

Symphony No10 in E minor Op93

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Moderato
Allegro
Allegretto
Andante – Allegro

"Music illuminates a person through and through, and it is also his last hope and final refuge. And even half-mad Stalin, a beast and a butcher, instinctively sensed that about music. That's why he feared and hated it."

The impact of Stalin

That's Dmitri Shostakovich on Stalin's loathing of musical expression in the 1979 book *Testimony*. He knew only too well about the Soviet tyrant's terror of the ability of music to speak the truth, having himself been the subject of two major attacks by Stalin after the leader rose to power in 1929. The first, in 1936, was prompted by Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, and led to a vicious reprimand in the pages of *Pravda*, the party newspaper. Shostakovich apparently called his response, the Fifth Symphony, "a Soviet artist's creative answer to justified criticism" – but its enormous popularity made him into an even more vulnerable target for state censure. A stronger reprimand came in 1948, when Shostakovich was denounced for "formalism" – in other words, for rejecting the feel-good socialist realism required by the state. He turned to writing empty, patriotic bombast and state-serving film scores until the time came for a loosening of the strict controls.

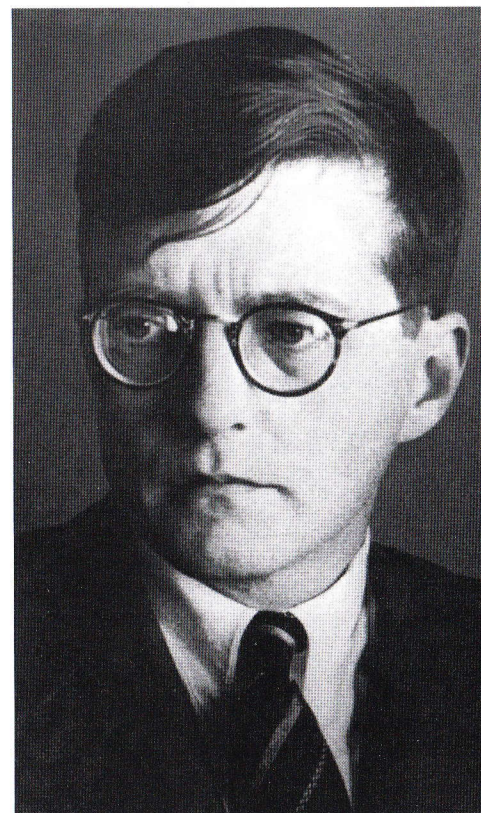
That moment arrived, to a certain degree, on 5 March 1953, with Stalin's death. Stringent arts policies relaxed a little, and Shostakovich apparently seized the opportunity to write a large-scale

symphony, his tenth, taking as his theme nothing less than the brutal suppression that Stalin had wrought on his country, in which millions died and millions more lived in daily terror. Again in *Testimony*, the composer said: "I did depict Stalin in my... Tenth. I wrote it straight after Stalin's death, and no one has yet guessed what the symphony is about. It's about Stalin and the Stalin years."

Meaning and relevance

Indeed, Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony has been described as forty-eight minutes of tragedy, despair and terror, followed by two minutes of triumph – and it's hard to disagree with that appraisal. But, as with so many issues concerning the great Russian composer, nothing is quite as straightforward as it seems. Many have questioned whether the bluntly anti-Soviet views expressed in *Testimony* are really by Shostakovich at all, and the Russian pianist Tatiana Nikolayeva, who worked with Shostakovich extensively in the 1950s, claimed he began his Tenth Symphony well before Stalin's death. The symphony's hugely powerful music sounds unmistakably as though it's "about" something, but we'll probably never know for sure what that is. In any case, it's highly doubtful that the work is anything as simplistic as a musical condemnation of Stalin.

Even after its premiere, by the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra under Yevgeny Mravinsky in December 1953, many within the Soviet system were confused as to what to make of the piece. In March 1954, the Moscow branch of the Union of Soviet Composers called a special three-day conference to debate Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony and its place within the



strictures of socialist realism. Shostakovich refused to be drawn on what his symphony meant, and in the end, the delegates decided to call it – in appropriately ambiguous language – an "optimistic tragedy". As one of Shostakovich's most enduringly respected and most often performed works, though, there's no doubting the abiding relevance of the symphony's message – however we might interpret it.

Opening movement

The long, slow first movement takes up almost half the symphony's length, in a grand arch that builds from the brooding darkness of the opening theme on cellos and basses to a shattering central climax, complete with shrieking woodwind, explosions of military percussion and terrifying brass fanfares.

Allegro

The second movement *scherzo* comes as a short, sharp shock after the sombre weightiness of the first, and in *Testimony* Shostakovich apparently called it "a musical portrait of Stalin". Whether that's true or not, there's no denying the demonic power and frenzied violence of its relentless, unpredictable music.

A movement of initials

The third movement opens as a spectral waltz, with fleeting memories of the terrifying *scherzo* that we've just heard. It's also the first time in the work that Shostakovich uses the distinctive musical theme that he derived from his own initials – DSCH, turned into music as D–E flat–C–B – high up in the woodwind as a grotesque waltz theme. The return of the movement's opening music is interrupted by an enigmatic solo horn call, which returns twelve times in total, each time seeming to dismiss the music before it. It's recently been discovered that this memorable horn theme spells out the name Elmira (in musical notes as E–A–E–D–A, based on E La Mi Re A), referring to Elmira Nazirova, a student of Shostakovich with whom he was infatuated. Perhaps he's telling us that love is the only respite he can find from Soviet terror – it's just one of the symphony's many enigmas.

Finale

The finale opens in a darkness similar to that of the first movement, but following some meandering woodwind lines a perky violin melody emerges as if from nowhere, taking on an increasingly dark and militaristic tone as it develops. Following several restatements of Shostakovich's distinctive DSCH motif, he's eventually the winner – the triumph of the individual over Stalin's state terror, maybe? One thing's for certain, even in the closing mood of uncertain celebration: the Tenth Symphony was the first by Shostakovich that Stalin would never hear.

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