Dmitri Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony (1937) in concert in New York City

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Major orchestras in the US and around the world need little excuse to program the symphonic music of Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975). This year, however, which marks the 50th anniversary of his death at the age of 68, will witness more than the usual share of his powerful music, evoking the trials and tragedies of the 20th century.

One such program was presented by the New York Philharmonic two weeks ago. It featured Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, considered by most—critics and listeners alike—to be the greatest of the total of 15 symphonies he composed between 1925 and 1971, a span of almost five decades.

The Philharmonic was led on this occasion by guest conductor Leonard Slatkin. Slatkin, who celebrates his 80th birthday later this year, comes from a noted musical family—his father was one of the founders of the Hollywood String Quartet, in 1939, and his mother was the cellist in the ensemble. Slatkin is well known from his lengthy tenures with the orchestras in St. Louis (1979-1996) and later in Detroit (2008-2018), but he has also conducted major orchestras around the world.

The program began with two contemporary works: *Double Play,* for orchestra by Cindy McTee and *Triathlon* by John Corigliano. Both of these recent works were receiving their New York Philharmonic premieres. They were not without interest, especially the work by Corigliano. The 87-year-old composer—who worked as an assistant to Leonard Bernstein on the televised Young People's Concerts in the 1960s—is best known for his Symphony No. 1 (1988), a response to the AIDS crisis, as well as his Clarinet Concerto and his opera *The Ghosts of Versailles*.

The audience was told just before the performance of *Triathlon*, partly in jest, that it should perhaps be called a concerto for saxophonist, rather than saxophone, since the three movements call for three separate instruments, with consecutive appearances by soprano, alto and baritone saxophone in turn. It was certainly unusual to see the soloist, Timothy McAllister, bring three instruments on stage with him as he prepared to play. The contrasting sounds of these members of the saxophone family were on full display.

The main attraction of the evening was of course the deservedly famed Shostakovich symphony. The story of the genesis of Shostakovich's Fifth is one of the more familiar in the history of classical composition. Shostakovich had become widely known and lauded with the premiere of his First Symphony in 1926, when he was only 19 years old. Over the next decade he continued to compose, including two other symphonies and *The Nose*, an opera based on the satirical short story by 19th-century Russian novelist Nikolai Gogol.

Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* met at first with general approval when it premiered in 1934. In early 1936, however, Stalin himself came to a performance, and the official Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* printed a bitterly negative article a few days later, calling the opera "muddle instead of music."

The ruling bureaucracy was on the eve of launching the infamous Moscow Trials, and over the next three years virtually the entire leadership of the 1917 October Revolution would be sent to their deaths.

Shostakovich labored under these tragic circumstances to produce a new work that would be true to his musical ideas and language, and at the same time salvage his musical career and perhaps even his life. Out of his fear and inner turmoil came the Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, which premiered in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) on November 21, 1937.

The audience reaction was immediate and emotional, the ovation for the new work lasting for half an hour. The official critics also applauded the composition. The reputation of Shostakovich and his new symphony was such that the work received a radio premiere in New York only a few months later, in a broadcast by the NBC Symphony Orchestra.

The Fifth Symphony is regarded by many not only as Shostakovich's greatest, but also as one of the most powerful and influential works of the last century, and a worthy successor to the 19th-century symphonies of Beethoven, Schumann and other Romantics, as well as the later work of Jean Sibelius and Gustav Mahler.

The Fifth is in the traditional four movements, but the 19th-century form is infused with a 20th-century content. The first movement begins with an immediate theme that has been called Beethovenian. It is sober, majestic and also ominous. This is followed by a subsidiary theme, quieter and more lyrical, and the themes go through various intense and emotional conflicts and transformations. The timpani are prominent in some march-

like sections. Here and elsewhere one is struck by the confidence and coherence of Shostakovich's ideas, and also the transparency of the work, the way that unison passages of great power alternate with sometimes delicate solos for flute, oboes as well as the horns and other brasses, the xylophone and others in the percussion section. Horns, trumpets and timpani are prominent, and at several points the piano makes an appearance, somewhat rare in a symphonic work.

The relatively brief second movement has some of the sardonic quality characteristic of many of Shostakovich's scherzos. It is followed by the Largo slow movement, dominated by a quiet and lyrical theme. The calm is interrupted by another dramatic section, with the xylophone again prominent as part of unison passages, before the movement subsides into the peacefulness with which it began.

The famous final movement begins almost without pause, with a stirring and triumphant theme presented by the brass and the timpani. The entire movement has what critic Edward Downes called a volcanic quality. The dynamic range is great, here as elsewhere. The last section of the symphony is inspired and overwhelming, with a brief respite from the fast tempo, an interlude that makes the intense conclusion all the more shattering. The timpani once again is prominent, especially in the outbursts that accompany and punctuate the concluding minute of this work.

The performance of the Shostakovich symphony under Slatkin effectively transmitted its range of emotions, evoking the period in which it was composed. The performance compared well with others that can be found on YouTube, such as those by the Frankfurt Radio Symphony, the Mariinsky Orchestra, and the performance of the New York Philharmonic under Leonard Bernstein in 1959, only weeks after it had returned from a European tour that included a performance in Moscow, when Shostakovich was in attendance and congratulated the American maestro.

The composition and the content of the Shostakovich Fifth cannot be separated from the events of the decade in which it was composed, in the Soviet Union in particular. This was the decade of the Depression, the rise of Nazism, the bloody consolidation of Stalin's rule and the emergence of the storm clouds leading to the Second World War. It is therefore remarkable, although not too surprising, that the New York Philharmonic program notes of two weeks ago—while including a separate section entitled "At the Time," and listing events of 1937 such as the coronation of King George VI in England, the Hindenburg disaster in New Jersey and the opening of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge and New York's Lincoln Tunnel—make no mention of the frame-up trials in the USSR.

It is not a matter of looking to the symphony for a political program, for direct connections with the Moscow Trials or other events. What is crucial is the way this music evokes the period, and above all the enormous struggles and sacrifices of the Soviet people. Shostakovich himself observed,

> … some of my colleagues called my Fifth Symphony an autobiographical work. On the whole, I consider this a fair appraisal. In my opinion, there are biographical elements in any work of art. Every work should bear the stamp of a living person, its author, and it is poor and tedious work whose creator is invisible.

The Fifth Symphony evokes both hope and despair, and it also looks to the future. In the most profound sense the hopes arise from the Russian Revolution itself, the despair from both Nazism and Stalinism, although this could not be spelled out in an abstract musical work. As Shostakovich also commented,

> … its basic ideas are the sufferings of man, and optimism. I wanted to convey optimism asserting itself as a world outlook through a series of tragic conflicts in a great inner, mental struggle.

Readers with an interest in classical music are encouraged to acquaint themselves with all of Shostakovich's symphonies. Among his other best known works are his two violin concertos, his two piano concertos, his magnificent Jazz Suites and film music for *The Gadfly* (1955 Soviet film), the *Festive Overture* and his voluminous chamber music, especially the piano quintet and the two piano trios, not to mention the 15 string quartets.