

Symphony No. 5 in D minor, op. 47

Dmitri Shostakovich

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

Shostakovich's fortunes with the Soviet government ran a roller-coaster course: one moment he was uplifted by extravagant praise, the next plunging into disfavor. His First Symphony began a series of highs, bringing immediate recognition at home and abroad. Shostakovich was much surprised and shaken in 1936 by the denouncement by *Pravda* of his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, which had already proved fantastically successful since its premiere on January 22, 1934. Having already begun his Fourth Symphony, he continued working with no noticeable style change following the denouncement. However, after ten rehearsals he aborted its premiere, withdrawing the work ostensibly out of personal dissatisfaction; unfortunately the Fourth Symphony was not heard until 1961. One cannot help wondering what was in Shostakovich's mind during this period of soul-searching and what effect the denouncement actually had on his creative processes.

The Fifth Symphony was the work that returned him to favor. It was termed "the creative reply of a Soviet artist to justified criticism" by an unknown commentator, a phrase accepted by Shostakovich, and later attributed to him. Did he indeed agree with the authorities that he should alter his style to appeal more to the masses? The premiere of the Fifth Symphony in Leningrad under Eugene Mravinsky's direction on November 21, 1937, was a smashing success. Whether or not Shostakovich made concessions to political pressure (many Western commentators criticized the work for such concessions), the Fifth became his most popular and is still his most frequently performed symphony.

Possible concessions might have been his return to the traditional four-movement symphonic structure and to a standard-sized orchestra, more accessible themes, and more tonal harmonic language. Yet his originality, sardonic sense of humor, angularity, and complex textures—the very elements that had infuriated Party officials—are present here as well. Shostakovich may have been testing whether he could please the Party without repressing his individual voice or lowering his artistic standards.

The intense first movement follows sonata form, opening with a dotted-rhythmic theme treated in stark octave imitation. The figure soon provides accompaniment to a lyrical theme, followed by a brief return of the dotted figure and a longer lyrical theme. Shostakovich inventively reverses the character of these motives during the course of the movement: the rhythms and intervals of the opening dotted figure become augmented and expanded to become a floating melody atop gently pulsing accompaniment, whereas the first two lyrical themes eventually become martial in character.

The second movement recalls Mahler's rustic scherzos and displays Shostakovich's satiric wit. The contrasting trio incorporates a coquettish violin solo, echoed by flute, and briefly recalled by oboe before the movement's close. The slow movement dispenses with brass instruments altogether, and employs a complex divisi string texture. This movement evokes the most tragedy of the four; Shostakovich commented particularly about the many people who wept at the premiere. Like the first movement, this movement recedes introspectively after a strident climax.

Conflicting "testimony" exists concerning the finale, in both cases attributed to Shostakovich. Apparently at the time the work appeared, Shostakovich declared:

The theme of my Symphony is the stabilization of a personality. In the center of this composition—conceived lyrically from beginning to end—I saw a man with all his experiences. The finale resolves all the tragically tense impulses of the earlier movements into optimism and joy of living.

The idea of a hero arising from tragedy has subsequently received various interpretations: as a generic model for a struggling artist, as Shostakovich himself, or even as an oppressed citizen living under Stalinist rule. Yet in his memoirs, collected by Solomon Volkov entitled *Testimony* (some of the credibility of which has been challenged), Shostakovich later taints the model of heroic triumph:

I discovered to my astonishment that the man who considers himself its greatest interpreter does not understand my music. [He referred to Mravinsky, with whom the composer had a falling out at the end of his life after a long association.] He says that I wanted to write exultant finales for my Fifth and Seventh symphonies but I couldn't manage it. It never occurred to this man that I never thought about any exultant finales, for what exultation could there be? I think it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth. 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."

Shostakovich does not hold a monopoly on conflicting statements; contradictions and incongruities often result when one examines the relationship between a composer's life and the works themselves. The threat of political influence upon the creative process makes Shostakovich's crisis particularly pronounced. The admixture of his personal experiences with his musical creativity will remain a complex issue, but like any great artist he was able to triumph.

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