Dmitri Shostakovich, at the age of 18, composed his First Symphony 100 years ago

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It was 100 years ago that Dmitri Shostakovich, as a young music student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, completed his First Symphony. He finished the work in April 1925, and did not turn 19 years old until five months later.

This was a level of precocity almost unmatched in the 20th century. The teen-aged composer even bears some comparison to Franz Schubert and Felix Mendelssohn of a century earlier, and to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart before them. Shostakovich's work, composed as a graduation piece at the Conservatory, is by no means simply a student work. It almost immediately entered the repertory of orchestras, not only in the Soviet Union, but around the world. The young man, shy but unwavering in his determination to devote his life to music, rocketed to fame.

World-famous German conductor Bruno Walter, who was soon after forced from his homeland when Hitler took power, led the Berlin Philharmonic in Shostakovich's First Symphony in 1927, only a year after its premiere in Leningrad. He was soon followed by Arturo Toscanini and Otto Klemperer. The critical as well as popular verdict on the work was uniformly enthusiastic.

None of the young prodigies mentioned above simply appeared out of the blue. While there are factors unknown to us, and no doubt genetics, associated with such musical precociousness, the intense giftedness was also shaped by the world into which they were born and in which they developed. This is especially true of Shostakovich. He was born one year after the 1905 Revolution in Russia, and marked his 11th birthday in the midst of the epochal events of 1917. The February mass uprising overthrew the Romanov dynasty after three centuries of rule, and the October Revolution, led by the Bolshevik Party eight months later, brought the working class to power. The Revolution emerged victorious after the three-year Civil War, in which it faced the intervention of the combined imperialist forces of the whole world.

The parents of young Dmitri were members of the liberal intelligentsia. By no means revolutionaries themselves, they nevertheless traveled in radical circles. An aunt and an uncle were Bolsheviks. Shostakovich's mother was a pianist who strongly encouraged her son's musical gifts. Dmitri, usually far more interested in music than in politics, was nonetheless inevitably exposed to the world-changing events around him. He attended the mass funeral for the victims of the February Revolution in April 1917 at the Field of Mars. "You Fell Victim to a Fateful Struggle," the Russian revolutionary folk song sung on that occasion as well as on many others, was incorporated by the composer in several of his later compositions, notably his Symphony No. 11, "The Year 1905."

Shostakovich's gifts were recognized early on by his parents. He entered the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1919, when he was only 13 years old. The renowned institution had been founded back in 1862 by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, the composer of *Scheherazade* and other well-known works. Rimsky, who died in 1908, was succeeded by another famous name in Russian music, Alexander Glazunov. This prolific composer now shifted his attention to administration and the training of a young generation. Glazunov was among those musical figures who proved loyal to the new workers' state.

The year 1919 was the height of the Civil War, when the Revolution was most threatened. Conditions at the Conservatory were severely affected by the famine and economic collapse facing revolutionary Russia. There was no heat, and also no reliable transportation system. The students walked to school, in Shostakovich's case several miles each day during the severe Russian winter. They attended classes clad in hats and overcoats.

Shostakovich is remembered by contemporaries who were interviewed many decades later as a student of single-minded determination, even as a young teenager. The resolve was accompanied by highly unusual musical gifts. He was an expert sight-reader and a pianist of great skill, based not merely on technique but above all on serious thought and a conception of what he was playing.

The First Symphony, though it was the first of his work to achieve wide acclaim and to be regularly performed, was by no means the first of Shostakovich's serious compositions. His Op. 2 *Preludes* date from 1919-20. This was followed by *Three Fantastic Dances,* Op. 5. The young composer began giving concerts in 1923, at the age of 17. A large part of his programs included his own work. In November of that year, for instance, he performed the *Appassionata,* one of Beethoven's most famous classics, along with his own *Preludes, Fantastic Dances,* and *Theme and Variations.*

One critic wrote:

> I shall be so bold as to greet this youth with the same words I greeted the young Heifetz. In Shostakovich's playing one is struck by that same joyously serene confidence of genius. My words relate not only to the exceptional playing of Shostakovich, but to his works as well. What wealth of fantasy and astonishing conviction, confidence in one's own work (especially in the *Variations*)—at just seventeen years old!

Shostakovich's coming of age musically occurred during the early years of the Revolution, which had an enormous impact on culture as well as politics, education and every other sphere of social life. This was the time of the Constructivism of Rodchenko and Tatlin, the Suprematism of Malevich, the Futurism of Mayakovsky and the avant-garde theater of Meyerhold.

Mikhail Druskin, a pianist and musicologist who knew Shostakovich very well in the early 1920s, was quoted on this subject almost 70 years later, in Elizabeth Wilson's valuable *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (1994):

> The fresh wind of the Revolution revitalized the whole pattern of life, thrown up as it was on the open spaces of the streets and squares. Youth, driven by the force of its tempestuous gusts, avidly reached out for all that was new and futuristic; often their ideas were idealized and illusory, and did not relate to reality. For only a few creators of spiritual values knew how to listen to the true voice of history, the "Noise of Time," to use Alexander Blok's expression. One way or another the times held sway over people, and left their imprint on them, the impressionable Shostakovich included. His future as an artist was conditioned and formed by those years. Shostakovich had many diverse and significant sides to him, comparable to the multifarious levels of artistic and cultural life of the time.

Leon Trotsky lucidly summed up the general situation of culture in these first years in *The Revolution Betrayed*:

> While the dictatorship [of the proletariat] had a seething mass-basis and a prospect of world revolution, it had no fear of experiments, searchings, the struggle of schools, for it understood that only in this way could a new cultural epoch be prepared. The popular masses were still quivering in every fiber, and were thinking aloud for the first time in a thousand years. All the best youthful forces of art were touched to the quick.

During this busy period, the young Shostakovich was active in a circle of student composers. They met regularly to discuss the works of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Hindemith and others, including Les Six, the group of French composers whose most prominent figures were Darius Milhaud and Francis Poulenc, and who advocated an openness to new forms of musical expression, including jazz. Shostakovich brought his own compositions to this group, where contemporary work was debated.

There was also the direct attempt to bring culture to the working class. Shostakovich joined with a violinist and a cellist to perform trios for Red Army soldiers, and at local factories. During this period, Shostakovich also met Mikhail Tukhachevsky, a young civil war hero who was also a music lover and amateur violinist, and who expressed enthusiastic admiration for the young musician. Tukhachevsky later became a leader of the Red Army, before perishing in the Stalinist purges of 1937.

During this period, Shostakovich lost his father after a short illness. For a period of time he was obliged, in order to support the family, to perform as a cinema pianist, work he found tedious and often distasteful, accompanying silent films which were usually of low artistic quality. He also came down with tuberculosis of the lymphatic system, less deadly than the usual form of the disease but nonetheless serious. Glazunov, well aware of Shostakovich's importance even though as part of the older generation he had some difficulty relating to his pupil's music, directly appealed to Anatoly Lunacharsky, then the Commissar of Culture, to have the young man sent for rest and medical treatment to the Crimea. "The death of such a person would be an irreplaceable loss for the world of art," he wrote. A stay of several months was arranged.

The First Symphony was conceived in 1923, during this period of whirlwind activity and the give-and-take of young musicians. It was written the following year, mostly between December 1924 and April 1925.

Shostakovich's youthful symphony announces a new musical presence, a distinctive one, not simply derivative of 19th or early 20th century composers such as Tchaikovsky or Mahler. As Nicolai Malko, the Soviet conductor, later recalled, describing Shostakovich's performance of the work for him on the piano,

> I was amazed both by the symphony and by his playing… it was extremely noticeable that this symphony did not have the "academic stamp" that usually characterizes the beginning composer… It was immediately clear that this First Symphony by Shostakovich was the vibrant, individual, and striking work of a composer with an original approach. The style of the symphony was unusual; the orchestration sometimes suggested chamber music in its sound and its instrumental economy…

To the extent there is any forerunner in terms of the mood of the work, it might be his fellow Russian Sergei Prokofiev, 15 years older than Shostakovich and already well known.

The impression left by Shostakovich's First Symphony is a modern one, very much of the 20th century. Especially in its opening and concluding movements, it exhibits a nervous energy, with a series of contrasting episodes which seem to express the great contradictions and struggles of the period.

The youthful composer here already stakes his claim to greatness, and employs some of the same techniques for which he would become well known. The composer of the later symphonies, especially the 5th, 7th and 8th, with their well-known tragic and heroic associations, is anticipated in the dynamic range and unexpected shifts in tempo of the first movement, the humor of the somewhat sardonic scherzo, the stillness and somber quality of the slow movement and the drama of the finale.

The prominent use of the piano stands out. This instrument, on which Shostakovich excelled as a soloist, had been used in orchestral music, of course, but only in concerto form. The piano as a solo instrument contrasting with the orchestra was featured in some of the most famous works of such 19th century masters as Beethoven (his *Emperor Concerto*, among others) and Brahms. It was never used by Beethoven or Brahms as part of the orchestra, however, nor by any other major composer before the 20th century. Its use here, with particular prominence in the 2nd and 4th movements, underscores the percussive energy characteristic of the work as a whole.

The opening minutes of the symphony set the overall tone: nervous energy, unexpected shifts of tempo and melodic direction, a quirkiness that returns, especially in the finale. This is followed by the scherzo second movement, a brisk and energetic interlude, characterized by wittiness and also a somewhat mocking tone, of the type that Shostakovich would be identified with for most of his career. The piano is important and conspicuous throughout, with several solo sections.

The Lento slow movement is another contrast, music of a somber quality, the music leading to a long and impassioned solo violin climax. The finale, which follows the slow movement without pause, returns to the impetuous and unexpected qualities of the first movement. After developing themes related to those heard at the beginning of the work, a famous passage for solo kettledrum is introduced by a brass fanfare, about three minutes from the conclusion. The music races to a thrilling and dramatic finish, characterized by a march-like brass fanfare and cymbals in the closing measures.

Following the premiere of his symphony, many of the leading lights of the music world wanted to find out more about the young composer. Shostakovich had a chance to meet some of the most well-known cultural figures of the day, among them the European composers Franz Schreker, Darius Milhaud, Artur Honegger and Alban Berg.

Milhaud, the composer of *Le Boeuf sur la Toit* and *Scaramouche*, later wrote: "Despite its rather conventional form and construction [the Symphony] betrayed genuine gifts and even had certain qualities of

greatness, if it is to be remembered that its composer, Shostakovich, was only eighteen at the time . . ."

Berg, the leading pupil of Arnold Schoenberg and the composer of *Wozzeck*, the atonal opera that premiered in the same year that Shostakovich completed his symphony, wrote to Shostakovich after hearing a performance of the symphony in Vienna a few years later: "It was a great joy for me to get to know your symphony. I find it quite marvelous, especially the first movement."

Inside the USSR, in addition to additional orchestral and symphonic efforts, Shostakovich collaborated with theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold and poet Vladimir Mayakovsky in 1929, supplying an original score for a production of Mayakovsky's satirical play *The Bedbug.*

The First Symphony was part of a musical ferment that characterized the 1920s. Classical composers made use of jazz idioms and popular and folk elements without "dumbing down" their compositions. This was the period of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris*, Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera* and *Mahagonny* and much more.

There was also the Viennese musical giant Schoenberg and his Second Viennese School. While Schoenberg declared war on tonality in favor of his twelve-tone system, a lively debate persisted between rival solutions to the question: "whither music" for the 20th century.

This was the atmosphere in which Shostakovich was launched on his five-decade career. He was to become a composer who moved millions, and in the sheer consistency and length of his career he towered over his contemporaries.

He was a genius whose emergence coincided with the heroic early years of the Russian Revolution—more accurately, the very end of that heroic period. This was a period of the flowering of the avant-garde, in close proximity to the struggle for revolutionary social transformation. Many artists and a section of the intelligentsia were won to the cause of the working class.

And yet, Shostakovich was destined to live the bulk of his life, the last 45 years, in the shadow of the monstrous degeneration of the revolution that had aroused the hopes of masses of workers and the oppressed on every continent. This degeneration, which saw the decimation of a generation of revolutionary fighters, also threatened composers like Shostakovich, Prokofiev and others with repression.

This became especially threatening in 1936, as the Stalinist Great Terror began, and also in 1948, when Shostakovich and others were denounced and threatened with ostracism or worse by the bureaucratic ignoramuses for the crime of "formalism." Although the situation eased greatly after Stalin's death in 1953 and the "de-Stalinization" that followed, the climate of fear and bureaucratic control persisted until the composer's death. Apart from whether he fully understood this historical process—and it is clear that he did not—Shostakovich became a symbol of persistence and survival, of the sacrifices of the Soviet people and of what remained of the revolutionary conquests of the past, in the face of Stalinist despotism.

The composer found a way, in his grand compositions, in the 5th, 7th and 8th symphonies, and later the 11th, 12th and especially the 13th ("Babi Yar"), to evoke the triumph and great tragedies of a whole century. At the same time, he alternated these with lighter works, such as his 6th and 9th symphonies, as well as his film scores. Only very rarely did he oblige the ruling clique with work of which he was not proud.

Shostakovich remained quite active musically in the post-World War II period, and he stands out, along with his close friend Benjamin Britten and not many others, for successfully resisting the dogmas of atonality and serialism during these decades.

He left behind a body of work that is, for quality as well as quantity, without peer for the 20th century. It includes 15 symphonies; 15 string quartets; two piano concertos, two violin concertos and two cello concertos; two piano trios; a piano quintet; two operas; more than two dozen orchestral suites (including his two famous jazz suites and his suite from *The Gadfly*) and three dozen film scores; and much more besides. Most of his symphonies, concertos and other orchestral music is regularly performed, and his chamber music is widely recorded and often heard.

This year also marks, in addition to 100 years since the beginning of Shostakovich's public career, a half-century since his death, on August 9, 1975. Dozens of books and thousands of pages have been written about the composer during this period.

In the first decades after his passing, a number of critics and musicologists insisted on elevating Shostakovich (degrading would be a more fitting word) into a symbol of anti-communism. These polemicists used the fact of Shostakovich's persecution by the Stalinist regime to equate the Stalinist betrayal of the revolution to the revolution itself. This was simply an extension of the age-old anti-communist canard equating Lenin with Stalin.

In Shostakovich's case, ample use was made of some of the composer's own reminiscences, as an old, ailing and disappointed figure, as recounted by Solomon Volkov in his 1979 book, *Testimony.* This book, combining some interviews with Shostakovich with various anecdotes and gossip, was misleadingly called the memoirs of the composer. The anti-communist view of Shostakovich persists today in the often superficial and ignorant program notes accompanying performances of his work, in which he is depicted simply as the victim of "communist tyranny."

The one-sided and fallacious interpretation of Shostakovich's work and legacy has been answered by works which examined his life more objectively. Among them the biographies by Laurel Fay and Elizabeth Wilson stand out. The *World Socialist Web Site* has also examined Shostakovich's life in some detail, and has written separately about some of his important works, among them the 1st, 5th and 7th Symphonies.

A Shostakovich Casebook, published some 20 years ago, includes a few dozen separate essays, articles and reviews from approximately the first 25 years after the composer's death. It serves as an excellent antidote to those who go to sometimes absurd lengths to make the ludicrous and false claim that everything Shostakovich ever wrote was dedicated to the struggle against communism.

British musicologist David Fanning comments,

> But if I believe that [Shostakovich] was revolted by many manifestations of Stalinism and post-Stalinism, certainly from the mid-1930s and maybe from some time before that, do I have to equate that with anticommunism? What evidence is there against the possibility that Shostakovich remained wedded to at least some communist ideals, to the point where he could regard many of the things that happened in its name as indeed "distortions" rather than expressions of it?

And British composer Gerard McBurney, discussing the Fifth Symphony, writes in his essay in *A Shostakovich Casebook*, "No one can or ought to deny the wider engulfing Terror of that time, nor could they ever take away the tears of those who heard the first performances of the Fifth Symphony … However different this work might first appear from most of the pieces Shostakovich wrote before it, it could only have been written by someone who had travelled on the journey that had led to it…" Shostakovich "was, and in some very peculiar senses remained to the end of his life, a child of his time, the Soviet 1920s; and … he took the already intriguing inheritance of that age and made it into something utterly his own."

Shostakovich's First Symphony can be enjoyed on its own merits, but an understanding of the work is deepened when one considers the 50 years of Shostakovich's life that followed. The composer was a very

contradictory figure: a man of tremendous reserve who was nevertheless seen as an international symbol, a figure of musical integrity and originality but nevertheless facing the dictates of a parasitic and reactionary bureaucracy. His music can’t be fully appreciated apart from the October Revolution, which created the circumstances under which it was composed. It flowed from and is completely bound up with the history of the Soviet Union itself.