

SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY

October 16-17-18, 2009

SHOSTAKOVICH Cello Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major, Op. 107

Allegretto

Moderato

Cadenza

Allegro con moto

INTERMISSION

SHOSTAKOVICH Symphony No. 10 in E Minor, Op. 93

Moderato

Allegro

Allegretto

Andante; Allegro

Cello Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major, Op. 107

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg

Died August 9, 1975, Moscow

Shostakovich met Mstislav Rostropovich when the cellist was still a teenager and soon became the young man's composition teacher at the Moscow Conservatory. Even after Rostropovich went on to a brilliant solo career, he remained close to the composer, and in 1959 Shostakovich wrote a concerto for his former student. The Cello Concerto No. 1—dedicated to Rostropovich and conceived with his phenomenal abilities in mind—has become one of the most frequently performed and recorded of all cello concertos, but its creation produced problems for the composer. Normally a very fast worker, Shostakovich completed the first movement in the spring of 1959, but was then unsure about the shape of the rest of the concerto. He had originally planned a concerto in the standard three movements, but as he worked that summer this plan changed, and the remainder of the piece consists of three separate movements—a slow movement, cadenza, and finale—played without pause. Another striking feature of this concerto is its exceptionally lean scoring, for the orchestra consists of a string section with only eleven additional instruments: four pairs of woodwinds, one French horn, timpani, and celesta. The French horn, however, repeats and develops themes so prominently that at moments it rivals the solo cello in importance.

Shostakovich described the opening *Allegretto* as “a scherzo-like march,” and in another original touch he dispenses altogether with the usual orchestral exposition: the solo cello itself opens the concerto with the four-note figure that will form the melodic basis of the first movement. The cello also announces the firm and driving second subject, and in the course of the active development the solo horn repeats both these ideas. This saucy, slightly sardonic movement comes to a sudden close on its opening theme.

The mood changes completely at the *Moderato*. Muted strings introduce the wistful main idea, quickly repeated by the solo horn. The cello, though, enters with different material: its simple tune is singing, almost innocent. The development grows gnarled and complex, but the horn leads to a haunting conclusion: Shostakovich has the cello play the final pages entirely in artificial harmonics and accompanies it with the softly-ringing sound of the celesta. On this lean

and icy sound the movement flows directly into the third movement.

This lengthy cadenza develops themes from the second movement and makes virtuoso demands on the cellist, who at some points must bow with the right hand and simultaneously pluck doublestopped pizzicatos with the left. There is something almost grotesque about the skirling woodwind tune that opens the athletic finale. As this movement proceeds, the opening theme of the first movement begins to emerge from the busy texture, and—pushed on by prominent horn calls—the concerto rushes to its close on the theme with which it began.

Rostropovich gave the first performance of Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 1 with the Leningrad Philharmonic on October 4, 1959. A month later, he and the composer made a visit to the United States and brought the concerto with them. Following the triumphant performance in Philadelphia, Rostropovich made a recording with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Eugene Ormandy, and Shostakovich was present to supervise the recording sessions. That recording, which preserves the excitement of that occasion, remains the finest ever made of this concerto.

Symphony No. 10 in E Minor, Op. 93

Shostakovich and other leading Russian composers were pilloried at the infamous 1948 Congress of the Union of Soviet Composers, a showcase inquisition put on by a government intent on keeping its artists on a short leash. Charged with writing music that “dwells too much on the dark and fearful aspects of reality,” Shostakovich was dismissed from his teaching positions and forced to read a humiliating confession. His apology makes painful reading: “I have always listened to criticism addressed to me and have tried my best to work harder and better. I am listening now too, and will listen in the future. I will accept critical instruction.”

And then—mentally—he went underground. The public Shostakovich supported his family by writing film scores and patriotic music, but the private composer wrote the music *he* wanted to and kept it back, waiting for a more liberal atmosphere. Such a day seemed to come with the death of Stalin on March 5, 1953, and that summer Shostakovich set to work on a new symphony. It would be his first in eight years, and he worked fast—it is hard not to think that he had been saving ideas for this symphony for some time during the period of his disgrace and apparent atonement. Completed on October 25, 1953, the Tenth Symphony was first performed by Yevgeny Mravinsky and the Leningrad Philharmonic on December 17 of that year.

While the Tenth Symphony was much admired at its Western premiere in New York the following year, it touched off a firestorm in Russia, where it was regarded (with justification) as a challenge to Soviet control of Russian artists. It is an imposing work, long (over 50 minutes), and somber. Its sonority is dark too, characterized throughout by the sound of lower strings. This symphony can also feel strangely unbalanced—huge first and third movements frame a tiny second movement, and the symphony concludes with an upbeat finale that seems to betray much of what has gone before. Half a century after its composition, the Tenth is regarded as one of the finest of Shostakovich's fifteen symphonies, yet it remains troubling and mysterious music.

The first movement of the Tenth is a *Moderato* that begins quietly—and ominously—with rising and falling patterns of three notes. These patterns, the thematic foundation of this huge (twenty-minute) movement, will reappear throughout the symphony. More animated material follows: a wistful tune for solo clarinet and a dark waltz for solo flute—Shostakovich may call for a huge orchestra, but he scores much of this symphony with a surprising delicacy. These simple figures will explode violently across the span of this movement, which rises to a series of craggy climaxes. Occasional brushes of sunlight illuminate the bleak vistas here, but skies remain generally dark. After so much mighty struggle, the movement vanishes on the most delicate strands of sound—the very ending is scored for solo piccolo, barely-audible timpani rolls, and widely-spaced pizzicato strokes.

The *Allegro* is brief—and brutal. The movement rips to life with frenzied energy, and then it does not stop, riding this frenzy until it vanishes on the whirlwind after four breathless minutes. Along the way, listeners will detect the same rising pattern of three notes that opened the first movement, but here they are spit out like bursts of machine-gun fire. Part of the legend surrounding this symphony is that this movement is a musical portrait of Stalin, but the composer's son Maxim has specifically denied this, calling those reports “rumors” and saying that “Father never said that it was a portrait of Stalin” (it seems a shame to think of wasting such terrific music on Stalin, but that rumor appears to have an unshakeable life of its own).

After the fury of the second movement, the *Allegretto* begins almost whimsically—the marking is *dolce*. The violins' opening gesture repeats the three-note phrase that underpins so much of this symphony, and very quickly we move to what is distinctive about this movement: one of the earliest appearances in Shostakovich's music of his musical signature, as high

woodwinds toot out the four-note motto D-Eb-C-B. In German notation, E-flat is S and B is H, and the resulting motto spells DSCH, the composer's initials in their German spelling: Dmitri SHostakovich. This musical calling card would appear in many subsequent Shostakovich works, most notably in his String Quartet No. 8 of 1960, and here it recurs so insistently that it seems Shostakovich's way of asserting his existence and his independence. The other distinctive feature of this movement is a mighty horn call that rings out twelve times across its span. This *Allegretto* is the most enigmatic movement of the symphony, and though one senses a private drama being played out, the composer left no clue as to its meaning. The music slides into silence with lonely woodwinds chirping out the DSCH motto one final time.

The opening of the finale returns to the mood of the very beginning, with somber low strings beneath lonely woodwind cries. When this anguished mood has thoroughly darkened our sensibilities, Shostakovich suddenly shifts gears—solo clarinet offers a taut call to order, and the violins launch into an *Allegro* that drives all before it and pushes this symphony to an almost too-conventional happy ending. What are we to make of this conclusion, apparently shaped by the requisite high spirits of Socialist Realism and full of madcap energy, the scurrying of clowns, further declarations of the DSCH motto, and an (apparently) optimistic close? It has certainly unsettled many listeners, who feel it a violation of the powerful music that preceded it. Does this “happy” ending represent artistic capitulation? Is it the required bow toward Soviet authority? Some hear it ironically, believing its gaiety forced, a cover for a darker content behind the fireworks in the foreground.

If the finale bothered Western critics, it was the first three movements that worried those in Moscow. A conference was called there in the spring of 1954 to try to come to terms with music that was so politically incorrect. Some defended Shostakovich's right to compose as he chose, while the old guard offered the expected party bromides, denouncing the Tenth Symphony as “the tragedy of a profoundly isolated individual . . . Out of his purely personal and therefore narrow world he looks in horror at that evil and the cataclysms it wreaks and feels that he is helpless in the face of them. Such a conception of the world is very far from that which is experienced by the majority of the Soviet people.” Shostakovich himself offered a spectacularly evasive comment, saying only that in this music he had wished “to portray human emotions and passions.” When asked if he would provide a program for the symphony, he said, “No, let them

listen and guess for themselves.” After three days of debate, the conference came to a compromise approval of this music, declaring—after the sort of mental gymnastics possible only by a Soviet committee—that the Tenth Symphony represented “an optimistic tragedy.”

The music remains enigmatic many years after that conference has drifted into history. How can we reconcile the icy darkness of so much of this music with the shouted-out declarations of personal independence and then resolve both of these with that almost too-buoyant finale? The exact source of the power of Shostakovich’s Tenth Symphony continues to elude our understanding, even as we are swept up in its somber strength.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger

WHY THIS PROGRAM? - Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, Symphony Archivist

Oct. 16-18, 2009:- The Shostakovich Concerto No. 1 for Cello being played at these concerts was first heard here during the season of 1985-86, when it was played by a young Karen Freer, a Young Peoples Concert winner. David Commanday conducted the SDSO. It has since been played here twice more, the most recent soloist being Mstislav Rostropovich himself, during the opening gala concert of the 1988-89 season, when Lynn Harrell (another fine cellist!) led the orchestra. Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony was premiered here under Peter Eros, during the 1974-75 season. He repeated it in the 1980-81 season. Jahja Ling led the most recent performance with the orchestra during the 1995-96 season.