

PROGRAM NOTES

Dmitri Shostakovich - Symphony No. 11, Op. 103 (*The Year 1905*)

Dmitri Shostakovich

Born September 25, 1906, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

Died August 9, 1975, Moscow, Russia.

Symphony No. 11, Op. 103 (*The Year 1905*)

Shostakovich began Symphony no. 11 in 1956 and completed it on August 4, 1957. The first performance was given on October 30, 1957, in Moscow. The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, three oboes and english horn, three clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, snare drum, bass drum, tam-tam, xylophone, celesta, bells, two harps, and strings. Performance time is approximately sixty-nine minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Shostakovich's Eleventh Symphony were given at Orchestra Hall on January 19 and 20, 1961, with André Cluytens conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on June 11 and 12, 1999, with Mstislav Rostropovich conducting.

One might have naively thought that when Stalin died in March 1953, Shostakovich would have found himself released from the crushing creative, personal, and political pressures of the dictator's last years. To some extent, this was the case, although nobody in the Soviet Union at the time imagined Stalinism would come to an end just because Stalin himself wasn't there. Certainly, Shostakovich's immediate creative response to Stalin's death was striking enough: the Tenth Symphony, a work of tremendous musical dynamism and vivid human scope. At the same time during these early post-Stalinist years, the composer was also adding substantially to his reputation by releasing a number of powerful and already written works, like the First Violin Concerto and the Fourth String Quartet, which he had previously held back for fear of the consequences. Taken together, these old and new pieces gave every reason to suppose that Shostakovich would now experience a liberation of his genius.

And yet, after the initial explosion of the Tenth, there actually followed one of his bleakest periods. Although a few important pieces date from this time, he spent a great part of his energies composing tub-thumping film music, music for unpretentious practical use, and "official" music of one kind or another, including popular songs to sentimental words of the "Communist Youth" variety. His admirers were confused and disappointed, and he himself complained of frustration and depression.

One major cause of his inertia at this period was the death of his wife Nina Varzar in December 1954. A distinguished scientist and an immensely strong character, Nina had been the rock on which his life had been built for many years. Their marriage had not been easy and was “open.” But without her, Shostakovich seemed, as several friends later remembered, rudderless, lonely, and confused.

It was during this time that the composer began to acquire an unenviable reputation as an unadventurous conservative, a hack, an official Soviet bard. In the West, his music was written off by commentators as more or less irrelevant as the avant-garde discovered brave new worlds of sound and post-war popular music began to overwhelm the classical traditions. In his own country, the young and rebellious musical generation that came to maturity in those Khrushchev years looked harshly and askance at this dinosaur from another age (he was only fifty). Half-forgotten were the wonders and experiments of his early years, and even the vast and tragic ironies of his middle-period symphonies seemed less important than they once had.

Then, in the summer of 1957, while staying in his favorite dacha (country cottage) in Komarovo on the north Baltic coast just west of Leningrad, Shostakovich produced his Eleventh Symphony.

The auguries were not good. At first hearing, this symphony confirmed the worst fears of the composer’s detractors and, at the same time, found worryingly warm favor with Soviet officials, who declared it one of the composer’s most satisfactory and splendidly Soviet pieces. To most listeners—those who liked it and those who hated it—the Eleventh seemed the very embodiment of the doctrine of Socialist Realism.

What made it such a perfect example of that state-sponsored aesthetic? First, the fact that it was explicitly written for the fortieth anniversary celebrations of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and that it purported to memorialize another sacred date in Soviet history: the 1905 Revolution. Then, there was the all too neat way it fulfilled so many of the musical ideals of Socialist Realism: it was heavily pictorial and programmatic; it often sounded like film music (a very good thing for Socialist Realists); most of the thematic material was not the composer’s own but drawn from nineteenth-century revolutionary songs that most people in the audience would already know and love (this was another very important qualification for Socialist Realist music); and, finally, its harmonic and orchestral language was deeply and obviously indebted to nineteenth-century Russian nationalist music (Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and the rest). One particular listener at the time of the first performance understood all of this in a completely different way. She was no special friend of Shostakovich’s and no musician, but she was one of Russia’s greatest twentieth-century poets—Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966). Zoya Tomashevskaya, the daughter of a famous literary critic, remembered the occasion well:

At the premiere of the Eleventh Symphony, there was a lot of discontented muttering. The music-loving connoisseurs alleged that the symphony was devoid of interest. All around one heard such remarks as: “He has sold himself down the river. Nothing but quotations and revolutionary songs.” Anna Andreyevna Akhmatova kept her silence. For some reason, my father couldn’t attend the concert. When we came home afterwards, he asked us, “Well, how was it?” And Anna Andreyevna answered, “Those songs were like white birds flying against a terrible black sky.”

Akhmatova had evidently been deeply moved. To another friend she commented:

His revolutionary songs sometimes spring up close by, sometimes float by far away in the sky . . . they flare up like lightning . . . That's the way it was in 1905. I remember.

Akhmatova had put her finger on one of the three keys to this symphony—the extraordinary and vivid choice of nineteenth-century songs that provide most of the melodies. The other two keys are the way the symphony develops ideas from one of Shostakovich's own compositions, the sixth of his Ten Poems on Texts by Revolutionary Poets, op. 88, a work for unaccompanied chorus written in 1951. And, finally, there is the way almost the entire symphony seems clearly modeled on a crucial work of music from Russia's past, one of Shostakovich's personal favorites—Mussorgsky's mighty historical opera about a revolution, *Boris Godunov*. Echoes of the crowd scenes from *Boris*—from coronation to revolution—abound in all four movements and there are also specific references to details of Mussorgsky's piece, including the famous two chords of the Coronation Bells. All three of these keys to the mystery bring us to the intriguing realization that this is one of the most purely “Russian” of all Shostakovich's symphonies. There is hardly a hint of Mahler, who was so important as a model from the First Symphony to the Tenth.

The nineteenth-century revolutionary songs that so excited Akhmatova are little known to American listeners. But to Russians of the early twentieth century, these lyrics and tunes were part of their cultural inheritance, rather like “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” in the United States.

The first movement opens with Mussorgskian scene-setting music, establishing the place—Palace Square in the middle of Saint Petersburg—and the time—the hour before dawn on the fateful day of January 9, 1905, at the moment when the Russian Revolution of that year began. We hear the frozen stillness of the river Neva in the darkness, the distant sounds of military bugles calling “Reveille” in the barracks, and the equally distant chanting of the Russian Orthodox prayer for the dead, the Kontakion.

Then, like an echo from one of the prison cells in the Peter-Paul Fortress immediately opposite the Winter Palace, we catch the first of those songs Akhmatova recognized—“Listen!” This was a popular ballad with nineteenth-century political prisoners and often sung in Stalin's Gulags, too. It tells a convict's story of hearing a fellow prisoner being led out to early-morning execution. Shostakovich introduces it on the gentle sound of two flutes (like two trumpets playing in the distance), just after an eerie passage of softly beating drums:

Like the deed of a traitor, like the conscience of a tyrant,
The autumn night is black.
But blacker than night looms out of the mist
A gloomy vision of the prison.

All around, the lazy stepping of the guards
In the quiet of the night. But—there it is!—
Like the tolling of a bell, lingeringly, longingly, the echoing call:
“Listen!”

A little further on in the first movement, after a reprise of “Listen!” in the bassoon, violins, and violas, Shostakovich introduces a second melody, gloomy and hymnlike, first in the cellos and basses, then in the flute and clarinet. This is “The Arrested Man,” a song from 1850:

The night is dark. Seize the moment!
But the walls of the prison are strong,
And the gates are locked
With two iron padlocks.
Along the corridor there faintly flickers
The watchman’s candle,
And the jingling of the spurs
Of the sentry, who longs to live.

There follows a grief-filled exchange of words between two equally oppressed individuals, a despairing prisoner and the sentry who cannot help him.

The second movement mostly plays not with tunes from early songs, but instead with melodies taken from the second key ingredient of the Eleventh Symphony, Shostakovich’s own unaccompanied choral setting of Arkady Kotz’s poem written in the aftermath of the catastrophe it describes, the Bloody Sunday massacre that took place in front of the Winter Palace on January 9, 1905:

Bare your heads! Bare your heads!
On this bitter day the shadow of a long night trembled over the earth.

In musical language vividly reminiscent of the choral scenes from Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*, the unarmed protestors, carrying portraits of Tsar Nicholas II, process to his palace to ask for his help:

Hey you, father Tsar! Look around you.
We have nothing to live on, your servants give us no help.

After a climax in which the orchestra repeats over and over again the phrase “Bare your heads,” Shostakovich returns for a moment to the opening of the symphony, to the prayer for the dead and, again, the sound of the old song “Listen!” The third movement—Eternal Memory (the Russian name for the ancient chant we call the Kontakion, which we already heard at the beginning of the symphony)—is a funeral march or processional. It starts with the revolutionary funeral song “You fell as a victim”:

You fell as a victim in the fateful struggle
Of selfless love for the people.
You gave everything that you could for them,
For their lives, their honor and their freedom.

Sometimes you were tormented in dank prisons . . .
Your merciless sentence
Had already been decided for you by the executioner-judges
And your chains rattled as you walked.

This lovely old tune is soon answered by a stern, revolutionary marching song. Here, Shostakovich combines several different sources into a single musical utterance. The most prominent melodies here come from two songs. The first begins:

Bravely, comrades, step forward!
Your spirit has been strengthened in the struggle.
Let us lean our bodies forwards
On the road to the kingdom of freedom.

We all come from the people,
We are the children of working families.
Brotherly union and freedom—
This is the slogan that takes us into battle.

The second song at this point is called “Hail, free word of liberty!”

The finale of the Eleventh begins with a fiery revolutionary march:

Rage, you tyrants, and mock at us,
Threaten us with prison and with chains.
We are stronger than you in spirit,
 though you trampled on our bodies.
Shame! Shame! Shame on you, you tyrants!

This is followed, in an extended marching sequence for the strings of the orchestra alone, by one of the most famous and catchy of all revolutionary anthems, the so-called “Warsaw Song”:

Malevolent whirlwinds blow around us,
Dark forces press down on us with hate.
We have engaged in the fateful struggle with our enemies,
The fate that awaits us is still unknown.
But with pride and courage we will raise
The battle standard of the workers' cause,
The standard of the great struggle of all peoples
For a better world, for holy freedom!
 To the bloody battle,
 Holy and true,
 March, march onwards,
 You working people!

The violence unleashed in this final movement is astonishing, overpowering with its sense of uncontrollable rage. The symphony ends with a last return to Shostakovich's own 1951 chorus and its opening words, repeated over and over again and at deafening volume by the whole orchestra: “Bow your heads! Bow your heads!”

And that brings us back to the meaning of this symphony and to Akhmatova's brilliant description of the songs in it as like “white birds flying against a terrible black sky.” This piece may indeed be “about” the 1905 Revolution, that bloody upheaval whose eventual failure led directly to the 1917 Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union. Then again, when Shostakovich wrote it, his country was only just emerging from the nightmare of the Stalinist Terror and the

mass executions and imprisonments by means of which the Bolsheviks continued the old tyranny of the Romanov emperors in new and vastly destructive forms. And in the year in which it was composed, the USSR invaded Hungary and bloodily repressed the uprising there, an event which caused many Western communists to tear up their party cards and made many more in the Soviet intelligentsia, to which Shostakovich belonged, despair at the workings of their own country.

Shostakovich himself never “explained” this music, beyond leaving its pictorial titles to tell a clear story of 1905 almost in the manner of a children’s cartoon book. But when we hear and listen—“Listen!”—to its not so hidden words (and almost every bar suggests words), then we quickly see that what the composer is talking about has many more layers of meaning than we first suspected. This is a symphony not about one event, but many events, and about how any one of us approaches those events in the darkness of our conscience.

Gerard McBurney

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Gerard McBurney is the artistic programming advisor for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. He has reconstructed a number of lost works by Shostakovich including the 1931 music-hall show ‘Hypothetically Murdered’ and the ‘real’ Jazz Suite No.2 of 1938; in the mid-1990s he made a dance-band version of Shostakovich’s 1958 musical comedy ‘Moscow Cheryomushki’, which will receive its US premiere at the Chicago Opera Theater in 2011. McBurney recently finished orchestrating Shostakovich’s lost opera about a monkey-human hybrid, ‘Orango’, which will be premiered in Los Angeles in 2011-12.

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