

# Notes on the Program

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## Chamber Symphony (after String Quartet No. 8), Op. 110a

### Dmitri Shostakovich

**D**mitri Shostakovich wrote his String Quartet No. 8 (performed here in the Chamber Symphony arrangement by Rudolf Barshai) over the course of only three summer days, while visiting Dresden, Germany, to compose music for a film about that city's destruction in World War II. The devastation caused by heavy bombardment by British and American forces that set off a firestorm across much of the city was still abundantly evident a decade and a half after the fact. "[It made] a terrific impact on me," Shostakovich recalled, "the frightful and senseless destruction." He inscribed his score "In memory of the victims of fascism and war."

However, on another occasion, the composer said of the quartet that "I dedicated it to myself," alerting listeners to meaningful subtleties that might sneak past Soviet censors. In fact, the quartet is unusually rich in allusions to the composer's other works. References — some extended, some fleeting — recall Shostakovich's First and Fifth Symphonies, his E-minor Piano Trio, his First Cello Concerto, and a love aria from *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (an opera that had once earned him disgrace from Soviet officialdom), as well as a traditional prisoner's song ("Tortured by Heavy Bondage") that Russian audiences would have recognized. Although interpreting its references involves considerable speculation, it seems likely that Shostakovich included himself as one of "the victims of fascism and war," and perhaps this can be read to suggest that the Soviet leaders were victimizers just as the German ones were.

The work's first four notes constitute a musical signature. This device (which Shostakovich also employed in several other works) is easily decoded when one

realizes that some notes of the musical scale are named differently in German than in English: D and C represent the same notes in both languages, but E-flat and B-natural are respectively known in German as Es (the phonic equivalent of "S") and H. Imagining oneself in Germany — where the composer was when he wrote the piece, and where his name is transliterated as Schostakowitsch — the first four letters of "D. Schostakowitsch" could be rendered as a musical motto by the notes D-S-C-H, which English-speakers know as D-E-flat-C-B-natural.

Shostakovich had gotten to know Rudolf Barshai when he coached the founding musicians of the Borodin Quartet when they were students at the Moscow Conservatory. Barshai was the group's original violist, remaining in that chair from 1945 until 1953. After that he went on to found the Moscow

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### In Short

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

**Died:** August 9, 1975, in Moscow, USSR

**Work composed:** as String Quartet No. 8 in the summer of 1960; dedicated "In memory of the victims of fascism and war"; this composer-approved arrangement made by Rudolf Barshai (1924–2010) in 1967

**World premiere:** String Quartet No. 8, on October 2, 1960, at the Glinka Concert Hall in Leningrad, by the Beethoven Quartet; Barshai arrangement, unknown

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** these performances

**Estimated duration:** ca. 25 minutes

Chamber Orchestra in 1956 and to pursue a distinguished career as both a violist and a conductor. In 1977 he emigrated from Russia and spent the remainder of his career as a conductor, leading the Israel Chamber Orchestra in Tel Aviv (1978–81), as principal conductor of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra (1981–82), and as principal guest conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony (1982–88) and the Orchestre national de France (1985–86).

Given his dual accomplishments in chamber music and orchestral conducting,

Barshai possessed a refined talent for transcribing chamber compositions for the use of small orchestras. His transcriptions include Shostakovich's Quartets Nos. 3, 4, 8, and 10, as well as Prokofiev's piano suite *Visions fugitives*. In its original version, the Eighth Quartet is catalogued as Shostakovich's Op. 110, while Barshai's transcription for string orchestra is designated as Op. 110a.

**Instrumentation:** string orchestra

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## Listen for . . . the Signature Motif

The D-S-C-H motif (i.e., D-E-flat-C-B-natural) proves central to the musical strategy of Shostakovich's work.



At the very opening, the theme is introduced respectively by cello, viola, second violin, and first violin, transposed so that within 11 measures the notes have been intoned on all 12 semitones of the octave. Any suspicions that Shostakovich may be preparing to flirt with 12-tone processes are dispelled as the movement settles into the key of C minor. He intensifies this somber tonality by sometimes allowing the E-flat (or “S”) of his motif to drift upward to E-natural, offering a passing glimpse of major-key optimism, but that hope inevitably returns to the gloomier minor. This major-minor conflict pervades the entire quartet, though the D-S-C-H motif appears prominently only in the first, third, and fifth movements.



Shostakovich in 1960

## From the Archives

In 1865 the New York Philharmonic responded to the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln with a performance of the second movement — the funeral march — from **Beethoven's Symphony No. 3, Eroica**, along with the composer's Ninth Symphony — minus the Ode to Joy, which was deemed inappropriate for the occasion. It would be just one of the times this Orchestra, and others, would offer musical responses in times of conflict and emotional strife.

During the Cold War, for example, cultural exchange programs between American orchestras and musicians in the USSR were supported by the US government in an effort to ease tensions through music. In 1959 the Philharmonic spent three weeks in the Soviet Union (during a ten-week tour of Europe that included other stops behind the Iron Curtain, in Warsaw, Zagreb, and Belgrade), performing concerts in Moscow, Kiev, and Leningrad.

Then Music Director Leonard Bernstein led a concert in Moscow during which he spoke of the similarities between American and Russian composers, using examples from Copland, Tchaikovsky, and **Shostakovich's** Symphony No. 7. Shostakovich was in the audience at that performance, and also attended a later concert that included his Symphony No. 5, after which he came onstage to embrace Bernstein and recognize the musicians. The moment was seen by US audiences through a CBS telecast.

Other examples of how the Philharmonic and other major orchestras and musicians have responded to current events can be viewed in the New York Philharmonic Archives exhibit *Music of Conscience: The Orchestral World Responds* in the Bruno Walter Gallery on the Grand Promenade (Orchestra Level). Highlights include:

- A letter from New York Philharmonic musicians thanking Arturo Toscanini for his stance against Fascism during World War II
- Bernstein's marked score of Mahler's Symphony No. 2, *Resurrection*, used on the November 1963 televised performance following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy
- Audience letters reacting to the performance of German music — “music of the enemy” — during World War I
- Photographs from Cold War-era visits to China and the USSR by the New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony Orchestra, and The Philadelphia Orchestra

— The Archives



Shostakovich greets  
Bernstein following the 1959  
Philharmonic performance of  
his Symphony No. 5, in Moscow