



SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No. 5

Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich was born in St.Petersburg in 1906 on 25th September . In his youth Shostakovich wrote much for the theatre, producing three ballets and two masterly operas: *The Nose* op.15 (1928) and *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* op.29 (1932). After fierce and public criticism in 1936, apparently instigated by Stalin himself, he changed direction and his output became predominately for the concert hall. Among a vast mass of orchestral, chamber and vocal music his two cycles of 15 symphonies and 15 string quartets stand supreme. Though still controversial, they are among the most frequently performed works of their century. Of the symphonies the Fifth op.47 (1937), the Eighth op.65 (1943) and the Tenth op.93 (1953) have entered the standard repertoire everywhere. The modernist Fourth op. 43 (1936), long suppressed by the Soviet authorities, is now recognised as a masterpiece, while the Seventh op.60 (1941), written during the Siege of Leningrad, became a symbol of the wartime struggle throughout the Allied world. In 1938 Shostakovich was violently criticised and humiliated at the Soviet Composers' Congress. As in 1948 he became *persona non grata*. His works were banned and he was politically and artistically isolated. In 1960, having withstood the attacks of '36 and '48, he gave in to pressure and joined the Communist Party. This capitulation caused personal misery and offended friends and colleagues. During this time he wrote, in three days, his String Quartet No.8 op.110 (1960), which he called 'an obituary for myself'. This work, which has found a wide audience, weaves quotations from his own music and scraps of other composers, Jewish music and a 19th century prison song into a powerful dramatic structure. Powerful in a different way is the Thirteenth Symphony op.113 (1962), for bass, chorus and orchestra, a campaigning work from the period of Khrushchev's Thaw, setting poems by Yevtushenko condemning anti-Semitism and injustice. Shostakovich worked closely with some of the greatest performers of his time. Evgeny Mravinsky premiered many of his orchestral works, and for the violinist David Oistrakh and the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich he wrote a pair of concertos each. His two piano concertos, more light-hearted pieces, were composed respectively for himself and for his son Maxim. In his last years Shostakovich suffered unremitting ill-health and spent long periods in hospitals and sanatoria. The music of his final period, including his last two symphonies, his late quartets, his final vocal cycles and his Viola Sonata op.147 (1975), is spare and dark, reflective of much anguish. He died in Moscow on 9th August 1975.

Throughout history, artists have thumbed their noses at authorities who were too dense to see through their parody and satire, and Shostakovich was no different. One does not need to look far beneath the surface of the Fifth to discover just what this "practical" reply actually contains. The first movement begins with a cry of despair, a tragic lament that goes on for some time before suddenly being interrupted by a goose-stepping march led by a two-note tympani theme, a motive that musicologist Ian MacDonald calls the "Stalin theme." The third movement is one of the most despairing pieces of music ever written, a memorial for Mother Russia and all those sent to the labor camps. And of the finale, Shostakovich wrote in his memoirs (smuggled out of Russia after the composer's death):

What exultation could there be? I think it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat... It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying "Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing," and you rise, shaky, and go marching off, muttering, "Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing." What kind of apotheosis is that? You have to be a complete oaf not to hear that.

The Fifth was hugely successful. The government was pleased that the rebel had knuckled under, while the Russian in the street saw the truth behind the facade. Western listeners, generally unaware of what was going on behind Stalin's mask, took the work at face value, yet were still overwhelmed by its grandeur and beauty. The symphony has become Shostakovich's most popular work, and the relatively recent revelation of its true meaning can only enhance our enjoyment of this testament to one man's struggle to express his people's anguish under a brutal tyrant.