

## VARIOUS FACES OF SHOSTAKOVICH

### 1. *The Young Student*

At the age of 17, in 1923, Shostakovich needed a job to help him through his studies at the Conservatory in Petrograd. He was hired at a cinema to accompany silent films. In 1925, he gave up the work so he could concentrate on the last few months of his course, at the end of which, he handed in his final exercise, Symphony Number 1. The extract we will listen to is the second movement which is full of the liveliness of youth and which, in my view, could well have accompanied an action-packed film while demonstrating the technical abilities of a budding composer wanting to impress his teachers.

### 2. *The Soviet Propagandist and writer of film soundtracks*

This is the face which is not as attractive to Western audiences and, in my view, made them initially very suspicious of Shostakovich. There has, in fact, been a compulsive urge on the part of many protagonists, to explain this aspect away. The final movements of the second and third symphonies are entitled "To October" and "The First of May" respectively. I have chosen to illustrate this uncomplicated aspect of Shostakovich's output by playing the soundtrack to "The Girlfriends" which is lighter and less pompous in tone but with a similar message:

We will share your path  
Like you we will rot in jails  
Like you we will give our lives  
For the rights of the working people.

### 3. *The Quick "made to measure" composer*

Two popular works were made to order: the Festival Overture which Shostakovich describes as "just a short work, festive or celebratory in spirit" was written at request in 3 days; "Tahiti Trot" was a response to a challenge posed in 1928 to orchestrate Vincent Youman's "Tea for Two" within an hour.

### 4. *The "Out of favour" composer*

At the height of his powers when he had developed a great reputation, he suddenly fell foul of the Soviet authorities. This happened dramatically when his opera, "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk", which had been initially well received, was condemned when Stalin attended it, left early and afterwards Pravda described it as "muddle instead of



music". The opera indeed is uncompromising. Its storyline is distasteful and the music reflects the brutality of the theme. This section comes from the beginning of the second scene of Act 1 when the cook has been man-handled into a barrel and is being molested by male servants. The heroine of the opera intervenes and the last aria in the section is a polemic in favour of women, preceded by the lines:

You men certainly

Think a lot of yourselves;

do you think you're the only ones

who are strong and brave,

the only ones with any wisdom?

When his music was condemned, he withdrew his 4<sup>th</sup> symphony because it was too avant-garde and issued an apology to accompany his 5<sup>th</sup> symphony.

#### 5. The War composer

Shostakovich was heavily involved in the siege of Leningrad. He was a firefighter and consequently experienced at the front line the devastating impact of the German attempts at invasion. I have chosen to illustrate his war music, however, with the less popular 3<sup>rd</sup> movement of the 8<sup>th</sup> symphony written in 1943. Of it, Shostakovich said: "The freedom-loving Peoples will at long last throw off the yoke of Hitlerism and peace will reign throughout the world under the sunny rays of Stalin's constitution". Officialdom responded by banning the piece with the verdict (1948) "One is reminded of a piercing road drill or a musical gas-chamber". This was meant critically – but is it so far from the truth as a devastating commentary on War?

#### 6. The introvert

Shostakovich, in a few of his works, played with a short motto (DSCH), his initials. This is particularly so in the 8<sup>th</sup> quartet written in 1960 which not only has this reference but also quotes from several of his own works for reasons he leaves us to figure out.



## 7. The explicit Post-Stalinist

"Recently, I've become convinced that the word is more effective than music. Unfortunately it is so. When I combine music with words it becomes harder to misinterpret my intent." These *may* be the words of Shostakovich's memoirs and particularly can be applied to his 13<sup>th</sup> symphony written in 1962. The words are strongly critical of aspects of Russian life while remaining fiercely patriotic. All the movements are settings of Yevtushenko's poems. The first is entitled "Babi Yar" and is a reflection on the iniquity of the mass slaughter of Jews by a group of Russians. We will listen to the 4<sup>th</sup> movement: "Fears" which clearly relates to Shostakovich's life under Stalin's regime.

## 8 The Artist approaching and coming to terms with death

Shostakovich's last quartet is remarkable. The last movement is a series of quotations from the first four. I feel that there is a sense of peacefulness at the end as he his music has helped him to reconcile himself to his ultimate destiny. The short phrases and frequent pauses followed by a final, slightly enigmatic statement probably have only full meaning if one has travelled through the experience of the whole quartet but the mood is clear.