

Program notes for The Enigmatic Shostakovich

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Tonight's program is devoted to the music of Dmitri Shostakovich, a composer who spent his entire professional life working under the Soviet regime. The constraints on musicians and other artists varied in their strictness over time and, as Shostakovich found out, a piece of music that was approved for public performance could later be banned by the same music committee, seemingly at will. Composers were expected to align their music with Socialist Realism, and if they deviated from that ideal they were usually charged with "formalism," which simply meant the committee thought a piece was not accessible enough for the general public, not uplifting enough, or ideologically wrong. Shostakovich was recognized as the most prominent Soviet composer for much of the mid-20th century, but he, like all his compatriots, was sometimes denounced for formalism, and had to balance making a living by conforming to the Party requirements while expressing his own voice. One of the reasons musicians today still speculate about the meanings of certain works is that Shostakovich was careful to not express them overtly, instead leading the listener to identify any subtext, particularly in his instrumental music.

Chamber Symphony, op. 110a

The Chamber Symphony is a 1967 arrangement for string orchestra of Shostakovich's String Quartet no. 8 by Rudolph Barshai, which Shostakovich approved. Shostakovich composed the string quartet in 1960 when he was in Dresden supposedly scoring the music for a film about the destruction of the city in World War II. A few days after completing the quartet he wrote to a friend, "I reflected that if I die some day then it's hardly likely anyone will write a work dedicated to my memory. So I decided to write one myself." He then spelled out the themes, his own and by others, that he had quoted in the work. He was probably depressed by the fact that he was about to be inducted into the Communist Party against his will, and he said in an interview later in 1960 that he was also influenced by the film about Dresden, stating, "I am dedicating it to the victims of war and fascism."

The Chamber Symphony is remarkable for its overall form of five movements, all of them played without a break, and three of the five with the tempo marking *Largo* (very slow). The whole work could be viewed as an extended lament. Also appearing prominently throughout the work is Shostakovich's musical signature, something he used in several other works, but that is perhaps of most significance here given that the work is such a personal piece. It is derived from the first four letters of the German transliteration of his name, D.

Schostakowitsch, DSCH. In German E-flat is labelled Es (which becomes S in the signature), and H is the German name for what we call B natural (B is reserved for B-flat), so the musical result of DSCH is D, E-flat, C, B, or if you think in C minor, 2-3-1-7.

The work opens with a fugal section based on DSCH, with each section of strings presenting the motto in turn. The mood is both studied and solemn, and later chromatic lines move over long drones. Shostakovich references both his Symphony no. 1 and Symphony no. 5.

The second movement is by far the fastest, *Allegro molto*. It is very tense and aggressive with heavy accents, and Shostakovich quotes from his Piano Trio no. 2 at the end. One measure's silence leads to the third movement, *Allegretto*. It is a kind of waltz, tentative at times, fiercer at others. Later, changes of meter make the waltz disappear for a time. DSCH is prominent throughout, and Shostakovich includes a quotation from the Cello Concerto no. 1 (also on tonight's program). The movement ends when the tempo slows and a single violin section plays a long note that links to a drone in the next movement.

Both movements IV and V are very slow. In the fourth movement Shostakovich quotes the 19th-century song "Tormented by Grievous Bondage" and an aria from his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsenk District*. Hammerstrokes express devastation, and there is some conflict between upper and lower strings. The final movement opens like the first, with imitation between the string parts based on DSCH. Again there are quotations from *Lady Macbeth*. The work ends by winding down, slower and quieter until there is silence.

Cello Concerto no. 1 in E-flat Major, op. 107

Shostakovich knew that his friend, the cello virtuoso Mstislav Rostropovich, wanted him to compose a cello concerto for him, but years earlier Shostakovich's first wife warned Rostropovich never to bring up the subject, which instruction Rostropovich obeyed only with great difficulty. On June 6th 1959 his patience paid off when Shostakovich announced that his next big work would be a cello concerto. He further stated that the first movement, which he said was in the style of a humorous march, was already finished. He completed the rest of the work in just over a month. Shortly afterwards Shostakovich gave Rostropovich the score. Four days later at the first run-through, Shostakovich was astonished to find that Rostropovich had already memorized the entire work. Rostropovich gave the premiere in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) in October 1959, played it again in Moscow five days later, and gave the first U.S. performance in Philadelphia in November with Shostakovich in the audience. Rostropovich continued to play the work throughout his career.

The orchestra Shostakovich chose to use is slightly unusual. Pairs of woodwind instruments include flute 2 doubling on piccolo and bassoon 2 on contrabassoon. The only brass instrument is a single horn; the only percussion instruments are timpani and celeste; strings are as usual. The horn takes an important role in relation to the solo cello in several movements, playing in dialogue and duet with the solo cello. The timpani often articulate beginnings and ends of sections and movements; the celeste is reserved for a special moment in the second movement. The overall shape of the concerto is also unusual. It is in four movements, with the final three linked together, and the third movement is an extended cadenza that takes the listener from the lyricism of the second movement towards the obsessive energy of the finale.

The work opens with a four-note motive that comes from the "Procession to Execution," part of his music for the film *The Young Guard* (1948), according to musicologist Laurel Fay. It is very prominent in the first section of the sonata-form movement, and it returns in all movements

except the second. This “humorous march” has both light and dark moments, and is quite aggressive especially when the soloist plays with repeated downbows.

The second movement is slower, marked *Moderato*, and for most of its length is calm, smooth, and long-breathed. The soloist plays duets with a clarinet, with the viola section, and with the horn. Muted strings murmur under the unmuted cello; winds play three unusual passages of oom-pa accompaniment to the soloist. After the music becomes urgent, intense, and loud, a magical moment involves the solo cello playing very high harmonics in dialogue with the glistening sound of the celeste, and with very soft muted strings beneath. A quiet timpani roll marks the end, as the cello starts its cadenza in the third movement.

The cadenza is divided into four sections by five pizzicato chords each time. The earlier, shorter sections develop musical ideas from the first two movements, while the last, and longest, section becomes faster and more virtuosic as it leads into the finale.

The finale is the fastest movement, with a tempo of *Allegro con moto*, and is in rondo form, ABACA-coda. While A is first heard without the soloist, in subsequent returns the soloist joins in. The bold motive from the opening of the concerto returns in the coda, then is joined with the A section from this movement, and the music rushes to its end.

Symphony no. 9 in E-flat Major

Shostakovich’s Symphony no. 9 dates from 1945, at the end of World War II. The Soviet musical world was led by Shostakovich to expect his ninth symphony to be a grandiose piece based on “the Victory.” The musicologist David Rabinovich remembered him saying, “I would like to write it for a chorus and solo singers as well as an orchestra” but that he was also wary of a comparison between his Symphony no. 9 and that of Beethoven. Early in 1945 he played the beginning of his “Victory” symphony for his students, which Rabinovich described as “powerful, victorious major music in a vigorous tempo.” For some reason (perhaps people’s expectations, trying to live up to Beethoven, or his own disinterest in what he was composing), he stopped work. Instead, in the summer he started a very different kind of symphony, and wrote it in barely a month. Shostakovich warned listeners that “in the Ninth a transparent, pellucid, and bright mood predominates.” Initial reactions were positive, if surprised, but inevitably in the Soviet Union a few years later it was banned briefly as being too “formalist” and elitist. There has long been disagreement between critics about Shostakovich’s expressive intentions, especially in the last movement.

Symphony no. 9 is a neoclassical work, in that it includes Classical elements in its form, phrasing, and orchestration. It is his shortest symphony, despite having five movements, similar in length to a Haydn or Mozart symphony. He uses a Classical sonata form, complete with a repeated exposition, and although the orchestra is quite large, the scoring is often delicate, giving the symphony a chamber feel. Shostakovich reserves the full sound for only a few moments. He places a lot of reliance on woodwind tone colors, including the piccolo.

The first movement is generally light and sparkling, especially when the piccolo is involved. The opening theme has a falling arpeggio phrase followed by a loose inversion. In the recapitulation, the opening theme returns with extra brass interruptions, and the piccolo theme is now played by a solo violin. The end comes without delay.

The slower second movement opens with a very smooth clarinet solo. The form is ABABA, and the percussion and loud brass are silent. Gradually other woodwind instruments join the clarinet then drop out one by one. Strings and horns begin a contrasting section with a swaying chromatic rising line. These two ideas alternate throughout. The movement ends with a piccolo solo fading away.

The last three movements are played with no break. The third movement is marked *Presto*. It swirls along, with a notable trumpet solo in the middle. This movement, like the previous one, fades away both in tempo and dynamics. Very loud brass sounds announce the beginning of the fourth movement, which might be thought of as a slow introduction to the finale. Pompous brass fanfares alternate and contrast with two bassoon recitatives, which are thoughtful and more flexible rhythmically. The last note becomes the first of the finale, with a complete change of mood to clownish. The opening melody is derived from that of the first movement. Woodwinds are prominent, taking turns with the strings. The tempo picks up until the music hurtles on, feeling a little out of control, getting faster and louder and involving the whole orchestra. The music pulls back at the climax, only for the whole orchestra to rush again to the end.

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