

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born September 25, 1906 in St. Petersburg; died August 9, 1975 in Moscow.

Symphony No. 5, Opus 47 (1937)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Leningrad, November 21, 1937

Great Hall of the Leningrad Philharmonic

Leningrad Philharmonic

Yevgeny Mravinsky, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 52 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, E-flat and two B-flat clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps, celesta, piano and strings

"COMPOSER REGAINS HIS PLACE IN SOVIET," read a headline of *The New York Times* on November 22, 1937. "Dmitri Shostakovich, who fell from grace two years ago, on the way to rehabilitation. His new symphony hailed. Audience cheers as Leningrad Philharmonic presents work."

The background of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony is well known. His career began before he was twenty with the cheeky First Symphony; he was immediately acclaimed the brightest star in the Soviet musical firmament. In the years that followed, he produced music with amazing celerity, and even managed to catch Stalin's attention, especially with his film scores. (Stalin was convinced that film was one of the most powerful weapons in his propaganda arsenal.) The mid-1930s, however, the years during which Stalin tightened his iron grip on Russia, saw a repression of the artistic freedom of Shostakovich's early years, and some of his newer works were assailed with the damning criticism of "formalism." The opera *The Nose*, the ballets *The Golden Age* and *The Bolt* and even the blatantly jingoistic Second and Third Symphonies were the main targets. The storm broke in an article in *Pravda* on January 28, 1936 entitled "Muddle Instead of Music." The "muddle" was the opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, a lurid tale of adultery and murder in the provinces that is one of Shostakovich's most powerful creations. The nature of the criticism may be judged from the title of the article, though no reason was given why it did not appear until two full years after *Lady Macbeth* had been premiered in January 1934, and been running successfully for the entire interval. The denunciation, though it urged Shostakovich to reform his compositional ways, also encouraged him to continue his work, but in a manner consistent with Soviet ideals. As "A Soviet composer's reply to just criticism" — a phrase attributed to Shostakovich by the press, though it does not appear in the score — the Fifth Symphony was created and presented to an enthusiastic public. Shostakovich had apparently returned to the Soviet fold, and in such manner that in 1940 he was awarded the Stalin Prize, the highest achievement then possible for a Russian composer.

Since the appearance in 1979 of Shostakovich's purported memoirs (*Testimony*), however, the above tale needs reconsideration. The prevailing interpretation of the Fifth Symphony had been that generally it represented triumph through struggle, à la Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, and specifically the composer's renunciation of his backslidden ideological ways. Only three months after the premiere, Shostakovich wrote in an official publication, "The theme of my Symphony is the stabilization of the personality. In the center of this composition — conceived lyrically from beginning to end — I saw a man with all his experiences. The Finale resolves the tragically tense impulses of the earlier movements into optimism and joy of living." With that statement, the Soviet authorities were given exactly the explanation that they demanded, and Shostakovich was "rehabilitated."

The story seemed so pat that it went unquestioned for years. However, some re-thinking after Shostakovich's death led Ray Blocker, in his book on the composer's symphonies, to conclude, "The Fifth was a challenge rather than an apology, despite the way in which the state received it." Why, for example, did Shostakovich not write a patriotic cantata loaded with folk songs and nationalistic bombast if his sole aim were his return to grace? Why an abstract, supranational work like a symphony? Was there some hidden power or message in the music that could speak to the individual heart while remaining beyond the censor's wrath? In *Testimony*, Shostakovich, bitter, ill, disillusioned, gave a ringing affirmative answer to this last question: "I think it is clear to everyone what happens in the [finale of the] Fifth Symphony. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat, as in *Boris Godunov*. It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, 'Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing,' and you rise, shaky, and go marching off muttering, 'Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing.' What kind of apotheosis is that? You have to be a complete oaf not to hear that.... People who came to the premiere of the

Fifth in the best of moods wept.” One of his greatest fears when the Fifth Symphony was new was that his true intention — the deep, soul-burning irony of the work — was so obvious that someone would inform on him. No one did. Stravinsky once said that Soviet composers were good, but that they could not afford the luxury of integrity. He seems to have been wrong about Shostakovich.

Shostakovich’s thoughts about the Fifth Symphony bear directly on the listener’s perception of the work. The key to the meaning of the score, its finale, can no longer be seen as a transcendence or negation of the tragic forces invoked in the earlier movements, especially the third, but becomes an affirmation of them. The boisterous trumpets and drums are not those of a festival or a peasant dance, but of a forced death march — Stalin’s “exterminations” outnumbered those of Hitler. The Fifth Symphony arose not from Shostakovich’s glorification of his nation. It arose from his pity.

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The Fifth Symphony is cast in the traditional four movements. The sonata form of the first movement begins with a stabbing theme in close imitation. A group of complementary ideas is presented before the tempo freshens for the second theme, an expansive melody of large intervals whose shape bears some resemblance to that of the main theme. The sinister sound of unison horns in their lowest register marks the start of the development section. The intensity of this section builds quickly to a powerful, almost demonic march. The recapitulation rockets forth from a series of fierce brass chords leading to a huge, sustained climax after which the music’s energy subsides to allow the second theme to be heard in a gentle setting assigned to flute and horn. Quiet intensity pervades until the movement ends with ethereal scales in the celesta.

The Symphony’s scherzo comes second to act as a buffer between the emotional weight of the first and third movements. It has much of the sardonic humor that Shostakovich displayed in such movements throughout his life, but it also bears an unmistakable debt to the music of Gustav Mahler, especially in the passage in the central trio for solo violin, which closely resembles an important sonority in Mahler’s Fourth Symphony.

The Symphony’s greatest pathos is reserved for the third movement. It is dominated by string sonorities, with woodwinds and percussion providing limited timbral contrast. The heavy brass are silent. This movement is best heard not in a specific formal context but as an extended soliloquy embracing the most deeply felt emotions. For much of its length, the expression is subdued, but twice the music gathers enough strength to hurl forth a mighty, despairing cry. As in the first movement, the disembodied sound of the celesta (reinforced here by the harp) closes this gripping *Largo*, which the eminent Russian-American conductor Sergei Koussevitzky thought to be the greatest symphonic slow movement since Beethoven.

The finale is divided into three large sections, determined as much by moods as by themes. The outer sections are boisterous and extroverted, the central one, dark-hued and premonitory. The robust scoring and vigorous marching motion of the beginning and end are deeply indebted to the Russian tradition of such works as Tchaikovsky’s Second and Fourth Symphonies. Whether the mood of rough vigor of this framing music or the tragedy of the central section stays longer in the mind is a matter listeners must determine for themselves. The delicate formal balance Shostakovich here achieved could be tipped in either direction depending on the experience the individual brings to it. Only great masterworks can simultaneously be both so personal and so universal.