

## Shostakovich- Symphony No. 5

This great 'warhorse' of the modern repertoire is derived from the spirit of Russian Nationalism – *the bad kind*, possessed by the need to control and dominate and conjured from the oppression of dictatorial government. Dmitri Shostakovich stands as one of the greatest Russian composers of any generation, and yet, his life is marked with the unfair rollercoaster of unqualified criticism. In fact, in this case, the unqualified criticism carried with it the possibility of harsh punishment, national disgrace and potential fatality for the individual, their friends or their family. History shows us that time and again, it's the kind of criticism that one expects from tyrannical forces that feel the end to their dominance might be near. It is marked by extra privation and completely illogical action.

By 1925 with his First Symphony it was clear that the grand arc of a great career was in ascendancy. Here was extraordinary music, extraordinary orchestration, and funnily enough music that was meeting a set of socially instructed artistic confines that had already started to be imposed. All of his works up to and including the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk* were heralded as genius, and the opera was so successful after its Leningrad debut in January 1934 that it played in Europe and in London and by the time May 1936 came around it was being performed in three theatres in Moscow simultaneously. All was well with the world, and in fact advised by a friend to attend, Shostakovich was present at the January 26<sup>th</sup> performance of the opera which was attended by Stalin and the entire Politburo. Given the political and popular success of the piece already, I'm sure he would have been expecting to be introduced in a moment of triumph. What happened next is infamous and appalling, but very consequential. Stalin grimaced through the entire performance, egged on by sycophants and laughing out loud in the love scenes. Two days later the Pravda article 'Muddle not Music' appeared condemning the piece and containing the veiled threat "this is playing with nonsensical things, which could end very badly". Shostakovich was not naïve to what this meant. The terrifying pogroms of 1936-1937 had started and his sister Mariya would be soon be sent to Siberia. In addition close friends and colleagues, Marshal Tukhachevsky, Nikolai Zhilyayev, Boris Kornilov and Adrian Piotrovsky were all ordered executed by Stalin, - all dead by May 1937. The Opera went on hold, the Fourth symphony went on hold, and more terrifying, Shostakovich's life went on hold. He talks of the despair of nights spent on the landing outside his front door, so that his family would not be awoken when the Secret Police came to take him away. Of this possibility he was sure and he lived in complete fear. *Lady Macbeth* and the Fourth Symphony didn't see the light again until the 1960's, when a benign Nikita Krushchev looked on unable to stop the international acclaim Shostakovich had finally achieved.

However, in 1937 Shostakovich had to purposefully and publically redeem himself, and be seen to be redeeming himself if he were to survive. The Fifth Symphony is entitled, "An artist's

response to just criticism” – and with populist, easy melodies and fanfares that drive the blood, he deliberately appeals to the *lowest common denominator* in music appreciation. He succeeds, somewhat tongue-in-cheek to rehabilitate himself, at the same time deliciously implicating the puerility of the political critics. This is not to say the work doesn’t have extraordinary musical merit. It does – however, it is not the real Shostakovich. It is the remolded, skeptic, fearful, compliant artist, who realizes that his real force would have to be controlled and manifested *sotto voce*. How do we know this to be fact? If one wants to know the real Shostakovich, look to the fifteen quartets, not to the symphonies. The first quartet also comes from the Lady Macbeth period, and in fact quotes generously from it and other snippets from that early unadulterated style. He doesn’t write another quartet until 1946 and then it is always in the quartets that the real, full, emotional, private and didactic musician is completely demonstrable. Fifteen symphonies and fifteen quartets later one can assess the true emotional ride by looking at history. Shostakovich wasn’t observing this history as a bystander, he was in it, experiencing it, governed by it, fearing it and greatly pained by it. The quartets and later symphonies allow a release of the stored emotion by way of musical commentary.

The seesaw was not over. Following his rehabilitation with the triumphant reception of the fifth symphony war broke out with the Finnish people in 1939. Despite commissions for stirring militaristic works, the Red army suffered huge defeat. The commissions had come from none other than Andrei Zhdanov – the party leader in Leningrad - however, all were too embarrassed to use the resulting ‘*Suite on Finnish Themes*’. 1941 brought the war with Germany and the depth of human loss in the Leningrad campaign. Despite the seventh symphony’s proclamation of victory, the similarity of it to the fifth and the effects of the ‘Stalingrad’ symphony No. 8 – Zhdanov’s denunciation of Shostakovich, along with Prokofiev and Khachaturian went on without mercy in 1948. The grip of this tyrannical and barbaric oppression of art relaxed just a bit with Stalin’s death in 1953. It is a mild shock to the senses, that in recent months the conditions of the former Soviet Union have been held up as an example of good society– and the rose tinted spectacles of memory have seen fit to lay wreaths at Stalin’s tomb.

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