**Dmitri Shostakovich**  
Born September 25, 1906, Saint Petersburg, Russia.  
Died August 9, 1975, Moscow, Russia.

**Symphony No. 1, Op. 10**

Shostakovich completed his first symphony in December 1925, and it was first performed on May 12, 1926, in Leningrad. The score calls for three flutes and two piccolos, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, triangle, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, bells, and strings, with an important role for solo piano. Performance time is approximately thirty-three minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Shostakovich's First Symphony were given at Orchestra Hall on December 28 and 29, 1928, with Frederick Stock conducting.

In our amazement at those rare talents who mature early and die young—Mozart, Schubert, and Mendelssohn immediately come to mind—we often undervalue the less spectacular accomplishments of those who burst on the scene at a young age and go on to live long, full, musically rich lives. Dmitri Shostakovich's First Symphony, written when he was eighteen—scarcely a less impressive achievement than the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, finished when Mendelssohn was just seventeen—inaugurated a symphonic career that spanned nearly half a century and the entirety of Shostakovich's creative life. (The equally significant string quartets, also fifteen in number, are concentrated in the later part of his career.)

Shostakovich wasn't a child prodigy, but he grew up in an unusually musical home and revealed from an early age exceptional talent, a keen ear, a sharp musical memory, and great discipline—all the essential tools (except, perhaps, for self-confidence and political savvy) for a major career in the music world. His Symphony no. 1 is the first indication of the direction his career would take. Written as a graduation thesis at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory, it brought him international attention. In the years immediately following its first performance in May 1926, it made the rounds of the major orchestras, beginning in this country with the Philadelphia Orchestra in November 1926 and coming to the Chicago Symphony on December 28, 1928. (The program note begins, “The name of Dmitri Szostakowicz will vainly be searched for in the dictionaries of musical biography.” Who at that time could have predicted that Shostakovich—to use the transliteration that quickly became standard—would become a household name?)

Although his development would be governed by nonmusical forces reflecting some of the most dramatic social and political events of our century, the issues in the First Symphony are purely musical. It's a technical exercise, evidence of a well-earned diploma. (That other matriculation symphony, Haydn's *Oxford*, was performed when Haydn, at fifty-six, was given an honorary doctorate from Oxford University.)

What's most remarkable about Shostakovich's First Symphony isn't the appearance of so many hallmarks of the composer's mature style—biting sarcasm, unabashed romanticism, dry musical humor, and moments of public rhetoric alongside deeply personal statements—but that everything is handled with mastery and assurance. It's easy to tell which composers Shostakovich most admired as a young man—there are passing references in particular to his fellow countrymen Prokofiev, Scriabin, Stravinsky, and Tchaikovsky—but the final, lasting image is of Shostakovich himself. It's the same Shostakovich who appears in photographs at the time—pokerfaced (with tongue in cheek?), intense, diffident, and—despite the reserve in his eyes, shaded by the spectacles that would be his mask for life—determined to succeed.
The First Symphony begins as chamber music and ends with the kind of orchestral bombast we now know from the *Leningrad* and his other symphonies designed to address public issues. It has four thematically related movements, with the scherzo placed before the slow one, which leads without pause into the finale. A solo piano has a significant role in the symphony. (At the conservatory, Shostakovich had been undecided whether to concentrate on composition or piano; years later he said, “If the truth be told, I should have done both.”)

The distinctive quality of the first movement is its crystalline texture, delicate yet razor sharp. From the opening measures, where a solo bassoon converses with a single trumpet, individual instruments shine. Important ideas are often introduced simply, by one voice against a spare accompaniment. At the climax, Shostakovich unexpectedly throws a number of ideas together, to tremendous effect.

The scherzo is an early example of the composer’s humor, refined during his days as a pianist in local movie houses, when he often laughed so uncontrollably during his favorite scenes that he had to stop playing. This movement is filled with high spirits; the ghostly trio, with its persistent triangle and snare drum rolls, is oddly mysterious. Still, before the movement is over, Shostakovich manages to combine these two elements into a thrilling climax.

The Lento begins with a plaintive oboe tune, distantly related to the main theme of the first movement, and continues in a richly lyrical vein—music that refutes all the later comments about Shostakovich’s lesser melodic talent. The finale, which brings together many previous themes, is more intricate, with wide mood swings, abrupt tempo changes, bold contrasts (a full orchestral climax answered by a timpani solo, for example), and a general emotional complexity that is inevitable at any reunion. But most of all, it confirms the arrival on the music scene of an exciting and enduring new voice.

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