

A concert of early and rare Shostakovich

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An unusual concert, made up entirely of pieces by Soviet Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975), was presented last week by the Juilliard Orchestra at New York City's Alice Tully Hall.

Not only was the program all-Shostakovich—it was all *young* Shostakovich. The Juilliard Orchestra, led by the Russian-born conductor Vladimir Jurowski (born 1972), played three works, all composed between 1925, when Shostakovich was all of 18 years old, and 1931, when he was 25.

The First Symphony, the earliest composed of the works on the program, was an instant success when it premiered in Leningrad in 1926. It earned Shostakovich immediate notice in the Soviet Union, and word of his precocity and originality traveled soon enough to Europe and North America. Though Shostakovich went on to compose a total of 15 symphonies, the First remains among his most popular.

The other pieces on the program, however, were true rarities, buried in part because the Stalinist degeneration of the Russian Revolution soon led to bans on the performance of music that was considered avant-garde, experimental or politically ill-suited to the needs of the Soviet bureaucracy.

For *New Babylon*, a silent film directed by Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, Shostakovich composed a 90-minute score. Completed in early 1929, the project was unsuccessful and the score, arranged for a small ensemble of about 14 musicians, was forgotten until after the composer's death.

An ambitious variety show, *Hypothetically Murdered* was composed for the Leningrad Music Hall about two years later. This met with a somewhat greater popular response, although the music, as well as the script of the show, was lost. Gerard McBurney, the British composer and Shostakovich scholar, reconstructed the music about 20 years ago, on the basis of piano sketches and indications of orchestration on the piano

parts and elsewhere.

Both of these little-known pieces are based on scripts that appear to be at least as experimental as their music. In the case of the silent film, the backdrop is the Paris Commune of 1871, when the working class in the French capital took power and held it for two months before being crushed by the army based in Versailles. The young filmmakers Kozintsev and Trauberg contrasted the rise and defeat of the Commune to the cavorting of the dissolute bourgeoisie in a Parisian department store/cabaret, in a style that bore some resemblance to the satirical work of Weimar-era artists like George Grosz.

(Interestingly, there is at least one other more recent example of the events of the Commune being given musical accompaniment. About five years ago a musical entitled *The Paris Commune* was presented at New York's Public Theater.)

In the case of the 1931 variety show, only descriptions of the original survive. The attempt was apparently to make a light entertainment that also was deemed as serving a serious social purpose. The "plot," so to speak, focused on a young man who fails to participate in a required civil defense drill and is punished by being ordered to play a casualty, or "hypothetically murdered."

Whether and to what extent Shostakovich's music worked well together with the silent film or with the variety show is difficult to determine today. In the case of *New Babylon*, there are some YouTube excerpts that are interesting and intriguing.

The Juilliard concert proved, in any case, that both of these works deserve attention on a strictly musical plane. From *New Babylon* the music of three out of the ten reels was performed, amounting to nearly 40 minutes of music. The action in the film was described in the program.

The first section shows wealthy Parisians in the New

Babylon department store cheering French troops leaving to fight the Germans in the Franco-Prussian War. This ended, of course, in the ignominious defeat of the French forces, and in turn was followed by the victorious working class Commune. The second reel focuses on the Parisian cabaret, depicted in the style of Weimar-era caricatures of German militarism and bourgeois decadence. The fourth reel is entitled “18 March 1871,” the date of the original victory of the Commune.

The score for *New Babylon* was composed only months after Shostakovich had completed work on his experimental and satirical opera *The Nose*, based on the short story by Nikolai Gogol. Not surprisingly, *New Babylon*’s music recalls that of *The Nose*. (See: “Shostakovich’s *The Nose* finds its way to the opera stage”.) The voice of a young and bold composer comes through, in combinations of lyricism, satire, atonality and more accessible music, including folk elements and even a reference to the can-can made famous in Offenbach’s *Orpheus in the Underworld* (1858).

Shostakovich’s next opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, was composed in 1932, although it did not premiere until early 1934. This was the work that aroused the ire of Stalin himself, and was followed by years in which Shostakovich worked under pressure and composed some of his greatest work despite fears for his safety and even his life.

Both *New Babylon* and *Hypothetically Murdered* precede this period, however. Both scores come from the approximately four years between Shostakovich’s two major operatic works. This was a time of relative freedom in the arts, despite the vicious repression already visited upon those, above all, the Left Opposition, who upheld the genuine revolutionary traditions and program of the 1917 Revolution. *Hypothetically Murdered* and especially *New Babylon* based itself on the avant-garde techniques of Sergei Eisenstein in film and Vsevolod Meyerhold in theater.

Eight sections of the *Hypothetically Murdered* Orchestral Suite were performed at this concert, in 15 minutes that went by in a blaze of polkas, waltz rhythms and jazzy enthusiasm. This is lighter music than Shostakovich became famous for in masterpieces such as the 5th or 7th Symphonies, but it is an essential part of his work. Some of its satirical and infectious

themes were in fact used by the composer in later compositions. The style of *Hypothetically Murdered* also anticipates the more famous Jazz Suites Nos. 1 and 2, composed by Shostakovich in the 1930s, as well as the suite from *The Gadfly*, in 1955, whose Romance is an enchanting example of Shostakovich at his most lyrical.

Shostakovich’s First Symphony was the last piece on the Juilliard program. This 30-minute work gives evidence of its composer’s youth and brashness. It is recognizably not yet the work of a mature composer, but it is hard to believe that Shostakovich was not yet 19 when he finished it. His skills and inspiration can be compared even to Mozart, who at the age of 19 had written his well-known 29th Symphony, but whose mature symphonies still lay ahead.

The First Symphony, written as Shostakovich’s senior project at the conservatory, where he studied under Alexander Glazunov, was without question the voice of a genius and of a new generation. The first movement demonstrates this, with its imaginative development of four thematic ideas. After the original and effective scherzo and adagio slow movements, the finale brings the work to an extraordinary and moving climax. The orchestra, whose members undoubtedly were aware that this work was composed by someone who was younger than most of them, gave a performance that matched, in its fervor and discipline, those of far more experienced ensembles.



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