

Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10 is a very special piece for me. I always look forward to playing this incredible masterpiece since there's something new to discover with each interpretation.

OSKAR OZOLINCH, NCS VIOLIN

Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, K. 550

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

BORN January 27, 1756, in Salzburg; died December 5, 1791, in Vienna

PREMIERE Composed 1788; first performance unknown

OVERVIEW

At no time was the separation between Mozart's personal life and his transcendent music more apparent than in the summer of 1788, when, at the age of 32, he had only three years to live. His wife was ill and his own health was beginning to fail; his six-month-old daughter died in July; *Don Giovanni* had received a disappointing reception at its Viennese premiere in May; he had small prospect of participating in any important concerts; and he was so indebted he would not answer a knock on the door for fear of finding a creditor there. Yet, amid all these difficulties, he produced, in less than two months, the three crowning jewels of his orchestral output, the Symphonies No. 39, 40, and 41.

The G-Minor alone of the last three symphonies may reflect the composer's distressed emotional state at the time. It is among those great works of Mozart that look forward to the passionately charged music of the 19th century while epitomizing the structural elegance of the waning Classical era. "It may be," wrote Eric Blom, "that the G minor Symphony is the work in which Classicism and Romanticism meet and

where once and for all we see a perfect equilibrium between them, neither outweighing the other by the tiniest fraction. It is in this respect, at least, the perfect musical work.”

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The symphony’s pervading mood of tragic restlessness is established immediately at the outset by a simple, arpeggiated figure in the violas, above which the violins play the agitated main theme. This melody is repeated with added woodwind chords to lead through a stormy transition to the second theme. After a moment of silence, a contrasting, lyrical melody is shared by strings and winds. The respite from the movement’s driving energy provided by the dulcet second theme is brief, however, and tension soon mounts again. The wondrous development section gives prominence to the fragmented main theme. The recapitulation returns the earlier themes in heightened settings.

The *Andante*, in sonata form, uses rich chromatic harmonies and melodic half-steps to create a mood of brooding intensity and portentous asceticism. Much of the movement, especially the development, makes use of the repeated notes of the opening theme and the quick, fluttering figures of the second subject.

Because of its somber minor-key harmonies, powerful irregular phrasing, and dense texture, the minuet was judged by Arturo Toscanini to be one of the most darkly tragic pieces ever written. The character of the minuet is emphasized by its contrast with the central trio, the only untroubled portion of the entire work. The finale opens with a rocket theme that revives the insistent rhythmic energy of the first movement. The gentler second theme, with a full share of piquant chromatic inflections, slows the hurtling motion only briefly. The development section exhibits a contrapuntal ingenuity that few late-18th-century composers could match in technique and none surpass in musicianship. A short but eloquent silence marks the beginning of the recapitulation, which maintains the symphony’s tragic mood to the close.

The evaluation that the French musicologist F.J. Fétis wrote of Mozart's Symphony No. 40 remains as valid today as when it appeared in 1828: "Although Mozart has not used formidable orchestral forces in his G-minor Symphony, none of the sweeping and massive effects one meets in a symphony of Beethoven, the invention which flames in this work, the accents of passion and energy that pervade and the melancholy color that dominates it result in one of the most beautiful manifestations of the human spirit."

INSTRUMENTATION

Flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, strings

Symphony No. 10 in E Minor, Op. 93

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

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

PREMIERE Composition date unclear; first performance December 17, 1953, in Leningrad, Yevgeny Mravinsky conducting

OVERVIEW

The resilience of Dmitri Shostakovich was astounding. Twice during his life he was the subject of the most scathing denunciations Soviet officialdom could muster, and he not only endured both but found in them a spark to renew his creativity. The first attack, in 1936, condemned him for writing "muddle instead of music," and stemmed from his admittedly modernistic opera *Lady Macbeth of Mzensk*. The other censure came after the Second World War, in 1948, and it was part of a general purge of "formalistic" music by Soviet authorities. Through Andrei Zhdanov, head of the Soviet Composers' Union and the official mouthpiece for the government, it was made known that any experimental or modern or abstract or difficult music was no longer acceptable for

consumption by the Russian peoples. Only simplistic music glorifying the state, the land, and the people would be performed. In other words, symphonies, operas, chamber music — any forms involving too much mental or emotional stimulation — were out; movie music, folk song settings, and patriotic cantatas were in.

Shostakovich saw the iron figure of Joseph Stalin behind both condemnations. After the 1936 debacle, Shostakovich responded with his Fifth Symphony and kept composing through the war years, even becoming a world figure representing the courage of the Russian people with the lightning success of his Seventh Symphony (“Leningrad”) in 1942. The 1948 censure was, however, almost more than Shostakovich could bear. He determined that he would go along with the Party and withhold all of his substantial works until the time when they would be given a fair hearing — when Stalin was dead. About the only music Shostakovich made public between 1948 and 1953 was that for films, most of which had to do with episodes in Soviet history (*The Fall of Berlin*, *The Memorable Year 1919*), and some jingoistic vocal works (*The Sun Shines Over Our Motherland*).

With the death of Stalin on March 5, 1953 (coincidentally, Prokofiev died on the same day), Shostakovich and all Russia felt an oppressive burden lift. The thaw came gradually, but there did return to Soviet life a more amenable attitude that allowed significant compositions again to be produced and performed. Drawing on some sketches dating back as far as 1946, Shostakovich set to work almost immediately on a large, bold symphony, a composition that was to prove the greatest he had written in the form to that time — the Symphony No. 10.

It is impossible to know how long Shostakovich had been preparing ideas for the 10th Symphony. The actual composition of the score in summer 1953 took very little time. The composer wrote almost constantly from early morning until late in the day, taking only brief breaks for meals. It may well be that Stalin’s death allowed the dam to burst that had been holding back the ideas he was storing since his Ninth Symphony appeared

eight years earlier — the longest gap between any two of his symphonies. The cohesion and integrity speak for a composition that Shostakovich had formulated carefully in his head before committing to paper, and it seems that the work may well contain musical images that were the result both of the painful years after the 1948 denunciations and the tempered joy at the release from Stalin's ferocious grip. Robert Layton wrote of the important place this symphony holds in Shostakovich's output: "Shostakovich was still in his thirties when he wrote the Ninth Symphony and the view that he had not wholly lived up to the promise of the First Symphony was prevalent.... Certainly, none of his symphonies up to this time is absolutely flawless if judged by the Olympian standards of the great symphonists, though there is no doubt that they offer ample evidence of symphonic genius. The Tenth Symphony changed this."

The 10th Symphony is among the greatest works of its type written during the 20th century. It can be favorably compared not only with the music of Sibelius, Prokofiev, and Vaughan Williams, but also, even more impressively, with that of Brahms and Beethoven. Besides the technical mastery the symphony displays, it, like all of Shostakovich's works in this form, also seems to bear some profound underlying message, some implicit struggle between philosophical forces. When the symphony was new, Shostakovich would give no hint as to the "meaning" of the work. At a conference of Soviet composers in 1954, he stated, "Authors like to say of themselves, 'I tried, I wanted to, etc.' But I think I'll refrain from any such remarks. It would be much more interesting for me to know what the listener thinks and to hear his remarks. One thing I will say: in this composition I wanted to portray human emotions and passions." Asked sometime later if he would provide a written program, he laughed and said, "No. Let them listen and guess for themselves."

In his purported memoirs, *Testimony*, published after his death, Shostakovich was more specific. "I couldn't write an apotheosis to Stalin, I simply couldn't," he admitted. "I knew what I was in for when I wrote the Ninth [i.e., the 1948 denunciation]. But I did

depict Stalin in music in my next symphony, the Tenth. I wrote it right after Stalin's death, and no one has yet guessed what the Symphony is about. It's about Stalin and the Stalin years. The second part, the scherzo, is a musical portrait of Stalin, roughly speaking. Of course, there are many things in it, but that is the basis." He vouchsafed no more than that. Knowing what we do about Shostakovich's years of struggle under Stalin and the composer's feeling of release at the dictator's death, it is not hard to fill in what he left unspoken because this Symphony is ample testimony to his philosophy of music as a communicative art: "I find it incredible that an artist should wish to shut himself away from the people.... I always try to make myself as widely understood as possible; and if I don't succeed, I consider it my own fault." The 10th Symphony succeeds magnificently.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first movement grows through a grand arch form whose central portions carry its greatest emotional intensity. The music is built from three themes, each of which undergoes a certain amount of development upon its initial presentation. The first is a darkly brooding melody that rises from the depths of the low strings immediately at the beginning. As this sinuous theme unwinds in the cellos and basses, the other string instruments enter to provide a surrounding halo of sound. The second theme appears in the clarinet, the first entry by the winds in the movement. (The use of tone colors in this symphony, both to provide the sonorous material of the work and to aurally define its structure, is masterly.) The ensuing treatment of this theme generates the movement's first climax before this section is rounded out by the re-appearance of the solo clarinet. The third theme emerges in the breathy low register of the solo flute as a sort of diabolical waltz. These three elements — low string, clarinet, and flute melodies — provide the material for the rest of the movement. Their integration and manipulation give the impression, even on first hearing, of a work of grand sweep and unimpeachable

integrity, an impression that is deepened with familiarity. It is probably the greatest symphonic movement that Shostakovich ever wrote.

The menacing second movement, purportedly a musical portrait of Stalin, is, in the words of Ray Blocker, “a whirling fireball of a movement, filled with malevolent fury.” Its thunderous tread leaves little doubt of Shostakovich’s feeling about the murderous Stalin. Formally, it is cast in ternary form (A–B–A), though the propulsive turbulence of the music leaves little room for subtle structural demarcations. The shortest section of the symphony, it is the perfect foil for the deep ruminations of the preceding movement. Indeed, after the quiet close of the first movement, its beginning seems to virtually explode into the listener’s consciousness.

The opening gesture of the third movement, three rising notes, is related in shape to the themes of the first two movements and provides a strong link in the overall unity of the 10th Symphony. As a tag to this first theme, Shostakovich included his musical “signature” — DSCH, the notes D–E-flat–C–B. (The note D represents his first initial. In German transliteration, the composer’s name begins “Sch”: S in German notation equals E-flat, C is C, and H equals B-natural.) The movement’s center section is dominated by an unchanging horn call that resembles the awesome riddle of existence posed by the solo trumpet in Ives’ *The Unanswered Question*. The opening section returns in a heightened presentation. The movement closes with Shostakovich’s musical signature, played haltingly by flute and piccolo, hanging in the air.

The last movement begins with an extended introduction in slow tempo, a perfect psychological buffer between the unsettled nature of the third movement and the exuberance of the finale proper. The finale is both festive and thoughtful while recalling thematic material from earlier movements to serve as a summary of the entire work. Concerning the ending of the symphony, the British writer on music Hugh Ottaway wrote, “The impact is affirmative but provisional: anti-pessimistic rather than optimistic.”

Shostakovich left the final interpretation of the 10th Symphony up to each listener. It is no doubt heroic, filled with struggle and a deep awareness of life's pains. But it is also uplifting in its dedication to the human spirit and the continuity of life against the greatest obstacles. Ray Blocker, in his book on the composer's symphonies, wrote: "Here is the heart of Shostakovich. In this work he opens his soul to the world, revealing its tragedy and profundity, but also its resilience and strength."

INSTRUMENTATION

Two piccolos, two flutes, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, E-flat clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, strings

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