

Dmitri Shostakovich

Symphony No. 4 in C minor, Opus 43

DMITRI DMITRIEVICH SHOSTAKOVICH WAS BORN IN ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA, ON SEPTEMBER 25, 1906, AND DIED IN MOSCOW ON AUGUST 9, 1975. HE BEGAN HIS SYMPHONY NO. 4 ON SEPTEMBER 13, 1935, AND COMPLETED IT ON MAY 20, 1936, BUT WITHDREW THE WORK WHILE IT WAS IN REHEARSAL FOR THE PLANNED FIRST PERFORMANCE (WITH FRITZ STIEDRY AND THE LENINGRAD PHILHARMONIC) IN DECEMBER OF THAT YEAR. HE ALLOWED PUBLICATION OF A TWO-PIANO REDUCTION IN 1946, BUT THE FIRST PERFORMANCE TOOK PLACE ONLY ON DECEMBER 30, 1961, IN MOSCOW, WITH KIRIL KONDRASHIN CONDUCTING THE MOSCOW STATE PHILHARMONIC.

SHOSTAKOVICH'S SYMPHONY NO. 4 IS SCORED FOR A MASSIVE ORCHESTRA INCLUDING TWO PICCOLOS, FOUR FLUTES, FOUR OBOES (FOURTH DOUBLING ENGLISH HORN), FOUR CLARINETS PLUS E-FLAT CLARINET AND BASS CLARINET, THREE BASSOONS AND CONTRABASSOON, EIGHT HORNS, FOUR TRUMPETS, THREE TROMBONES, TWO TUBAS, TIMPANI (TWO PLAYERS), TRIANGLE, CASTANETS, WOOD BLOCK, SNARE DRUM, CYMBALS, BASS DRUM, TAM-TAM, XYLOPHONE, GLOCKENSPIEL, CELESTA, TWO HARPS, AND STRINGS (SIXTEEN TO TWENTY FIRST VIOLINS, FOURTEEN TO EIGHTEEN SECOND VIOLINS, TWELVE TO SIXTEEN VIOLAS, TWELVE TO SIXTEEN CELLOS, AND TEN TO FOURTEEN BASSES ARE REQUESTED).

In the intensely ideological environment of Soviet music, the appearance of a new symphony by Dmitri Shostakovich was awaited with unusual anticipation. As often as not, the premiere would be followed by heated debate, controversy, and even scandal. The heroic Fifth Symphony, for example, restored Shostakovich to official grace after he had been publicly castigated by Stalin's cultural hit-men for what they saw as the gratuitous violence, lewd excesses, and inaccessible dissidence of his brilliant—and very popular—opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. The wartime Seventh Symphony (*Leningrad*), with its mocking portrayal of what seemed to be Nazi militarism, pleased the authorities even more, although the composer later suggested that the real target of his musical sarcasm had not been Hitler, but Stalin.

The oddly disengaged and fanciful Ninth Symphony, completed in 1945, put Shostakovich in the ideological doghouse again because of its failure to celebrate adequately the epic Soviet victory over Hitler in World War II. And the Thirteenth Symphony (*Babi Yar*), a setting of texts by poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, incurred the wrath of Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in late 1962 because it dared to suggest that some Soviet citizens, and not only Germans, might have been anti-Semitic and assisted the Nazis in exterminating Jews in territories occupied by the Nazis.

But even within the tortured Soviet performance history of so many of Shostakovich's symphonies, the fate of the massive Symphony No. 4 is particularly dramatic. A hugely ambitious and formidable work begun in 1935, less than three years after the completion of *Lady Macbeth*, and finished in May 1936, this symphony was, in Shostakovich's words, "a sort of credo of my work as an artist." The fate of the Fourth was drastically altered, however, by the vicious attacks on the composer and *Lady Macbeth* that appeared in the Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* on January 28, 1936, while he was in the midst of working on his new symphony. Entitled "Muddle Instead of Music," the unsigned article clearly reflected the opinion of the top party leadership, including Stalin, who had attended a performance of the opera on January 26. *Pravda* denounced the opera as "coarse, primitive, and vulgar" and its score as "a deliberately dissonant, confused stream of sound." *Lady Macbeth* was removed from the repertoire in all Soviet theaters, and Shostakovich was attacked at numerous official meetings for committing the crime of "formalism." In a matter of days, he was transformed from the golden boy of Soviet music into its whipping boy. He had good reason to fear for his very safety, and for that of his wife, Nina Vasilievna, pregnant with their first child.

That Shostakovich (not yet thirty years old) found the strength to continuing composing his Fourth Symphony under such perilous circumstances is testimony to his remarkable faith in his own talent, and his uncanny ability to concentrate. Soon after finishing the score in late spring 1936, he played it through on the piano for the visiting conductor Otto Klemperer, who reacted with great enthusiasm and announced his intention to conduct the symphony the following season. Rehearsals for the premiere by the Leningrad Philharmonic, at the time conducted by the Austrian Fritz Stiedry, began in the autumn. Even without the political pressure surrounding the premiere, the work provoked grumbling from both conductor and

musicians, given its unusual episodic form, its length (a bit over an hour), and its massive forces (particularly the six flutes and piccolos). Ten closely monitored rehearsals were held in a tense atmosphere until one day, Shostakovich was summoned to the office of the Philharmonic's director for a conference with officials from the Party and Composers Union. There he was informed that the premiere (scheduled for December 11) was to be cancelled—and that he had to make the announcement himself. And so in the newspaper *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, a notice appeared that Shostakovich had requested to withdraw his Fourth Symphony “on the grounds that it in no way corresponds to his current creative convictions and represents for him a long-outdated creative phase.” Claiming publicly that the symphony suffered from “grandiosomania,” Shostakovich put the manuscript away in a drawer and said that he planned to revise it. During the blockade of Leningrad in World War II, the original orchestral score was lost, but the parts used in the rehearsals had survived. In 1946 a four-hand piano version was reconstructed from these and published, in a limited edition.

Only during the cultural “thaw” that followed Stalin's death in 1953 did Shostakovich begin to think seriously about having his “lost” Fourth Symphony performed—and in its original version. (Significantly, Shostakovich did not revise it, as he did the score of *Lady Macbeth*, which was retitled as *Katerina Izmailova* when it returned to the stage in the USSR in 1963.) The Fourth finally received its premiere on December 30, 1961—almost exactly twenty-five years later than planned—in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory. It was first heard in the West only in 1962, at the Edinburgh Festival.

Rivaled only by the Seventh Symphony in length, instrumentation, and scale, the Fourth, in the words of Russian musicologist Marina Sabinina, “embraces the unbounded contradictions of life and sees no possibility of reconciling them.” Some critics have noted that the enormity of the Fourth may also reflect the passion for “gigantomania” that was then sweeping through the young USSR, as brigades of Soviet workers attempted overnight to transform a poor and predominantly rural society into a great industrial power, throwing up vast hydroelectric plants and industrial complexes.

Whatever their sources, the mammoth ambitions of the Fourth Symphony emerge at the outset and rarely flag throughout the ensuing hour. The orchestra is the largest employed in any of the composer's symphonies, featuring an expanded percussion section with six timpani (divided into first and second) and prominently displayed chimes, drums, xylophone, and celesta. This impressive, almost overwhelming ensemble shows its strength immediately, launching into a strutting, martial theme from the opening measures of the first movement. In this movement and throughout the symphony, Shostakovich makes extensive use of fugal and ostinato forms, just as he did in the orchestral interludes in *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. These help provide structure to what at times threatens to become a free flow of brilliant ideas, some subjected to further development and others cast violently aside. The string fugato in the first movement's Presto section is remarkable for its grotesque sonic density. Like the two movements that follow (and like the last movement of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* Symphony), the first ends with a whimper (*morendo*, which is to say, “dying away...”).

The smaller Moderato con moto (about eight minutes) sandwiched between the two much larger outer movements (each exceeding twenty-five minutes) opens with an insistent dance-like theme in the violas. The second theme, a melancholy and ironic waltz, is very closely related in mood and contour to one of Shostakovich's best-known themes, the main theme of the first movement of the Fifth Symphony.

Shostakovich saves his most interesting ideas and material for the Fourth Symphony's concluding movement, however. The Largo section, a funeral march, is clearly influenced by the music of Gustav Mahler, a composer Shostakovich deeply admired for his ability to combine melodic elements of commonplace, even vulgar origin with ideas of intense spiritual vision, spanning the extremes of human existence. This ironic little march, constructed over an obsessively repeated dissonant tritone interval (C to F-sharp) in the timpani, gradually builds to a shattering orchestral climax, a sensational emotional catharsis. An extended Allegro follows, interrupted by a montage of genre episodes that reflect Shostakovich's already extensive experience as a composer for theater and cinema: a polka-scherzo, several rather demented waltzes, a march, the tune of a boulevard song. The mood becomes pensive again in the coda, firmly in C minor, where the orchestra vibrates like an organ, accompanying weird echoes of the sad but playful funeral march tune.

In the concluding measures, the heavenly celesta plays alone against a massive pedal-point chord, sounding at first the C, E-flat, and G of C minor, but then finally reaching beyond, to A and finally by an ascending fourth to a barely audible D. The resulting effect is ethereal and ambiguous, as if (in Marina Sabinina's words) "the celesta is posing a question to eternity that is destined to remain unanswered." In a minor key and fading away into uncertainty—this is not the sort of heroic ending that Soviet cultural officials were at the time demanding.

Describing the Fourth Symphony's various sections fails to convey the cumulative power and majesty of the whole. That such an ambitious, emotionally complex, and carefully crafted work could have been produced by a composer who had not yet reached his thirtieth birthday is ample evidence of his sheer genius. Its unconventional structure and predominantly tragic mood also show that Shostakovich bravely (foolishly?) refused to simplify his style in the aftermath of the attack on *Lady Macbeth*. If the Fourth had been performed in 1936 as was originally intended, and had it been well-received, who knows what might have happened? Perhaps Shostakovich would have given us more works of a similar character. Instead, he adopted a more classical, transparent, and conservative idiom for the Fifth Symphony—complete with optimistic, triumphant finale in a major key—a choice that restored him to official favor.

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