Tuesday, November 15, 2016, at 8:00

**Edwin Outwater** Conductor

**Vasks**
Cantabile for Strings

**Shostakovich**
Symphony No. 8 in C Minor, Op. 65
Adagio—Allegro non troppo—Adagio
Allegretto
Allegro non troppo—
Largo—
Allegretto
Pēteris Vasks
Born April 16, 1946; Aizpūte, Latvia

Cantabile for Strings

“I think it is very important that a musician speaks passionate feelings about his homeland,” composer Pēteris Vasks said in an interview. “For me,” he continued, “what is important is to speak as a representative of a very small, unhappy but courageous country which has suffered much. In my music, I speak Latvian. Our roots are full of sadness and suffering, just as they are in many other Eastern European countries. But in artistic terms, our tragic history has given us a terrific impulse to be creative, to express our emotions.”

The sadness and suffering of Latvia about which Vasks speaks have had a centuries-long and virtually uninterrupted history. Helpless to defend itself, the tiny country was forced to live under the domination of many foreign powers—Poland, Sweden, and most recently Russia. Devastated during World War I, the country enjoyed a brief period of independence until 1940, when it was annexed to the U.S.S.R. After almost a half century under the Soviets, the Latvian people were moved to overt protests, joining together to confirm their resolve to be free. In a courageous action, the Latvian parliament voted for independence from the Soviet Union, and in August 1991 Latvia was recognized by the U.S.S.R. as an independent state.

Pēteris Vasks’s entire life, as a student and then as a practicing musician, has been lived under the shadow of Soviet domination, which we know from the experiences of such composers as Shostakovich and Prokofiev was extremely traumatic and hazardous to free creativity.

Apparently Vasks did not attempt to escape the Soviet prison that his country had become. He attended the Riga Music School and graduated from the Lithuanian State Conservatory in Vilnius in 1970. His instrument was the double bass, which he played in the Latvian State Philharmonic, but he largely gave up performing to study composition, in Riga, where he has lived as a freelance composer.

Vasks’s sense of nationalism is apparent from his words quoted above, but he has also expressed a more universal outlook that brings him into a world consciousness. “My music,” he says, “contains a great deal of idealism. I want to tell people about beautiful ideals, high goals, show them that there is not only the drab everyday, that there is more than mere pessimism. . . . Every honest composer searches for a way out of the crises of his time . . . shows how humanity can overcome the passion for self-annihilation that flares up. Perhaps my music contains sadness, but it also contains a great deal of optimism and idealism. Beauty and harmony are rare in life, but in music they are possible. I go through pessimism finally to confirm at the end that I say ‘Yes’ until my last breath to the beauty of the world.”

In Vasks’s Cantabile, composed in 1979, beauty and harmony coexist with an intense brooding not far removed from the emotional realm of Barber’s Adagio for Strings and Górecki’s notoriously popular Symphony of Sorrowful Songs (pieces that really don’t have much more in common than their tone of seriousness). When the music becomes rhythmically agitated, the influence of Lutosławski seems apparent. The deep sonorities of the music arise from the preponderance of pedal points (long-held bass notes) in the lower strings. This compositional method as well as
the aleatoric technique, which has the musicians playing at will until directed, imbues the music with a kind of sensual, other worldly atmosphere.

Vasks ideal in the cantabile, “to express how beautiful and harmonious the world is,” is achieved in a kind of wonderfully floating stream of consciousness but controlled manner that is enveloping and, for all its brevity, emotionally satisfying. —Orrin Howard

Orrin Howard annotated Los Angeles Philharmonic programs for more than twenty years. Provided courtesy of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Dmitri Shostakovich
Born September 25, 1906; St. Petersburg, Russia
Died August 9, 1975; Moscow, Russia

Symphony No. 8 in C Minor, Op. 65

Music and war were linked in Shostakovich’s mind from early childhood. At an age when other precocious composers were cutting their teeth writing piano pieces, Shostakovich wrote a revolutionary symphony and the Funeral March in Memoriam to the Fallen Heroes of the Revolution. Shostakovich was only eleven when the czar was overthrown; ten years later, when he had a deeper understanding of both political unrest and music’s incalculable power, he dedicated his Second Symphony to the October Revolution.

The triumph and tragedy of war have inspired a number of musical works through the ages, including Haydn’s dramatic Mass in Time of War, the noisy heroics of Beethoven’s Wellington’s Victory, and, more recently, Britten’s War Requiem and Sir Michael Tippett’s A Child of Our Time. But it’s the wartime symphonies by Dmitri Shostakovich that most powerfully tell of individual anguish amid mass devastation—that reveal personal grief and the victories of the soul against the big, messy backdrop of combat. Perhaps, in the case of Shostakovich, we know so much about his own personal political battles that we read too generously between the lines, placing an unnecessary burden on the music. But in the Seventh (Leningrad) and Eighth symphonies—both written at the height of World War II and in a tremendous, emotional white heat—the notes on the page carry a heavy weight. Both works were designed as public statements, intended to address big issues, and they’re overwhelming in their sheer size and emotional range. Yet despite their monumental scale, it’s a solitary voice that lingers in the ear after the sounds of trumpets and drums have receded.

The conflict between public speech and private thought is the province of the twentieth-century Soviet artist. Certainly Shostakovich became its most famous victim and his Fifth Symphony the most astonishing apology ever written in the form of music.

COMPOSED
1943

FIRST PERFORMANCE
November 4, 1943; Moscow, Russia

INSTRUMENTATION
four flutes and two piccolos, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, xylophone, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, strings

APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME
63 minutes
Throughout his life, the form of the symphony was Shostakovich’s public forum. Despite—and often because of—political tension, the composer maintained his public pose in these big works, leaving the darker, more personal thoughts for his string quartets. But even the symphonies betray him. For many listeners, the end of the Fifth Symphony, with its heroic cadences, sounds oddly hollow, as if Shostakovich could play the part no longer.

Shostakovich obviously understood the curious power of music, strangely tangible yet inexplicit—somewhere beyond words. Often this was, for him, its saving grace. “Words are not my genre,” he once told Yevgeny Yevtushenko, whose words he did set, in the Thirteenth Symphony, Babi Yar. “I never lie in music,” Shostakovich said. (And it was Yevtushenko’s outspoken text, not Shostakovich’s music, that caused trouble and had to be revised after the premiere.) Certainly Shostakovich’s own words raise many questions, even today. The authenticity of Testimony, the “Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov” is still disputed. And so we’re left with the music. In his introduction to Testimony, Volkov quotes Ilya Ehrenberg, who said, when confronted with the Eighth Symphony, “Music has a great advantage: without mentioning anything, it can say everything.”

Shostakovich himself always maintained a curious silence regarding his Eighth Symphony, even though he had often spoken out about its predecessor and fellow war symphony, the Leningrad. These two works, for all their similarities, could hardly be more different. Unlike the Seventh Symphony, the Eighth has no title and it isn’t about anything as concrete as the siege of Leningrad. The circumstances that inspired it are less sensational—the original score says only: “The composer worked on the symphony at the Ivanovo Home for Composers’ Creative Work in the summer of 1943”—and the music less specific in its evocation. But, if anything, the Eighth is more deeply motivated. While the Seventh chronicles the horrors of war, the Eighth seeks understanding. And, where the Seventh limits its scope to the triumph of victory, the Eighth looks beyond the horizon, to true peace.

Shostakovich casts the work in an irregular arrangement of five movements, the last three linked in one powerful, unbroken sequence that’s unparalleled in the symphonic literature. That span of music, lasting a full half hour, is balanced by a single movement, nearly as long and heavy with anger and sadness, at the start. A quick and savage scherzo, marked simply allegretto, stands between.

A solitary strand of music, played by the cellos and basses, begins the symphony, adagio and fortissimo. Shostakovich moves soberly through slowly shifting music—dirgelike and contemplative, then angry, even explosive. A barely contained outburst gives way to a long passage of quiet reflection. Midway, the music slowly rises to its greatest climax and then breaks to reveal the mad galloping of the Allegro non troppo, capped by wild horn calls and a beating drum. Movement is halted, finally, by an explosion signaled by terrifying drum rolls—leaving us with the sound of an English horn, the lone survivor, and a nearly deafening silence. Shostakovich makes little of the shift from C minor to C major—the latter has rarely sounded so bleak—even though this is our first glimpse of our destination, still half an hour away.

Next comes the full force of the Allegretto—tremendous and irregular marching music characterized by the swagger of the brass band, striding tunes, high-flying piccolo squeals, and a banging drum. It’s a harrowing vision of the military march. The music eventually disintegrates—at one point there’s little left but the flute on top

![Shostakovich playing cards with his children on summer holiday during the 1940s](image-url)
and the contrabassoon five octaves below—and then rears up for one last crash.

The last three movements are conceived as one: the climax of the Allegro non troppo becomes the beginning of the Largo; the crux of that movement, in turn, opens onto the great vistas of the final Allegretto. This progression is calculated with a keen sense of drama and a master's command of the big picture. The Allegro non troppo is a terrifying piece of music, not only because of its menacing tone and dangerous pace, but also because it sounds inhuman, like the workings of a giant and sinister machine. It begins with rapid, even quarter notes that march relentlessly through every measure, starting in the violas and eventually invading the entire orchestra. Page after page brings no relief, only the occasional shrill cries of the winds or a crazed bugle call.

Suddenly, with a drum roll and a couple of grand, ceremonial chords from the full orchestra, a powerful unison theme is announced. And only then, when the music pulls back quickly from fff to a thread of sound, do we understand that the machine has stopped and that this noble new theme has swept us into the serene expanses of the Largo. That theme is the foundation for an expansive set of variations and it’s repeated twelve times—always in the low strings—while ever-new ideas circle above it, including several rhapsodic solos. This solemn threnody, restrained and quiet (many pages don’t rise above a pianissimo), is the calm after the storm, but while there’s calm, there’s not yet peace. That comes in a moment of extraordinary stillness—at the same time one of the quietest and most important moments in the score—when the three clarinets lead the music up into the pure radiance of a C major triad.

The final Allegretto, opened up by the discovery of C major, has an unexpected air of innocence. The music is simple and even playful—listen to the opening diatonic bassoon melody or to the jubilant piping of the piccolo a few bars later—and the scene is fresh and pastoral. Even though there are reminders of more troubled music midway through—the opening of the symphony breaks in at the climax—it’s a bold and provocative ending for a dark, tragic symphony. It has also proven controversial. Critics found the finale anticlimactic; the Soviet authorities, unable to reconcile these few rays of sunlight falling on so much desolation, called it “an optimistic tragedy.” But optimistic is too unambiguous a word for the serene and dreamy, emotionally complex final pages. Shostakovich leaves it to each of us to hear this music, as inward and personal as anything in his symphonic output, in our own way. ■

—Phillip Huscher

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.