



The Department of Music presents
Cornell Symphony Orchestra
Chris Younghoon Kim, conductor

Bi-Focal
Premiere

Peiying Yuan
(b. 1984)

Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, op. 47
I. *Moderato*
II. *Allegretto*
III. *Largo*
IV. *Allegro non troppo*

Dmitri Shostakovich
(1906–1975)

BAILEY HALL
CORNELL UNIVERSITY
Thursday, October 15, 2012 – 8:00 PM

Program Notes

Yuan: Bi-Focal

Bi-Focal is a short orchestral piece, with a somewhat heavy compositional agenda. Although an understanding of the inner-workings is not essential to enjoy the music for what it is, the following notes serve to elucidate some details about the piece for those who thirst to know. For some time now, I have been toying with the idea of how musical form and content may be connected internally, with the point of charging structure with function. In this piece, three musical objects take turns to be foregrounded and ultimately fulfill different trajectories of emphasis. The objects may best be recognized by their musical profile: the first, a tone cluster and swell emanating from a single pitch E; second, a hyperbolized sonic decay; and third, a repeated note figuration. Based on these three objects, the music quickly sets up a scheme of generative, progressive musical material that reaches a climactic, if otherwise, vegetative release. With each subsequent recurrence of the scheme (heard three times in total), the music increasingly reaches a vegetative, form-fulfilling state as the listener's mode of perception changes from a contentual to a schematic, such that the delayed climax in the final recurrence of the scheme serves to shed light that the three musical objects are finally presented as a single entity: the complete encapsulation of the three objects is the ultimate state of vegetation, both schematically and contentually. In parallel with the shifting modes of perception, the music exploits notions of indefinite boundaries to provide the listener with a sense of being within and amongst particular moments and events. The piece can hence be listened to both within itself and from a perceptual distance, at the same time that the music uses material in and of itself. It is in these two ways that the title *Bi-Focal* can be interpreted.

Bi-Focal is a revision and re-title of an earlier version, *Through Bifocals*, that was commissioned by conductor Darrell Ang for the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and premiered on April 9, 2011 at the Esplanade Concert Hall in Singapore. The revised version receives its first performance by the Cornell Symphony Orchestra tonight.

Peiying Yuan is a composer from Singapore. Her music often mediates between the lushness of Western harmonies and the soundscapes and heterophony of Eastern musics. Presently, her compositional interests include issues of cyclicity and exploring the relationship between form and function. In the electronic medium, she has worked primarily with digital sampling and processing.

Currently a doctoral candidate at Cornell University, she previously received degrees in music composition from the University of Missouri-Kansas City and the National University of Singapore. Her mentors include Steven Stucky, Kevin Ernste, Roberto Sierra, Chen Yi, James Mobberley, Paul Rudy, Zhou Long, Kawai Shiu, and Ho Chee Kong.

Peiying's music has been performed by the Nouvel Ensemble Moderne, Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Momenta Quartet, Argento Ensemble, newEar, Ensemble BE, Ensemble TIME, the ensemble at the Wellesley College Composers Conference, and the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory New Music Ensemble, among others.

Recognition for her music includes an ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composer Award, Libby Larsen Prize, Missouri and Kansas Music Teachers Association Commissioned Composer Award, SCI/ASCAP Commission Competition, KcEMA Newbie Commission, Christoph and Stephan Kaske Fellowship to the Wellesley College Composers Conference, first prizes at the newEar Composers' Competition, Red Note New Music Composition Competition, and others. Her upcoming projects include pieces for the California group Wild Rumpus, pianist Xak Bjerken, and the Cornell University Wind Ensemble.

– Peiying Yuan

Shostakovich: Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, op. 47

The Fifth Symphony of Dmitri Shostakovich is today among the most performed works in the symphonic repertoire, the frequency of its appearance on concert programs rivaling that of war-horses of the literature like symphonies by Brahms and Beethoven. Its stature in the canon is all the more impressive for a work composed in the twentieth century. The story behind its conception is well known to many concert goers: its conservative style assured Shostakovich's rehabilitation in the public sphere after he had been blacklisted by the Soviet regime for avant-garde elements in his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. It is also generally accepted that a dark ironic current runs through the work, undercutting the forced triumphalism of the finale and constituting Shostakovich's covert resistance to the oppressive Soviet government. As compelling as this extra-musical narrative is for the audience, the work's success is in large part due to its strength as a piece of absolute music. The symphony's debt to the Russian symphonic tradition of Tchaikovsky is clear through its overt expressiveness and rhetorical breadth. However, because of Shostakovich's rigorous development of short musical motives and his ability to create dramatic structures through these means, the symphony may owe even more to the model of Beethoven.

Nowhere is this structural and developmental inventiveness more in evidence than in the first movement of the symphony. A few easily memorable thematic elements recur throughout the movement in shifting dramatic roles that give this movement its rhetorical force. Following this process will help the listener engage more deeply with the dramatic development of the work, and simultaneously help reveal why that development is so engaging in the first place. The work opens with a wildly leaping, angular string figure broken up between the violins and lower strings. This quickly subsides, and hushed echoes of this opening figure form the background material for the next main thematic element, a ghostly theme in the violins beginning with a descending scale. These elements are developed for several minutes; the winds and brass gradually join, but the bleak atmosphere of the opening persists. Suddenly, the mood shifts. The strings began to pulsate in a seemingly innocuous repeated "long-short-short" rhythm. Over this, the violins spin out a long, Romantic melody of great breadth that serves as the first movement's second main thematic element. The violins are answered by the violas, who take up this melody in the upper limit of their range: a fragile, spectral color. As they descend, the tail end of their melody is extended by the cellos, and soon the whole orchestra becomes fixated on repetitions of this tiny melodic cell. The piano enters along with a sudden shift to pizzicato in the strings, and the mood quickly becomes menacing. Over this material, the horns growl out a demonic transformation of the descending-scale violin theme of the opening—a spine tingling effect.

Over the next several minutes, Shostakovich engineers a gradual increase in intensity and speed, the orchestra finally waking up after the long, dreamy initial presentation of material. A strong point of arrival is reached with the three trumpets playing a snarling version of the descending-scale theme in brutal parallel harmonies against a foursquare march accompaniment played by the timpani and snare drum. What the snare drum plays here is actually a sped-up version of the "long-short-short" rhythm originally presented by the strings. This rhythm and the buildup of intensity continue. At the next main point of arrival, the strings suddenly burst into a wildly sped-up, frantic, desperate version of the angular leaping figure from the very opening of the movement. Underneath this, the brass simultaneously play two separate statements of the long Romantic melody originally played by the violins, now transformed into a terrifying monstrosity. A climax is reached and the orchestra grinds to a halt, coalescing into a unified cry of despair. All that remains is the mindless "short-short-long" rhythm, which before had seemed to be an unimportant accompaniment pattern, now pounding the orchestra into submission and slowly subsiding. This dissolution is underpinned by a version of the

leaping material from the opening in the low brass, grotesquely turned on its head. Then, without warning, a sudden moment of peace arrives after this long stretch of conflict and intense emotion. The “short-short-long” rhythm is effortlessly picked up by the strings, and is no longer oppressive but rather a gentle blanket of sound over which the long Romantic melody returns, transformed into a tender duet between the flute and horn. This tender moment is short lived, however, and it quickly dissolves into music reminiscent of the gloomy opening of the movement. A brief closing section provides a haunting summation of this dramatic process of thematic development, with one final statement of the descending-scale theme played by the flute in its low register. However, this time it is inverted and instead ascends, picked up by the piccolo and solo violin, seemingly grasping at something unattainable.

The second movement scherzo provides relief from this intense thematic development and is less serious, if also quite acerbic in character. There are, however, subtle elements which tie it back to the previous movement. The opening of the scherzo for instance, a gruff theme played by the cellos and basses, is in fact a simple variation of the descending-scale theme from the first movement. This heaviness quickly gives way to lighter music with the character of a waltz with a bitter edge to it. The movement is driven by sudden changes in volume and character, but retains a simultaneously playful and ironic tone throughout.

The third movement contains some of the greatest music Shostakovich ever wrote and is the emotional core of the work. It is dominated by the strings, with the violins divided into three parts rather than the normal two for increased richness in the harmony. Lyrical passages in the strings alternate with lonely, nocturnal woodwind solos, supported only by the sparest of accompaniments in the harp. About halfway through the movement a climax of seemingly unbearable intensity is reached, after which the energy dissipates. However, another buildup ensues, culminating in a second climax that is an even greater and more extended outpouring of grief than the first. After this the orchestra breaks down, with seemingly nothing left to give. There are haunting and despairing echoes of music that earlier in the movement were so full of ardor. The last of these, played by the striking combination of harp and celesta in unison, is answered by a stunning chord in the strings, finally providing a moment of peace and security.

The first few seconds of the finale, a furious crescendo in the woodwinds and brass, jerk us mercilessly out of the peaceful atmosphere in which we were left at the end of the third movement. Beginning in the trombones and trumpets, a vigorous march ensues whose theme serves as the main material for development in the movement. The slow buildup of speed throughout this section recalls the fast music from the first movement. A climax is reached with a broad melody in the strings and a brilliant fanfare in the trumpets, bringing the first part of this three-part movement to a close. This triumph, however, is obliterated by a ferocious reappearance of the march theme over thundering timpani strokes, which in turn heralds a surprising return of the “long-short-short” rhythm from the first movement, as before an oppressive force. The second section of the movement is slow and flowing, but seems to wander through different recollections of previous material, unsure of its direction.

The re-entrance of the timpani playing a repeated note figure signals a change in mood and the arrival of the third and final section of the movement. Over this repeated pattern, the woodwinds intone a drab, solemn version of the march theme. As this restatement unfolds, the repeated notes of the timpani part gradually proliferate and seem to consume the entire thematic fabric, becoming a steady and unstoppable stream. What occurs during this process is not an increase of thematic density as in the first movement, but a slow thematic self-destruction, a reduction down to the most primitive of materials. When the final climax is reached, all the brass can muster against this stream of repeated notes are the first three notes of the march theme, played over and over again in an asi-

nine fanfare setting that many have been interpreted as a depiction of the forced joviality required for survival by life in a totalitarian society. On the symphony's final pages this thematic distillation goes one step further. All that remains are the first two notes of the march theme, pounded out mechanistically by the timpani where they are revealed to be nothing more than a stock orchestral cliché.

Because of this puzzling conclusion, at once both celebratory and tragic, this movement has proven to be the most problematic for its interpreters, both conductors and musicologists. It might be read either as intentional banality on the part of the composer, or as lack of inspiration or formal miscalculation (or even as a manifestation of the "finale problem" in symphonies of epic proportion from Beethoven through Mahler, namely that for some listeners the finales of such symphonies often seem unable to follow through on the dramatic arc they set up). If we find the conclusion of the movement unsatisfying and accept that this is a deliberate choice on the part of the composer, then we are left with an interesting conundrum. Is the independent integrity of an abstract work of art of the utmost importance? What does it mean when real world events, especially political ones, encroach upon this integrity?

– Niccolo D. Athens

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Cornell Symphony Orchestra

Violin I

Jonathan Park, *Psychology*, '14 *

Jacob Cohen, *Arts & Sciences*, '16 *

Ji Min Yang, *Chemical Engineering*, '15

Paul Hwang, *Music*, '15 *

Deanna Lin, *Biological Engineering*, '15

Eugene Cho, *Biology*, '16

Akito Theodore Nicol, *Biology*, '16

Olivia Lee, *HBHS*, '13

Karen Schaub, *Biometry & Statistics*, '15

Jonathan Dawson, *China and Asia Pacific Studies*, '15

Gilad Fefer, *Animal Science*, '15

Jason Wang, *Operations Research & Information Engineering*, '14

Crystal Han, *Biological Sciences*, '13

Benjamin Sacks, *Philosophy*, '15

Violin II

Jin Ho Eric Chang, *Chemical/Biomedical Engineering*, '14 *

Katherine Soule, *SNES/Biometry and Statistics*, '14 *

Yipu Wang, *Math/Computer Science*, '13

Sam Johnson, *Engineering*, '16

Jason Fenwick, *Materials Science*, '14

Maria Lapointe, *Arts & Sciences*, '15

Christine Ly, *Biological Sciences*, '14

Eric Gold, *Computer Science*, '14

Jenny Xia, *Biology*, '13

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Eleanore O'Neil, *Animal Sciences*, '15

Jasmine Edison, *Music/Linguistics*, '15

Christian Kinsella, *English*, '14

Vivek Gaddam, *Engineering*, '16

Viola

Steven Wang, *City and Regional Planning*, *Grad* *

Colleen Weatherwax, *Arts & Sciences*, '16 *

Ariana Munger, *Chemistry*, '15

Eva Golos, *Science of Earth Systems*, '13

John Burchfield, *Atmospheric Science*, '16

Annie Chiao, *Economics*, '13

Caleb Woo, *Engineering Physics*, '14

Timothy Lai, *Mechanical Engineering*, '16

Richard Gold, *Engineering*, '16

Hannah George, *Biology & Society*, '16

Catherine Fernan, *Policy Analysis and Management*, '16

Cello

Matt Hudson, *History/Asian Studies*, '15 *

Jisoo Kim, *Biology*, '16

Vivian Yang, *English*, '13 *

Marissa Lee, *Human Biology, Health, & Society*, '15

Joan Lee, *Nutritional Sciences*, '14

Gregory Chu, *Economics*, '16

Andie Liao, *Government/Economics*, '13

Daniel LaChapelle, *Mechanical Engineering*, '16

Kevin Wang, *Electrical & Computer Engineering*, '15

Lindsay Theodore, *Biological Sciences*, '13

Molly Beckhardt, *ILR*, '14

Ava Tan, *Electrical & Computer Engineering*, '16

Bass

Markus Salasoo, *Computer Science*, '13 *

Aaron Gittelman, *Chemical Engineering*, '16

Henry Schuth, *Arts & Sciences*, '16

Jenifer Chung, *Statistical Science*, '14

Nupur Bhatt, *Biology*, '16

Yundi Yang, *MPA, Grad*

Flute

Min Sung “Min” Song, *Environmental Engineering*, ‘16

Hee Kyun “Kate” Yun, *Chemical Engineering*, ‘16

Anne Kwok, *Physics*, ‘14

Seungeun Susan Lee, *Science of Earth Systems*, ‘14 *

Oboe

Kit Stone, *Education*, Grad *

Sophie Ruff, *Chemistry*, ‘15

E-flat Clarinet

Chris Peña, *Music*, Ithaca College

Clarinet

Ritchie Iu, *Computer Science*, ‘13

Stephanie Cho, *Law*, Grad

Bass Clarinet

Will R. Gregg, *Chemical Engineering*, ‘16

Bassoon

Marion Quien, *Chemical Engineering*, ‘16 *

Tommy Connors, *Music*, Ithaca College

Contrabassoon

Caitlin O’Brien, *Biological Engineering*, ‘15

Horn

William Voge, *Electrical and Computer Engineering*, ‘16 *

James Knight, *Arts & Sciences*, ‘16

Andrew Distler, *Arts & Sciences*, ‘15

Emma Staudacher, *Music*, Ithaca College

Alyssa Ahearn, *Music*, Ithaca College

Trumpet

Steven Miller, *Electrical and Computer Engineering*, Grad *

Jonathan Amazon, *Biophysics*, Grad

William Valley, *Mathematics*, ‘15

Trombone

Yiran Wang, *Chemistry*, ‘16 *

Varun Hegde, *Electrical Engineering*, ‘16 *

Johannes Plambeck, *Regional Science*, Grad

Tuba

Kevin Kozik, *Music*, Ithaca College

Percussion

Eric Brown, *Music*, Ithaca College

Taylor Eddinger, *Music*, Ithaca College

Keegan Sheehy, *Music*, Ithaca College

Tom Smith, *Music*, Ithaca College

Aaron Walters, *Music*, Ithaca College

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Harp

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