

**DAYTON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA
CLASSICAL CONNECTIONS, 2014-2015 SEASON
CLASSICAL CONNECTIONS #3**

Shostakovich: The Witness

Sunday, January 11, 2015, 3:00pm

Dmitri Shostakovich
(1906-1975)

Music for *The Gadfly*: Romance

Symphony No. 10: Discussion and Demonstrations

Dmitri Shostakovich

Symphony No. 10

Moderato

Allegro

Allegretto

Andante—Allegro

Unless you're a newcomer to the Philharmonic (and if you are, GREAT!) you know I have a thing for Shostakovich. He's not quite my favorite composer (that's Brahms), but he's very close. There's a power in his music, a poetry, a tragic tone that made it unique in the 20th century. At a time when many composers were interested in experimental techniques, Shostakovich followed his own path—writing more traditional works, with a romantic feel but a modern sound.

I can now reveal the secret of this season's Classical Connections repertoire. There's a theme that runs through all four concerts. Dmitri Shostakovich is the linchpin of that theme.

At age 30, Shostakovich faced a life-and-death crisis. For a decade he had been the top-dog of Soviet classical music, writing symphonies, ballets, and operas that were brash, dissonant, avant-garde, and wildly popular. But just a year later he unveiled a new style. The raucous, iconoclastic sound was replaced with something new: a neo-romantic synthesis of Tchaikovsky and Mahler.

That's right, Tchaikovsky and Mahler—subjects of this season's first two Classical Connections concerts. Now comes Shostakovich and epitome of his new style, the Tenth Symphony. The theme wraps up in April's program dedicated to music of Sofia Gubaidulina, the most intriguing composer of Russia's post-Shostakovich generation.

There's the secret theme of our four-concert series: Shostakovich, his predecessors, and his legacy.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "U. G. H.", located in the lower right quadrant of the page.

Mitya, Joe, and the People

[This article appeared in the 2000-2001 *Classical Connections Listener's Guide* in a slightly different form.]

You can't talk about Dmitri Dmitryevich Shostakovich without talking about Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili: Joseph Stalin.

Shostakovich burst on the Soviet music scene when his Symphony No. 1 premiered in 1926. It was only when the composer rose to accept the Leningrad crowd's thunderous ovation that the audience discovered that the author of this amazing symphony was just 19 years old. The symphony was his conservatory graduation piece. Shostakovich was immediately plugged into the Soviet Union's powerful system for promoting talented artists and performers. He was well supported, but also well watched.

As a politician and a dictator, Stalin was a genius. But he was not a cultured man. Though they feared him, most ethnic Russians looked down on Stalin's Georgian roots. As the self-styled "Great Leader and Teacher" of the Soviet Union, however, Stalin knew he had to be seen as omniscient as well as omnipotent. So he made sure that he was surrounded by the Soviet Union's best and brightest in all fields. That included the young Shostakovich.

By 1934 Shostakovich seemed unstoppable. His opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was playing to packed houses in Moscow and Leningrad, plus foreign performances in New York, London, Zurich, Stockholm and Copenhagen. On January 26, 1936 the Great Leader went to see what all the fuss was about.

He didn't like what he saw.

Two days later the front page of *Pravda* featured a vicious attack on Shostakovich titled "Muddle Instead of Music". It was signed by Stalin himself. The article upended Shostakovich's

life. He abruptly canceled the already-scheduled premiere of his Symphony No. 4, a dark, troubled work that would have been a one-way ticket to the gulag.

Shostakovich's response to the denunciation was to lie low. Forthright musical expression was not an option. But he couldn't stop composing. He had to make a living. He avoided ideologically suspect genres like opera and symphony and turned to safer things: ballet and film scores. (Stalin was a big film buff.)

By 1937, Shostakovich felt secure enough to risk another symphony. The Fifth—dark, tragic, bitterly sarcastic, and mock-heroic—seemed to invite more trouble. But the 50-minute symphony was met with a 45-minute ovation from a crowd of Leningraders that shouted “Bravo!” while tears streamed down their faces.

For the people of Leningrad, a city which bore the brunt of Stalin's purges of the 1930s, the Fifth Symphony was a bold statement of truth in a world ruled by lies. In a dictatorship of the proletariat, when the proletariat speaks, even the dictator must listen. It wasn't Stalin who rehabilitated Shostakovich. It was the people, whose response to his music couldn't be ignored.

The Second World War cemented Shostakovich's reputation. He wrote his defiant anti-fascist Symphony No. 7 (“Leningrad”) in 1941 during the Nazi siege of Leningrad. The symphony was premiered as the Nazis bombarded the besieged city and became a musical representation of Allied resistance. Shostakovich appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine wearing his Leningrad Fire Brigade helmet. He was a national hero, a symbol of anti-fascist resistance.

The Eighth Symphony followed in 1943, filled with the sounds of war but ending on a note of hope. The authorities quickly dubbed it the “Stalingrad Symphony”. Shostakovich had no comment.

His third “war symphony”, the Ninth, came right after the Allied victory in Europe. Stalin expected something monumental, along the lines of Beethoven’s Ninth—a triumphal masterpiece. Instead, Shostakovich wrote a short symphony, satirical and quirky, with an ambivalent finale. Another denunciation was inevitable.

It came in 1948, when Shostakovich was one of several prominent composers publicly attacked by Stalin’s cultural commissar Andrei Zhdanov. He was accused of “formalistic perversions and anti-democratic tendencies in music,” including “the cult of atonality, dissonance and discord” and “infatuation with confused, neurotic combinations which transform music into cacophony.”

“Formalism” meant art for art’s sake—music as a rarified, complex, intellectual pursuit—instead of “Socialist Realism”—art accessible to the masses, reflecting Soviet society’s bright and optimistic future.

Socialist Realism in music came down to three simple words: “No sad songs.” But sad songs (or at least ambiguous ones) were all Shostakovich wanted to sing.

Again, he withdrew into a shell. He turned out safe pieces—*The Song of the Forests* (lauding Stalin’s postwar reforestation scheme), *The Sun Shines on the Motherland* (the title says it all), the score to the 1949 film *The Fall of Berlin*.

There were unsafe pieces, too—the dark Fourth String Quartet, the tragic and ironic Violin Concerto No. 1, the song-cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry*. But Shostakovich withheld these works from public performance and played them only in private for his closest friends.

Then, on March 5, 1953, Joseph Stalin died. Four months later, Shostakovich began work on his Symphony No. 10, a dark, angry, defiant meditation on the tragedies of the Stalin Era. With the Kremlin deep in the post-Stalin power struggle, this symphony was dangerous. Once

again, the Soviet people rallied to Shostakovich's side. They understood that this piece was there to express everything they feared to say themselves. They embraced it with such enthusiasm that there was nothing Shostakovich's enemies could do.

Shostakovich's music saved the people. So the people saved Shostakovich.

Elmira

In 1996 I did a Classical Conversations-style program on Shostakovich *Ten* with the Milwaukee Symphony. I talked (as I will on January 11) about how the composer wrote his name into the music with the four-note figure D-E-flat-C-B. (In German, E-flat is called “Es”, pronounced like the letter S. B is called H. So D-E-flat-C-B stands for DSCH—Dmitri SHostakovich.)

I also talked (as I will on January 11) about the third movement’s mysterious five-note horn call. I described the horn call as an enigmatic, typically Mahlerian gesture. I was right.

I said it sounded like something with special meaning (it must, since we hear it 12 times!), but there’s no way to know what that it means. I was wrong.

I guessed that maybe it was a question—“Why?”—asked by Shostakovich as he reflected on everything he had suffered since his 1948 denunciation, and everything that the Soviet Union had suffered during the just-ended Stalin Era. I was wrong again.

Four years after that concert in Milwaukee, the mystery was solved in a paper by the American musicologist Nelly Kravetz. The horn call was a musical cypher for another name—Elmira. Elmira Nazirova was a young Azerbaijani pianist and composer who had studied composition with Shostakovich at the Moscow Conservatory from 1947 until his dismissal in 1948. They had met again in 1952 when Shostakovich traveled to Baku, Nazirova’s hometown.

In April 1953, shortly before he began work on the Tenth Symphony, Shostakovich, suddenly started writing letters to Nazirova. The pace of the correspondence picked up as he worked on the symphony’s second and third movements, then slowed after the piece was finished.

Shostakovich had become infatuated with Nazirova, and she became his third-movement muse. One letter told how the music of the third movement had come to him in a dream. Another letter explained how he had written the E-A-E-D-A horn call as a musical translation of her name. Still another letter quoted a melody from Tchaikovsky's opera *Eugene Onegin*—a melody set to the words “I love you.”

So in the midst of writing a deep, powerful, politically charged symphony, Shostakovich imagined an idealized connection between himself (D-E-flat-C-B) and Elmira Nazirova (E-A-E-D-A). How did this stay secret for so long? Because Nazirova never told. After emigrating to Israel, she finally shared the details with Nelly Kravetz, and the story came out.

Tip O'Neill said all politics is local. It seems that when it comes to Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony, all music is personal.

Shostakovich Timelines

- 1906** **September 25**, born in St. Petersburg to engineer Dimitri Boleslavovich Shostakovich and amateur pianist Sofia Kokoulina Shostakovich.
- 1915** Begins piano lessons.
- 1919** Enters St. Petersburg Conservatory as a piano and composition student. Writes his first orchestral piece, Scherzo for Orchestra.
- 1928** First opera, *The Nose*, a modernist setting of Gogol's satirical story.
- 1936** Denounced on the front page of *Pravda*. Withdraws his dark Symphony No. 4 in the midst of rehearsals.
- 1937** Premiere of Symphony No. 5. Strong audience response prompts Shostakovich's political rehabilitation.
- 1942** Seventh Symphony ("Leningrad") is an international sensation and publicity coup for the Allies.
- 1948** Denounced at All-Union Congress of Soviet Composers and fired from his teaching posts.
- 1953** Writes Tenth Symphony. Rehabilitated again.
- 1961** Fourth Symphony receives its premiere, after a 25-year delay
- 1975** **August 9**, dies in Moscow of complications from cancer and heart disease.
- 1906** Tsar Nicholas II announces reforms in an attempt to calm civic unrest in Russia. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. San Francisco earthquake.
- 1915** U-Boat sinks the Lusitania.
- 1919** Russo-Finnish War. Measurements of a solar eclipse confirm Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Black Sox scandal rocks baseball.
- 1928** D.H. Lawrence writes *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. George Eastman introduces color motion pictures.
- 1936** Spanish Civil War begins. King Edward VIII abdicates. Baseball Hall of Fame opens.
- 1937** Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong unite forces to fight Japanese occupation. First insulin treatments for diabetes.
- 1942** Doolittle raid on Tokyo. Battle of Midway. Irving Berlin's "White Christmas".
- 1948** Ghandi assassinated. The "Kinsey Report". Citation wins the Triple Crown. *Kiss Me, Kate*.
- 1954** Stalin dies. Brown v. Board of Education.
- 1961** "Ask not what your country can do for you..." First manned space flights. Maris hits 61.
- 1975** U.S. forces leave Vietnam. Nobel Peace Prize to Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov.