

Symphony No. 7 in C Major, Op. 60 “Leningrad”

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

B: September 25, 1906, Saint Petersburg, Russia

D: August 9, 1975, Moscow, Russia

Dedicated to the City of Leningrad and largely composed within the besieged city as a patriotic response to the Nazi invasion in 1941, it was enthusiastically embraced within the Soviet Union, but quickly dismissed and even ridiculed in the West.

Scored for three flutes (second doubling alto flute, third doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, three clarinets, (third doubling E-flat clarinet), bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, eight horns, six trumpets, six trombones, tuba, timpani, two harps, bass drum, cymbals, field drum, tam tam, tambourine, triangle, xylophone, piano and strings (approx. 70 minutes).

Seven of Shostakovich's 15 symphonies carried overt references to the turmoil surrounding war and revolution in the history of the Soviet Union. The composer's tortured personal relationship with Soviet artistic policy often seeped through the pages of his eight other symphonies. Not since Mahler and Joachim Raff was symphonic form so heavily involved with events and ideas beyond and outside the abstract realm of instrumental tone and musical themes that are the basis of the symphonic principle.

In the case of Shostakovich, the meaning and intrinsic value in his symphonies are further obscured because of public rebukes he suffered under the regime of Josef Stalin, as well as the concomitant demands that he hew to populist artistic expressions of Soviet realism. Conflicting statements he occasionally made about the nature of these works and other statements attributed to him in the controversial memoir published by Solomon Volkov after his death have also confused those issues.

The first three movements of the Seventh Symphony were composed in Leningrad, beginning in July 1941, and the fourth movement was completed the following December in Kuibyshev, the temporary wartime Soviet capital on the banks of the Volga River. The Bolshoi Theater Orchestra gave the premiere there on March 5, 1942. The work was then performed in Moscow. Microfilm of the score was finally smuggled into Leningrad, where a sadly depleted Leningrad Radio Symphony defiantly performed the work on August 9, 1942.

Sir Henry Wood conducted the symphony's London premiere in June 1942. Ernest Newman of the *London Times*, however, quickly dismissed the work's value. The microfilmed score finally reached New York via a circuitous route through the Middle East. Arturo Toscanini passionately conducted its American premiere with the NBC Symphony in July 1942. This led the way for dozens of American performances over the next year. However, the symphony's popularity soon evaporated and in 1943, Béla Bartók delivered a *coup de grâce* with his satirical trombone parody of its first-movement march tune in the “Interrupted Intermezzo” movement of his Concerto for Orchestra.

The Seventh Symphony is the first of Shostakovich's truly long symphonies, cast in a discursive Mahlerian mode. The experience of hearing these symphonies is like

crossing vast ocean in a small boat, being becalmed in light swells at some points, then being imperceptibly but irrevocably swept up in huge waves or strong, shifting currents. It is a purposefully constructed work, however, (especially considering the harrowing circumstances of its composition) and a significant milepost in Shostakovich's symphonic legacy. Above all, it exemplifies his fascinating ability to gradually transform inconsequential scraps of thematic material into towering musical statements.

The symphony is cast in a traditional four-movement format with the second-movement Scherzo preceding the slow movement, which flows without interruption into the finale. The first movement opens with a bright, positive theme attributed to be an expression of the Soviet people at peace. This theme and its accompanying themes proceed through a standard sonata-form exposition, but the development is replaced by an extraordinary interpolation: the insistent repetition of a distant march tune growing ever louder over some 300 measures. Shostakovich likened this to the repetitive rhythmic theme of Ravel's celebrated *Boléro*. Other commentators have cited the rhythmic snare-drum figure of Carl Nielsen's Fifth Symphony as another precedent. (Some have suggested that the deceptive gaiety of the tune referred to false hopes on the part of Russian people that Hitler's advancing armies would liberate them from Stalin's grip and treat them more humanely.) Another extraordinarily episode occurs toward the end of the movement, during a long, mournful recitative by the woodwinds, mainly the bassoon.

The central movements are abstract. The Scherzo opens in a pleasant mood, becoming more high-strung in the fast, nervous trio section at the center of the movement. The Adagio rises from a peaceful opening to an intense martial rhythm and a powerful unison for the strings, followed by a long reflective solo for the violas. The long finale, often called a "victory" movement, has a darkly resolute character as it builds its powerful climaxes.

The DSO last performed Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7 in C Major, Op. 60 "Leningrad" on Nov. 4, 2000, with Mark Wigglesworth conducting.

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