

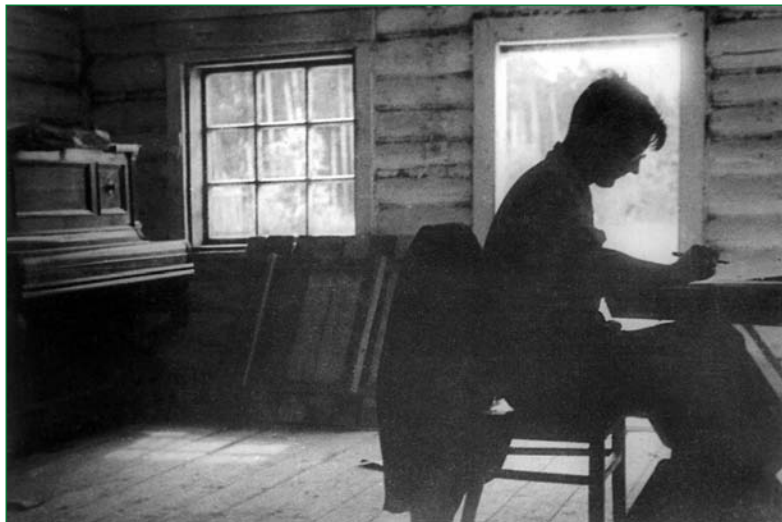
NAXOS

SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No. 8

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

Vasily Petrenko



Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Symphony No. 8 in C minor, Op. 65

A third of a century after his death and the symphonies of Dmitry Shostakovich have moved from the relative to the absolute centre of the repertoire: along with those of Mahler, they represent 'modern' music to the non-specialist concert-goer. Yet they differ from any comparable cycle since Beethoven in the absence (whether or not intended) of a logical progression as might have endowed their career-spanning inclusiveness with an evolution from aspiration to fulfillment.

Of the symphonies, the *First* is a graduation work that accorded the teenage composer international prominence. The *Second* and *Third* represent a reckless accommodation between modernist means and revolutionary ends, while the *Fourth* stakes out the boundary between the individual and society that was to remain a focal-point. The *Fifth* clarifies that boundary by paradoxically making it the more equivocal, which the *Sixth* continues by subverting the relationship still further. The *Seventh* is a reaction to civil conflict and social collapse finding its equivalent in the *Eighth*, which in turn finds its opposite in the *Ninth*. The *Tenth* marks the genre's culmination as outlet for an abstract programme. The *Eleventh* opens a period in which Russian concerns were foremost, its historical acuity diluted by the impersonality of the *Twelfth* then intensified by the explicitness of the *Thirteenth*. The *Fourteenth* stands outside the genre as regards its form but not its content, while the *Fifteenth* marks a belated re-engagement with abstract symphonism that might or might not have been continued.

The twenty months separating the *Seventh* and *Eighth* Symphonies saw several instrumental and vocal items linked with the war effort, but also three works composed purely out of a personal need during 1942. An opera after Gogol's novel *The Gamblers* floundered over the objective to set the entire text and was abandoned after almost an hour of starkly realistic music had been set down. The *Six Romances on Verses by English* [sic] Poets subject well-known texts to a

pared-down musical treatment that, notably in their (first) orchestration, confirms Shostakovich as continuing the Mussorgsky song tradition. The *Second Piano Sonata* [Naxos 8.570092] contrasts the often brittle intensity of its outer movements with a central *Largo* whose deep introspection anticipates not only the symphony shortly to come but also those written near the end of the composer's career.

It was the sonata that Shostakovich had casually dismissed in a letter written late in May 1943, when he spoke of being creatively spent. Yet in early July he commenced work in earnest on his *Eighth Symphony* at the composers' retreat near Ivanovo, completing the first movement on 3rd August and the following two movements on 18th and 25th of that month. The symphony was finished by 9th September, Shostakovich describing it as shot-through with conflict while being essentially optimistic and affirmative. Yevgeny Mravinsky (to whom the piece was dedicated) took it into rehearsal on 20th October, giving the première with the USSR State Symphony Orchestra at the Moscow Conservatory on 4th November. Compared with the triumphal reception given to the *Seventh 'Leningrad' Symphony*, the reaction was equivocal; even its admirers conceding that, with Soviet victory over Germany becoming ever more certain, such tragic and fatalistic music (which musicologist Boris Asafyev compared to Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*) was hardly a positive contribution to the war-effort. Further performances followed – not least the American première by Artur Rodzinski with the New York Philharmonic on 2nd April 1944, and the British première by Henry Wood with the BBC Symphony Orchestra on 13th July: between these, however, the Union of Composers had decided that the symphony was too individualistic, its language too obscure, to be awarded a Stalin Prize.

Although the first studio recording was made not so long afterwards – by Mravinsky with the Leningrad Philharmonic in June 1947 – the symphony effectively

disappeared when, just ahead of the 'Zhdanov Decree', it was placed on a list of proscribed works in February 1948; not to be rehabilitated until October 1956 when Samuel Samosud gave it in Moscow. Among later performances, one of the most memorable was the British public première when Mravinsky and the Leningrad Philharmonic gave it at London's Royal Festival Hall in the presence of the composer. Shostakovich seems to have had periodic misgivings as to its overall 'tone', but the work has gradually come to be regarded among his most representative and today ranks behind only the *First*, *Fifth* and *Tenth* as the most frequently performed of his symphonies.

The *Eighth Symphony* is scored for an orchestra of flutes and clarinets in fours, oboes and bassoons in threes, four horns, three each of trumpets and trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (four players) and strings. The first movement refines Shostakovich's personal rethink of sonata-form, the second and third are scherzos that confront each other stylistically and musically, while the fourth movement is his first orchestral passacaglia; the finale then attempts its overall resolution via an 'innocence to experience' trajectory left hanging in the balance.

The first movement, *Adagio*, continues the thinking of that from the *Fifth Symphony* in its being predominately slow with the point of maximum tension coming at the start of the reprise. It begins with a forceful 'motto' shared between lower and upper strings; the initial three notes, the second of them descending, are a motivic nucleus which opens each movement and pervades all of the work's themes. Dying down, this makes way for a first theme in which the violins state an aching melody over an austere accompaniment on lower strings. It twice reaches brief but pained climaxes before migrating to woodwind whose commentary serves as transition to a second theme, also on violins, that is more flowing but equally discursive and with a halting undertow on lower strings. This surges forward uncertainly before being recalled by violins over static string harmonies. A curtailed resumption of the theme leaves woodwind musing on the motto at the start of the

development, strings and brass entering on the way to a climax in which aspects of the first theme are hurled out by strings against a baleful rhythm first on brass and timpani then side drum. At its peak of accumulated intensity the music is cut off, resuming at a swifter tempo with a fractious version of the motto on strings and woodwind. A brutalized version of the first theme now appears on brass and timpani, strings spurring this on to a massive climax and out of which the motto balefully erupts on full orchestra as the reprise commences. Shuddering strings, left exposed, become the hushed backdrop to a cor anglais monologue which touches on all the ideas heard so far as it moves to a plangent apex, subsiding into a recall of the second theme that continues uncertainly on strings. Muted trumpets and trombones grimly intone the motto, then the coda focuses on the first theme and even manages to attain a strangely becalmed serenity at the close.

The second movement, *Allegretto*, is a bluff though sardonic scherzo whose first theme is dominated by shrill woodwind and coarse strings. This subsides into a more expressive variant, then a second theme is led off by piccolo over strutting strings. Woodwind goad the music on to a heady return of the first theme, cavorting brass and aggressive percussion to the fore, and at whose climax the second theme bursts in inanely on strings and trumpets. Animated percussion and woodwind wind down to a peaceful close, shattered by the brusque final chords.

The remaining three movements play without pause. The third movement, *Allegro non troppo*, is dominated by its initial rhythmic motion. Shrill dissonances on woodwind and trumpet sound above this rhythm, which transfers from strings then trombones to woodwind and pizzicato strings, and finally violins as a brief climax is reached. This subsides into double basses, emerging as vamping accompaniment to a trumpet theme whose jazzy syncopation is urged on by woodwind and side drum. The initial rhythm returns on violas against asides from violins then trombone, building remorselessly via strings to a shattering climax for full orchestra over pounding timpani.

The fourth movement, *Largo*, draws its predecessor's 'head' motif into a tragic theme for trombones and strings, soon subsiding into a rapt introspection that subsequently pervades the music. This theme, on cellos and basses, is made the basis of a sombre passacaglia whose first four variations pursue contrasts in texture between upper and lower strings. Later variations feature horn, piccolo, flutes then clarinet before the theme is heard as a doleful melody on violins. The last two variations highlight strings then woodwind, the latter ending unexpectedly in the major key.

The fifth movement, *Allegretto*, seems to be a tonic to this desolation with a whimsical theme for bassoon and pastoral rejoinder for strings. A nonchalant flute transition leads to the second and more expressive theme for cellos over halting woodwind, while the third theme pits skirling violins and capering woodwind over pirouetting lower strings and woodwind. From here, variants of the first theme gradually merge in an intricate *fugato* before that theme is stated boldly by

brass and woodwind, strings intensifying the momentum on the way to a climax which is none other than a restatement (only minimally varied) of the 'motto' climax from the first movement, and in which glowering brass now have the last word. Dying away, clarinet and violin stealthily recall the third theme, before its predecessor is heard on solo cello. The first theme returns chastened on bassoon, the pastoral rejoinder taking in wistful solos for flute and violin as it merges into the coda. Here the work's first three notes, the second of them now ascending, are heard on flute and pizzicato strings against a pure C major chord on violins.

"Life is beautiful. Everything that is dark and gloomy will rot away, and the beautiful shall triumph", wrote Shostakovich after the symphony's completion. The passing of time has made it possible to hear the extent to which his words are enshrined in the close of this work.

Richard Whitehouse

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra



Photo: Jon Barraclough

The Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra is Britain's oldest surviving professional symphony orchestra. It gives over sixty concerts from September to June at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, as well as presenting concerts across Liverpool city region and throughout the United Kingdom. The orchestra has also toured to the United States, the Far East and Europe. Since 2001 the RLPO has been Classic FM's Orchestra in North West England, a relationship extended until 2012. In 1998 the orchestra became the first in Great Britain to launch its own recording label, RLPO Live. Many RLPO Live recordings are currently being reissued by Avie Records. Other recordings by the orchestra appear on the EMI, Naxos, Nimbus, Universal and Virgin Classics labels. Latest releases are listed on

www.liverpoolphil.com. Musicians of the RLPO are involved in the orchestra's award-winning learning and engagement programmes, providing all ages with exciting opportunities to enjoy and take part in live music-making. Vasily Petrenko became Principal Conductor in September 2006, with a contract extended until 2012. In 2009 the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and its new music group Ensemble 10/10 were joint winners as Ensemble of the Year in the Twentieth Royal Philharmonic Society Music Awards.

Vasily Petrenko



Born and educated in St Petersburg, Vasily Petrenko was Resident Conductor at the St Petersburg State Opera and Ballet Theatre (1994-7) and Chief Conductor of the State Academy Orchestra of St Petersburg (2004-7). He took up his position as Principal Conductor of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra in September 2006, his contract extended to 2015 with the title Chief Conductor, and was appointed Principal Conductor of the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain from 2008. Engagements include the London Symphony Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra and Philharmonia, European Union Youth Orchestra, Netherlands Radio Philharmonic, Russian National Orchestra, Accademia di Santa Cecilia, Rome, NHK Symphony and Budapest Festival Orchestra, the Dallas, Baltimore, Cincinnati and San Francisco Symphony Orchestras, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, with scheduled débuts at Glyndebourne and the Opéra de Paris, among other opera commitments. Recordings with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra include a rare double bill of Fleishman's *Rothschild's Violin* and Shostakovich's *The Gamblers*, a disc of suites from Tchaikovsky's ballets and *Manfred Symphony* and Liszt's *Piano Concertos*. In October 2007 Vasily Petrenko was named Young Artist of the Year at the annual *Gramophone Awards*.

Photo: Mark McNulty; styled by Lorraine McCulloch,
courtesy of Cricket Liverpool

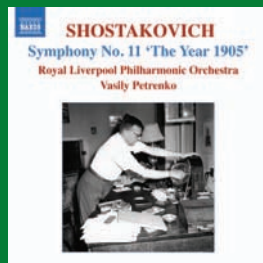
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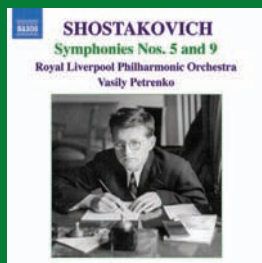
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A third of a century after his death the symphonies of Dmitry Shostakovich have moved to the absolute centre of the repertoire. Written during World War II, the unusually constructed *Eighth Symphony* is a powerful work built on striking contrasts between music which is at times unrelentingly bleak and at others brutally intense. The predominantly slow opening movement, punctuated by a terrifying central crescendo, is followed by a scherzo of savage parody. At the heart of the Symphony a second fast movement builds remorselessly to a shattering climax over pounding timpani. The rapt, largely introspective fourth movement, *Largo*, leads straight into the last movement, *Allegretto*, which seems to reach out for hope in an uncertain world. Vasily Petrenko's acclaimed interpretations of Shostakovich's *Symphonies No. 11* (8.572082) and *Nos. 5 and 9* (8.572167) are also available.



Dmitry
SHOSTAKOVICH
(1906-1975)

Symphony No. 8

**Symphony No. 8
in C minor, Op. 65 (1943)**

61:57

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|---|--------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | I. Adagio – Allegro non troppo | 25:14 |
| 2 | II. Allegretto | 6:03 |
| 3 | III. Allegro non troppo – | 6:18 |
| 4 | IV. Largo – | 9:34 |
| 5 | V. Allegretto | 14:48 |

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra
Vasily Petrenko

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 (courtesy of the DSCH Archive, Moscow)



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Playing Time
61:57



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