

Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Op. 47

Dmitri Shostakovich

The biography of Dmitri Shostakovich reads like something out of a particularly nightmarish Russian novel: Dostoyevsky, perhaps, but with more ironic jokes. His gifts were unmistakable — the world has agreed that, along with Sergei Prokofiev, he was one of the Soviet Union’s greatest composers — but he spent practically his whole career falling in and out of favor with the Communist authorities and he ended up battered and paranoid in the process.

Only the most perverse novelist could have dreamed up the life that lay ahead following the success of his pert Symphony No. 1 (1924–25): how in 1930 Shostakovich’s satirical opera *The Nose* would run afoul of Soviet politicians, being denounced by the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians for its “bourgeois decadence”; how he would redeem himself through his charming Piano Concerto No. 1 in 1933; how his fortunes would crash again in 1936, when Stalin saw and loathed his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* and reduced him to nothingness, until the composer contritely offered his Fifth Symphony as “the creative reply of a Soviet artist to justified criticism” (not really Shostakovich’s words, though often attributed to him).

The drama would continue through the rest of his life. In the wake of his rehabilitation he would be awarded the Stalin Prize twice in succession, in 1940 and 1941. In 1945 his star would fall again when his Ninth Symphony struck the bureaucrats as an insufficient reflection of the glory of Russia’s victory over the Nazis. He rebounded with yet another Stalin Prize in 1949, but nonetheless squirreled away private masterpieces in his desk drawer until Soviet cultural policies began to thaw after the dictator’s death in 1953. Only in 1960 would he feel confident enough to hazard the series of searing, poignant works rich

in musical autobiography that would characterize the final years of his earthly tragedy.

Shostakovich composed his Symphony No. 5 over a three-month period in 1937, a moment when he was effecting a rebound from official disgrace. Who knows what he was really thinking when he wrote this piece? Many suggestions have been put forth — there is probably no composer about whom musicologists debate with such virulence — but in the end, Shostakovich did an excellent job of covering his tracks. One may choose to take at face value the comments he provided in an article published just before the work’s premiere:

The birth of the Fifth Symphony was preceded by a prolonged period of internal preparation. Perhaps because of this, the actual writing of the symphony took a comparatively short time (the third movement, for example, was written in three days). ... The theme of my symphony is the development of the individual. I saw man with all his sufferings as the central idea of the work, which is lyrical in mood from

IN SHORT

Born: September 25, 1906, in St. Petersburg, Russia

Died: August 9, 1975, in Moscow, USSR

Work composed: April 18 to July 20, 1937

World premiere: November 21, 1937, in the Great Hall of the Leningrad Philharmonic, Yevgeny Mravinsky, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: June 15, 1941, Dimitri Mitropoulos, conductor

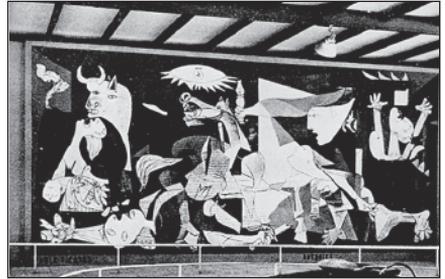
Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: January 23, 2015, Long Yu, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 50 minutes

At the Time

In 1937, as Shostakovich is completing his Fifth Symphony, the following events are taking place:

- In Spain, the city of Guernica is bombed by German and Italian forces who had joined with nationalists in the country's civil war; Picasso's mural of that name, depicting the horrors on the ground, is unveiled at the Paris World's Fair.
- In England, the coronation of King George VI takes place at London's Westminster Abbey; J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* is published.
- In France, the Duke of Windsor (who, as King Edward VIII, had abdicated the British throne the previous year) marries American Wallis Simpson.
- In Germany, the *Hindenburg* airship departs Frankfurt for the United States; upon docking in New Jersey, it catches fire and is destroyed in less than a minute, killing 35 passengers and crew, and one person on the ground.
- In China, the Sino-Japanese War breaks out when Japanese forces invade.
- In the United States, infrastructure improvements include San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge and New York's Lincoln Tunnel; President Franklin D. Roosevelt's proposal to increase the number of Supreme Court justices is defeated by Congress; Disney premieres *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the first full-length animated feature.
- In New Guinea, Amelia Earhart takes off on a Pacific leg of her around the world flight; radio contact is lost soon afterward.



From top: Picasso's *Guernica* on display at the Paris World's Fair; Golden Gate Bridge opening day; Amelia Earhart

start to finish; the finale resolves the tragedy and tension of the earlier movements on a joyous, optimistic note.

No doubt self-preservation played a role in Shostakovich's crafting this piece as he did. In fact, the officially sanctioned review of the premiere, in the publication *Izvestia*, found it in the stuff of a Socialist-Realist program. It identified the opening movement as a depiction of toiling miners and massive factory machinery subjugating nature, the scherzo as a picture of the athleticism of happy Soviet citizens, and so on. Probably Shostakovich had nothing so specific in mind. On the other hand, he didn't raise his voice in protest, since his livelihood as a composer depended to a large degree on the official acceptance of this symphony.

The Fifth has proved the most popular of Shostakovich's 15 symphonies. It provides an

excellent introduction to his sound-world, which in this case is rich in satire and grotesqueries, yet taut in its classical formality (or even "neo-classical" formality, in the second movement). The music is propelled with a driving sense of momentum throughout, nowhere more than in the energetic finale, whose pounding impact rarely fails to bring down the house.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets and E-flat clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, orchestra bells, xylophone, two harps, piano (doubling celeste), and strings.

An earlier version of this essay appeared in the program books of the Verbier Festival and Academy. © James M. Keller

In the Composer's Words

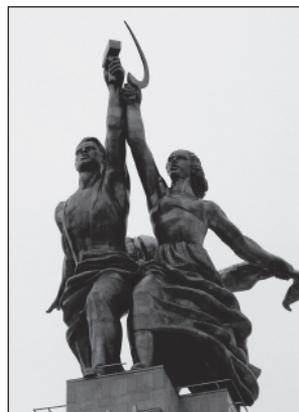
In a commentary published on January 12, 1938, in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, Shostakovich spoke of his newly premiered Fifth Symphony:

My latest work may be called a lyrical-heroic symphony. Its basic ideas are the sufferings of Man, and optimism. I wanted to convey optimism asserting itself as a world outlook through a series of tragic conflicts in a great inner, mental struggle.

During a discussion at the Leningrad section of the Composers' Union, some of my colleagues called my Fifth Symphony an autobiographical work. On the whole, I consider this a fair appraisal. In my opinion, there are biographical elements in any work of art. Every work should bear the stamp of a living person, its author, and it is poor and tedious work whose creator is invisible.

On the same day, *Sovetskoye iskusstvo* published a different article, in which the politically aware Shostakovich proclaimed the requisite cliché:

There is nothing more honorable for a composer than to create works for and with the people. The composer who forgets about this high obligation loses the right to this high calling. ... The attention to music on the part of our government and all the Soviet people instills in me the confidence that I will be able to give everything that is in my power.



Worker and Kolkhoz Woman, a sculpture by Vera Mukina, graced the Soviet Pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris, before being moved back to Moscow

The History in This Program

In the summer of 1959 the New York Philharmonic, led by then Music Director Leonard Bernstein, embarked on an epic, 10-week tour of Europe, giving almost 40 performances in 18 different countries. The scope of the tour was ambitious, but there was another reason the undertaking was particularly daring: it included a three-week stay behind the Iron Curtain, during the height of the Cold War.

The tour was sponsored by the President's Special International Program for Cultural Presentations. Between 1954 and 1959 the program, initiated with federal funding, helped send some 140 American organizations abroad in order to oppose the Soviet Union's "gigantic propaganda offensive." As the son of Ukrainian immigrants, Bernstein approached the adventure with his signature zest.

Not surprisingly, the American maestro charmed people wherever he went. Then Philharmonic President David Keiser remembered a large gathering of students waiting for Bernstein after a concert. The encounter ended with a Polish conductor giving Bernstein a piggyback ride — and vice versa. The Music Director earned even more fans during the final concert, when he played two Chopin piano solos as an off-the-cuff encore. In Russia, Bernstein's interpretation of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 was particularly well received — including by the composer himself, who embraced the American onstage after the final performance in Moscow.

Also in attendance in Moscow: Boris Pasternak. The author was living in semi-exile outside of the city after having been awarded the 1958 Nobel Prize in Literature for *Doctor Zhivago* — a major embarrassment for the Soviet government, which had banned the book. Pasternak made his first public appearance since the Nobel Prize fiasco to attend the Philharmonic's final concert in Moscow. "I've never felt so close to the aesthetic truth," he gushed to Bernstein backstage. "When I hear you, I know why you were born."

Of course, not everyone loved Lenny. Aleksandr Medvedev, a writer for *Sovetskaya Kultura*, remarked scathingly that Bernstein was more television host than artist, and the tour little more than a show. However, the reaction of Soviet audiences speaks for itself: after the final performance in Moscow the crowd stood, cheering and weeping, as the Orchestra took its bows, framed by Soviet and American flags on either side of the stage.

— The Archives

To learn more, visit the **New York Philharmonic Leonard Bernstein Digital Archives** at archives.nyphil.org.

Bernstein and Shostakovich embracing onstage at the New York Philharmonic's concert in the Great Hall of the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory, September 11, 1959

