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SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphonies Nos. 5 and 9

Czecho-Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra
(Bratislava)
Ladislav Slovák



Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 - 1975)

Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, Op. 47

Symphony No. 9 in E Flat Major, Op. 70

Dmitri Shostakovich was born in St. Petersburg in 1906, the son of an engineer. He had his first piano lessons from his mother when he was nine and showed such musical precocity that he was able at the age of thirteen to enter the Petrograd Conservatory, where he had piano lessons from Leonid Nikolayev and studied composition with the son-in-law of Rimsky-Korsakov, Maximilian Steinberg. He continued his studies through the difficult years of the civil war, positively encouraged by Glazunov, the director of the Conservatory, and helping to support his family, particularly after the death of his father in 1922, by working as a cinema pianist, in spite of his own indifferent health, weakened by the privations of the time. He completed his course as a pianist in 1923 and graduated in composition in 1925. His graduation work, the First Symphony, was performed in Leningrad in May 1926 and won considerable success, followed by performances in the years immediately following in Berlin and in Philadelphia. As a pianist he was proficient enough to win an honourable mention at the International Chopin Competition in Warsaw.

Shostakovich in his early career was closely involved with the theatre, and in particular with the Leningrad Working Youth Theatre, in musical collaboration in Meyerhold's Moscow production of Mayakovsky's *The Flea* and in film music, notably *New Babylon*. His opera *The Nose*, based on Gogol, was completed in 1928 and given its first concert performance in Leningrad in June 1929, when it provoked considerable hostility from the vociferous and increasingly powerful proponents of the cult of the Proletarian in music and the arts. The controversy aroused was a foretaste of difficulties to come. His ballet *The Golden Age* was staged without success in Leningrad in October 1930. Orchestral compositions of these years included a second and third symphony, each a tactful answer to politically motivated criticism.

In 1934 Shostakovich won acclaim for his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, based on a novella by the 19th century Russian writer Nikolay Leskov, and performed in Leningrad and shortly afterwards, under the title *Katerina Ismailova*, in Moscow. Leskov's story deals with a bourgeois crime, the murder of her merchant husband by the heroine of the title, and the opera seemed at first thoroughly acceptable in political as well as musical terms. Its condemnation in *Pravda* in January 1936, apparently at the direct instigation of Stalin, was a significant and dangerous reverse, leading to the withdrawal from rehearsal that year of his Fourth Symphony and the composition the following year of a Fifth Symphony. Performed in Leningrad in November 1937, the symphony was warmly welcomed, allowing his reinstatement as one of the leading Russian composers of the time.

In 1941 Shostakovich received the Stalin prize for his Piano Quintet. In the same year Russia became involved in war, with Hitler's invasion of the country and the siege of Leningrad, commemorated by Shostakovich in his Seventh Symphony, a work he had begun under siege conditions and completed after his evacuation to Kuibyshev.

Stricter cultural control enforced in the years following the end of the war led, in 1948, to a further explicit attack on Shostakovich, coupled now with Prokofiev, Miaskovsky and Khachaturian, and branded as formalists, exhibiting anti-democratic tendencies. The official condemnation brought, of course, social and practical difficulties. The response of Shostakovich was to hold back certain of his compositions from public performance. His first Violin Concerto, written for David Oistrakh, was not performed until after the death of Stalin in 1953, when he returned to the symphony with his Tenth, which met a mixed reception when it was first performed in Leningrad in December 1953. His next two symphonies avoided perilous excursions into liberalisation, the first of them celebrating The Year 1905 and the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution of 1917 in 1957, and the second *The Year 1917*, completed in 1961.

In 1962 there came the first performance of the Thirteenth Symphony, with its settings of controversial poems by Yevtushenko, and a revival of the revised version of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, under the title *Katerina Ismailova*. The opera now proved once more acceptable.

The last dozen years of the life of Shostakovich, during which he suffered a continuing deterioration of health, brought intense activity as a composer, with a remarkable series of works, many of them striving for still further simplicity and lucidity of style. The remarkable Fourteenth Symphony of 1969, settings of poems by Apollinaire, Lorca, Rilke and Küchelbecker, dedicated to his friend Benjamin Britten, was followed in 1971 by the last of the fifteen symphonies, a work of some ambiguity. The last of his fifteen string quartets was completed and performed in 1974 and his final composition, the *Viola Sonata*, in July 1975. He died on 9th August.

The career of Shostakovich must be seen against the political and cultural background of his time and country. Born in the year after Bloody Sunday, when peaceful demonstrators in St. Petersburg had been fired on by troops, Shostakovich had his musical education under the new Soviet régime. His own political sympathies have been questioned and there has been controversy particularly over the publication *Testimony*, *The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov, once accused of fabrication in his portrayal of the composer as a covert enemy of Bolshevism. The testimony of others and a recent scholarly survey of the life and work of Shostakovich suggest that the general tenor of Volkov's *Testimony* is true enough. Shostakovich belonged to a family of liberal tradition, whose sympathies would have lain with the demonstrators of 1905. Under Stalinism, however, whatever initial enthusiasm he may have felt for the new order would have evaporated with the attacks on artistic integrity and the menacing attempts to direct all creative expression to the aims of socialist realism. While writers and painters may express meaning more obviously, composers have a more ambiguous art, so that the meaning of music, if it has any meaning beyond itself, may generally be hidden. Shostakovich learned how to

wear the necessary public mask that enabled him to survive the strictures of 1936 and 1948 without real sacrifice of artistic integrity.

Shostakovich wrote the fifth of his fifteen symphonies in 1937 and it was given its first performance in Leningrad in November that year, presented as for the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. It originally carried the sub-title "The practical answer of a Soviet artist to justified criticism". This, coming after the events of 1936, led to a certain initial coolness towards the symphony outside Russia. Abroad it was at first seen as an act of submission to an arbitrary cultural dictatorship. Nevertheless there is no reason to suppose that Shostakovich was, at the time, insincere in his recantation and apology, or that his own musical development might not have led him to abjure the evils of Western serialism that had at one time begun to attract him. The condemnation of 1948 was, of course, quite another matter.

The Fifth Symphony is in four closely related movements, opening with a movement in broadly classical form, offensive, one might have supposed, to official opponents of formalism, but well received in Russia. Shostakovich had withdrawn his lavishly scored Fourth Symphony of 1936, and now used an orchestra of more usual size, including, however, two harps and a piano, in a structure and texture of great clarity. Cellos and double basses open the second movement, with its jaunty rhythms, followed by a tranquil slow movement of mounting tension, introduced by divided strings. The symphony ends with obligatory triumphalism, ironic in intention, if we accept the words attributed to the composer in his ghosted autobiography.

At the end of the Second World War some act of celebration was demanded of Russian musicians. According to Solomon Volkov's version of the composer's memoirs, Shostakovich was in no mood to celebrate the achievements of Stalin, who expected a conventional work of triumph, bolstered by quadruple wind in a large orchestra, with solo singers and choir, joining in a hymn of praise to the leader. This, too, was the composer's Ninth Symphony, that might have been expected to follow the model of Beethoven's last symphony.

The Ninth Symphony of Shostakovich proved offensive to the Establishment in the circumstances of 1945. It opens with a first movement of cheerful irony, in traditional form, its first subject announced by the strings and its second entrusted at first to the piccolo. The second movement starts with a clarinet solo, accompanied by pizzicato cellos and double basses, the spare texture of the movement emphasized as flute and bassoon join together in the melody. An ominous muted string rhythm then at first accompanies the French horns in music that grows more menacing, until the flute takes up again the first strain. The third movement is launched by a rapid clarinet melody, soon handed over to the piccolo and flutes. A jaunty trumpet takes the stage, echoed by the trombone, and the music fades into a fourth movement Largo, announced by trombones and tuba, followed by a solo bassoon, in sinister prominence, the very antithesis of triumphalism. It is this instrument that leads the way into the fifth and final movement, now in less tragic guise, although the movement has about it an air of hushed menace, until the trumpet leads to an apparently happier mood, on which a final coda sets the seal.

Czecho-Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra (Bratislava)

The Czecho-Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra (Bratislava), the oldest symphonic ensemble in Slovakia, was founded in 1929 at the instance of Milos Ruppeldt and Oskar Nedbal, prominent personalities in the sphere of music. Ondrej Lenárd was appointed its conductor in 1970 and in 1977 its conductor-in-chief. The orchestra has given successful concerts both at home and abroad, in Germany, Russia, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Spain, Italy, Great Britain, Hong Kong and Japan. For Marco Polo the orchestra has recorded works by Glazunov, Glière, Miaskovsky and other late romantic composers and film music of Honegger, Bliss, Ibert and Khachaturian as well as several volumes of the label's Johann Strauss Edition. Naxos recordings include symphonies and ballets by Tchaikovsky, and symphonies by Berlioz and Saint-Saëns.

Ladislav Slovák

Ladislav Slovák was born in 1919 in the Slovak capital, Bratislava, where, in spite of straitened circumstances, he completed his earlier musical training at the City Music School and subsequently at the Bratislava Conservatory. As a conductor he was greatly influenced by Vaclav Talich in Bratislava and from 1954 by Yevgeni Mravinsky, to whom he served as assistant in Leningrad. For some two years Slovák attended Mravinsky's rehearsals with the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra of the symphonies of Shostakovich, including first performances of Symphonies Nos. 11 and 12. In these rehearsals Shostakovich was present, hearing his music in performance for the first time and rarely interfering, except for occasional adjustments of tempi. He had great confidence in Mravinsky, with whom there was collaboration at the profoundest musical level. Slovák was privileged often to take part in discussions on problems of performance between Mravinsky and Shostakovich, and also learned much from other conductors, including the second conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic, Kurt Sanderling. On his return to Czecho-Slovakia Slovák was appointed Conductor-in-Chief of the Czecho-Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra in Bratislava, with guest engagements with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, which he conducted on an extended world tour to the Far East, Australasia and Russia in 1959. In 1961 he was appointed Conductor-in-Chief of the Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra and has continued with similar appointments as far afield as Australia and with a busy career as a guest conductor. His early working collaboration with Mravinsky and Shostakovich has led to performances of particular authority, in particular of the latter's fifteen symphonies.

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COMPACT
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DIGITAL AUDIO

STEREO

DDD

Playing
Time :
73'53"

SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphonies Nos. 5 and 9

Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra
(Bratislava)
Ladislav Slovák

Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, Op. 47

- | | | |
|---|--------------------|---------|
| 1 | Moderato | (16:44) |
| 2 | Allegretto | (5:07) |
| 3 | Largo | (14:57) |
| 4 | Allegro non troppo | (11:28) |

Symphony No. 9 in E Flat Major, Op. 70

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|---|------------|--------|
| 5 | Allegro | (5:14) |
| 6 | Moderato | (7:10) |
| 7 | Presto | (3:09) |
| 8 | Largo | (3:08) |
| 9 | Allegretto | (6:40) |

Recorded at the Concert Hall of the Slovak Radio in Bratislava,
from 12th to 18th February, 1987 (Symphony No. 5)
and from 7th to 11th January, 1988. (Symphony No. 9)

Producer: Leoš Komárek

Engineer: Hubert Geschwandtner

Music Notes: Keith Anderson

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