriateness of this might be questioned but he is relatively sparing in its use and the points at which he employs the famously saturated tone are those that have an open-air quality and seem to speak of the composer's love of his country. Post-Volkov and post-*perestroika* interpretations of Shostakovich's canon are certainly often valid but in this work we cannot ignore the clearly pastoral nature of some of the writing. The first string entry in the third movement (figure 106) is particularly passionate and the sound is enhanced by the addition of plenty of *portamento* and a slight *accelerando* and *crescendo* to many of the rising phrase ends. The effect is repeated a few minutes later (figure 119) as the violins rise through two octaves before singing a rocking figure over slowly moving string chords but although a characteristic of the performance it never becomes a mannerism. But lovely as these details are there are some structural problems, for instance the end of the first movement slows almost to a halt with an enormous *ritardando* and, in the third movement the *moderato risoluto* woodwind entrance at figure 121 lacks a sense of propulsion; there isn't a really noticeable gear shift, and the playing could benefit from a little more weight. Things improve again towards the end of the third movement at figure 141 when the slowly moving block chords in the strings bring a spreading warmth to the music.

Stokowski himself obviously believed deeply in the piece at the time of the recording though as he left it alone thereafter there may have been an element of topicality in his interest. In any event it manifests itself only intermittently in this performance, mainly in the form of the wonderful colours that he draws from the orchestra. At the coda Stokowski suddenly regains interest, making it one of the recording's high points as he manages to invest music that can seem merely portentous with real grandeur. Stokowski wrote of the coda that 'the trombones and trumpets sound [the theme that begins the symphony] as a clarion of triumph and jubilation' [7]. Whatever the revisionist view about the over-extended C major ending being ironically optimistic, Stokowski sweeps those feelings aside and even now we are able to feel it as a truly hopeful conclusion. But overall the performance is undermined by playing which is not so much bad as under-characterised and this is hardly helped by the decidedly 'off-air' quality of the recording exemplified by the first note having been lopped off. In the end it is a performance that is interesting to hear but can hardly be regarded as central to the discography of either the composer or the conductor.

### Tenth Symphony

1964 Chicago Symphony Orchestra Chicago Symphony Orchestra. CSO 90/12

The Tenth is widely seen as Shostakovich's finest symphony, and one of his finest in any sphere so it is surprising and disappointing that Stokowski never made a studio recording. However, there is a live recording with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra from March 1966.

The first movement is one of Shostakovich's typical arch-like structures, building from and returning to a tiny, quiet cell [8]. In his book on the symphony David Fanning likens the three subject groups of the opening movement to thought, song and dance [9]. Stokowski seems to feel the opening similarly; the rising phrase in the low strings is on the brink of audibility, sensed rather than heard. However, as the movement progresses he doesn't invest it with the organic sense that Fanning's view implies, rather treating it more sectionally, for example figures 18 and 23 (versions of the second subject) are marked off by *ritardandi* large enough to be noticeable though without disrupting the flow of the music. Figure 8 (a sort of variation in quavers) forces the perceived tempo up without the conductor necessarily having to change the beat but Stokowski chooses to push the tempo up a fraction.



Those who dislike this as being too interventionist may prefer the skill of Stokowski and his players in bringing out the structural use of colour in this movement; at figure 5 the clarinet plays a development of the opening motif and an air of relaxation flows over the music. True, the tempo eases slightly at this point but much of the effect can be attributed to the player's beautifully *semplice* tone. However, by the time the movement has reached a climax (figure 43) the punched out rhythm in the timps and side drum is blurred. It is impossible to say how much this is due to the tempo and how much to the recording but both are probably responsible to some degree. Nevertheless it is exciting, so much so that when, at figure 51, the horns play a brief chromatic phrase spanning a minor third that is smudged into a glissando *à la* *The Rite of Spring* in *Fantasia*, I can forgive it as a temporary exuberance. As the movement winds down there is an air of contemplation rather than the numbness that some (notably Mravinsky) bring to it as the piccolo plays with the basic intervals of the symphony.



In terms of its emotional thrust this is one of Shostakovich's most complex codas. To play it as simply positive is to misread it as fatally as to cover it in a thick layer of 'Shostakovichian irony'. This performance is more exuberant than violent and some may feel that he errs too far on the side of the redemptive finale whether that redemption comes from the recent death of Stalin or the climax of a longer process. What cannot be gainsaid is that Stokowski had many things to say about this symphony and, had he worked on it more, his interpretation could have become one of the most important readings. As it is, what we have is one of the great might-have-beens; a performance that is full of interesting moments but, in the last analysis does not quite hang together.

### Eleventh Symphony 'The Year 1905'

1958 Houston Symphony Orchestra  
 1958 Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra Russian Disc.  
 RDCD 15100

After losing the battle for the western première of the Seventh Symphony, it was with another epic historical canvas that he again became involved with one of the composer's works from the very start. It was less than six months after the world première that he introduced the Eleventh to the US and recorded it with the Houston Symphony Orchestra. The work has subsequently come in for criticism and rehabilitation buffeted between the demands of musicology and politics but it is clear that it was well suited to Stokowski's style. The programme, the folk song quotations and trumpet calls were the cause of some 'it's-not-a-symphony' criticism such as has been meted out to Vaughan Williams' Seventh. For all that, it enjoyed a flurry of early recordings; the conductor of the première, Nathan Rakhlin, recorded it just before Stokowski, who was followed a month later by André Cluytens.

The second movement has become notorious for *Testimony's* description of it as 'a musical portrait of Stalin, roughly speaking' [10]. However one feels about the statement, this movement is one of Shostakovich's most violent, on a par with the *allegretto furioso* of the Tenth String Quartet. The dynamic hardly drops below *forte* and the Chicago brass come into their own producing a tone that is strong without descending into the mere noise that some conductors have been wont to get from them. The one major dynamic change occurs at figure 94 when the brass and woodwind climax to a *fff* prior to leaving the strings to continue for a couple of bars, at which point they suddenly cut back to *piano* before terracing the dynamic up and down. Going for effect some conductors cut the sound back immediately but Stokowski takes a different approach by keeping the volume up throughout the passage, though of course the absence of the woodwind and brass brings down the *effective* dynamic level. In some ways this adds to the effect that one commentator noted of it being 'like a giant whirlwind overtaking a community' [11] but ironically it also removes the feeling of impending threat; the altered dynamic reduces one kind of tension but the tempo and harmony are other means of keeping it at a high pitch, bringing a threat just as intense, but of a different kind.

Even if Stokowski doesn't paint a Winter Palace as cold as some conductors do, the opening chords of the Houston recording are full of expectation, and the folk songs don't seem 'tacked on' but rather are part of the symphonic shape. But is this the advantage that it might seem? They certainly provide much of the basic material for the work; the first song opens with the triplets and the minor third that pervade the whole work and so could be viewed as a symphonic building block. On the other hand this could be taken as evidence that it is motifs, rather than melodies, that make for good symphonic material. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Shostakovich quotes actual folk songs and, even if one argues that the specifics of the texts, not being universally known, are of less relevance, the songs unavoidably have a 'folk' character. Similarly some of the trumpet solos bring with them images too concrete to allow for the complex of associations that accompany, say, a Mahlerian horn which is, at one and the same time, a horn and something more.

The enigmatic third movement opens cautiously and frequently returns to that mood. The woodwind solos in particular are full of character and it finishes with a white sound in the flute and piccolo that is entirely appropriate to the numbed, mood of incomprehension.

But the Eleventh's sound-painting is only intermittent through the rest of the work and the folk songs often appear in instruments that have less concrete associations.

For the slow introduction to the finale Stokowski returns to the same desolation that he brought to the opening of the Sixth Symphony; the movement's progression from 'dark' to 'light' might almost be a microcosm of the earlier work, textures such as the slowly skirling wind solos over long string pedals being written in a similar vein. At figure 185 (a quiet recapitulation in the low strings immediately following a *fff* outburst by the whole orchestra) Stokowski casts further back, bringing to it a Musorgskian colouring and a little further on the brass have an angry, clipped tone that is perfect.



By that stage its symphonic credentials have been established so that, for instance, the outbreak of militarism in the second movement seems to grow naturally out of the previous music.

This may seem to be criticising the symphony as much as the performance but central to its interpretation is the balancing of the abstract with the concrete and difficult as this is, it can be done as Ashkenazy proved in his Decca recording (448 179-2).

It was only a few months after the American performances that Stokowski travelled to the Soviet Union to conduct the Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra in programmes which were to include Shostakovich's Eleventh and Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony. Some of these have already appeared on disc but the Shostakovich has only recently been released. Given that the Moscow performance was so soon after the Houston recording it might be wondered whether there are that many differences. But of course he was working with a different orchestra, fascinatingly, a Russian one and in any case Stokowski would not have produced a mere re-run.

Being off-air tapes we can hardly expect it to sound as good as the Houston recording but lots of orchestral detail is lost; its never clear what notes the timps are playing and the tubular bells' vital alternating minor and major thirds at the very end are hardly audible though this may be something of a blessing as, judging by their tuning and tone they seem to have been replaced by roughly cut lengths of scaffolding - a similar flaw afflicts Kondrashin's otherwise superb first recording of Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony. To get an idea of the differences between the two listen to the climax of the second movement, where the page is black with notes. In Houston everything remains clear but in Moscow a muddle ensues, a muddle that does not communicate the confusion and anger of the Ninth of January. It is also plagued by a Moscow audience full of summer colds, and a percussionist who chooses the quietest moments to drop his beaters.

The way Stokowski sometimes makes the Moscow strings sound as if they could break into the *Tallis Fantasia* at any moment may be a fascinating comment on the nature of patriotism, and the opening pages have an added poignancy, made not merely to be a picture of the chill Palace Square but given an added element of grieving - a prediction of an enterprise doomed to tragedy. In fact this is one of the main differences between the two readings; in Houston he seemed eager to stress the symphonicism of the work whereas in Moscow the pictorialism comes though much more. The Moscow strings have a kind of 'split' quality - white at the top and fuller at the bottom and it is all set off with a silvery, trumpet with a huge dynamic range. I wonder if Stokowski knew the folk songs that Shostakovich quotes though it is academic as the low strings' *You Fell As Victims* (figure 99) starts with a degree of understatement that is just as effective as the more demonstrative approach of other conductors especially when, later on, the violas seem to strain for the top notes. On the Houston recording it has a *parlando* quality that makes me think that, even if he didn't know the actual words, he sensed its folk-song origins.



Unfortunately both recordings' flutes lack the hopelessness implied by the song of the prisoner at figure 8. The many subtle colours cry out for a conductor with Stokowski's touch. For a score accused of bombast there are pages and pages marked *piano* or quieter, there are also pages and pages of notes of equal value over which the conductor has to avoid monotony and Stokowski's flexibility is eminently suited to this.

Whether or not Stokowski picked up anything from the atmosphere while he was in the USSR the Moscow performance has even more drive than in Houston and it is full of telling orchestral details; the skirling strings at the start of the last movement; the wind choir, empty as the steppe, and the threnodies of the brass all come across brilliantly. The symphony lasts around an hour and there are some early climaxes which must be carefully judged if they are not to detract from the power from the real, later climaxes, and Stokowski controls these well but in the Moscow recording when it comes to the final pages it all happens too quickly and feels like a sudden afterthought, an impression that is intensified by the fact that it is not loud enough. In the Houston recording the run up to the coda is superb with its tar-black bass clarinet (this is lost in Moscow) and wild woodwind triplets giving it an almost unbearable tension exploding into the actual coda with a properly prominent bell. An interesting aside is that Stokowski experimented with using a kind of electric organ to boost the bass notes in the Houston recording. Both of these performances are more than merely worth hearing, especially if you can listen through the murk of the Moscow performance. As with the First Symphony Stokowski presents two aspects of the work but what is fascinating is that he could do this over a period of just two months.

To sum up; the Seventh and Moscow Eleventh, have to be regarded as interesting historical documents. This is not merely a question of recording quality; both are lacking in this regard but others that I have discussed are also less than perfect. The points of interest are that the Seventh is (so far) Stokowski's only available recording, while in the Eleventh it is Stokowski *plus* the orchestra that might attract. There are many interesting details in the Seventh but it could, without too much loss, be set aside. I would be less keen to lose the Moscow Eleventh but the Houston performance is equally fine, though with different emphases and, of course, the recording is in a different class.

The Chicago Sixth is brilliantly played, but is not an interpretation to live with. The two recordings of the First and the live Tenth are far from negligible but there are better versions in the catalogue. The recordings of the Fifth are interesting as they mark a progression in interpretation over almost 25 years during which the work was viewed from various political angles, and for this reason if no other they are worth considering as a set. But the 1964 Proms recording and the 1940 recording of the Sixth are indispensable and I would urge anyone remotely interested in these works, the composer or the conductor to buy them.

I would like to thank Edward Johnson and Andrew Youdell for help in preparing this article which appeared in a different form in the winter 1996 edition of *Toccata*, (the journal of the Stokowski Society).



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#### ENDNOTES

- [1] In 'Tempo in Shostakovich's Performances of His Own Works'. (*DSCH Journal No 2*, Winter 1994, pp7-15) Sofia Mosheovich points out that in his recordings the majority of deviations from the score are to slow speeds down though even where he altered the tempi he tended to keep the relationships between them. Nikolai Malko claimed Shostakovich estimated that the symphony should last 25 minutes but that at the marked tempi 'it would be physically impossible in many sections and would actually take less than twenty minutes.' Elizabeth Wilson: *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* p48. Excerpted from Nikolai Malko *A Certain Art*. New York, Morrow, 1966, pp160-167.
- [2] See Frank Forman and Kenzo Amoh: 'Evgeni Mravinsky Discography' in *ARSC Journal*, v25 n1. Spring 1994, which points out that the re-issues of the 1938 recording on LP and CD cited by Hulme are in fact re-issues of his 1954 recording. Mravinsky's first two recordings of the work were finally released on CD in 1988, the first as bonus disc number BMG Japan BOCC 3 in a four-disc set, and the second in the four-disc set BMG Japan BVCX 8020. Melodiya itself seems to have no original source for the première recording and the original fourteen 78rpm sides were provided by the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound and the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Further information is available on Amoh and Forman's website: <http://plaza19.mbn.or.jp/~yemravinsky/contents.htm>
- [3] Gerald Abrahams. *Eight Soviet Composers*, (OUP, 1943), p27.
- [4] Thankfully, in this age of increasing orchestral homogenisation the orchestra still produces their recognisable sound.
- [5] "And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time"
- T S Eliot. *Little Gidding*, part V.
- [6] Abrahams. op cit.
- [7] Stokowski. *Music for All of Us*. New York. Simon and Schuster, 1943. p110. There are several references to the symphony in the book, a sign that it was still fresh in his mind from a period of study.
- [8] The First Violin Concerto and the Second Cello Concerto are just two of several works with a similar form though in those cases the basic material is developed far more quickly.
- [9] David Fanning. *The Breath of the Symphonist: Shostakovich's Tenth*. Royal Musical Association, 1988, pp7-8.
- [10] Solomon Volkov. *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich as Related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov*. Faber, 1981, p107.
- [11] Frederick Youens' notes for Mravinsky's 1954 recording. They were reused verbatim for the 1994 CD re-release (Emergo EC 3366-2).



## "Quotations"

Roger Sessions, on his two meetings with Shostakovich:

Briefly, in Moscow:

"... he seemed to me the most nervous human being I've ever seen."

And later in Philadelphia:

"I sometimes spoke to him at the Philadelphia Academy of Music where there are sort of recesses where the walls are thick and the windows are little. We would be there talking, and then he'd be very warm and friendly, and suddenly the head of what they call the Composer's Union would appear in the background and immediately he'd freeze up like that, I felt very badly and awfully touched, because I liked him." (pp..238-239).

*Conversations with Roger Sessions* by Andrea Olmstead. 1987, Northeastern University Press, Boston.

Rodion Shchedrin, in a letter to *Gramophone* 1997

"In a totalitarian system relations between the artist and the regime are always extremely complex and contradictory. If the artist sets himself against the system, he is put behind bars or simply killed. But if he does not express his disagreement with its dogmas verbally, he is not physically bothered, he is left alone. He is even rewarded from time to time. Shostakovich did not wish to rot in prison or a cemetery; he wanted to tell people, through the power of his art, his pain and his hatred of totalitarianism

He wrote all his scores in a Soviet country. He was recognised and given awards there. But in his music he was always honest and uncompromising".

Wilfred Mellers, from *Romanticism and the Twentieth Century* 1988

"There is rough justice in the fact that Shostakovich, avowedly a state composer, is most consummately realised in the abstract medium that has become associated with the inner life.

This spiritual transcendence is his ultimate triumph, as, in the last resort, any man's must be".