Great Russian Symphonies, Vol.5 (2012)



Dmitry Shostakovich - Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Op. 47 *1.I. Moderato 18:01 2.II. Allegretto 5:12 3.III. Largo 15:34 4.IV. Allegro non troppo 12:50*
Sergey Prokofiev - Symphony No. 1 in D major, Op. 25, "Classical"
5.I. Allegro 4:50 6.II. Larghetto 4:42 7.III. Gavotte: Non troppo allegro 1:49 8.IV. Finale: Molto vivace 4:23
Ukraine National Symphony Orchestra (1-4) Theodore Kuchar - conductor Russian Philharmonic Orchestra (5-8) Dmitry Yablonsky - conductor

In 1936, the Soviet government launched an official attack against Dmitri Shostakovich's music, calling it "vulgar, formalistic, [and] neurotic." He became an example to other Soviet composers, who rightfully interpreted these events as a broad campaign against musical modernism. This constituted a crisis, both in Shostakovich's career and in Soviet music as a whole; composers had no choice but to write simple, optimistic music that spoke directly (especially through folk idioms and patriotic programs) to the people and glorified the state.

In light of these circumstances, Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony (first performed in 1937) is a bold composition that seems to fly in the face of his critics. Although the musical language is pared down from that of his earlier symphonies, the Fifth eschews any hint of a patriotic program and, instead, dwells on undeniably somber and tragic affects -- wholly unacceptable public emotions at the time. According to the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, the government would certainly have had Shostakovich executed for writing such a work had the public ovation at the first performance not lasted 40 minutes. The official story, however, is quite different. An unknown commentator dubbed the symphony "the creative reply of a Soviet artist to justified criticism," and to the work was attached an autobiographical program focusing on the composer's metamorphosis from incomprehensible formalist to standard-bearer of the communist party. Publicly, Shostakovich accepted the official interpretation of his work; however, in the controversial collection of his memoirs (Testimony, by Solomon Volkov) he is quoted as saying: "I think it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth. The rejoicing is

forced, created under threat...you have to be a complete oaf not to hear that."

Regardless of its philosophical underpinnings, Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 is a masterpiece of the orchestral repertory, poignant and economical in its conception. There is no sign of the excess of ideas so common in the Fourth Symphony. Instead, Shostakovich deploys the orchestra sparingly and allows the entire work to grow naturally out of just a few motives. Given some of his earlier works, the Fifth is conservative in language. Throughout the work he allows the strings to be the dominant orchestral force, making soloistic use of the woodwinds and horn especially effective. The Moderato begins with a jagged, foreboding canon in the strings that forms the motivic basis for the entire movement. The impassioned mood is occasionally interrupted by a lyrical melody with string ostinato, later the subject of a duet for flute and horn.

The second movement (Allegretto) is a grotesque 3/4 dance which, at times, can't help but mock itself; the brass section is featured prominently. The following Largo, a sincere and personal outpouring of musical emotion, is said to have left the audience at the work's premiere in tears. Significantly, it was composed during an intensely creative period following the arrest and execution of one of Shostakovich's teachers.

The concluding Allegro non troppo has been the center of much debate: some critics consider it a poorly constructed concession to political pressure, while others have made note of its possible irony. While the prevailing mood is triumphant, there is some diversion to the somber and foreboding, and it is not until the end that it takes on the overtly "big-finishy" character for which it is so noted. ---Allen Schrott, allmusic.com

Prokofiev's Symphony No. 1 (1916-17) represents the composer's earliest mature effort in a genre he returned to time and again for the remainder of his career. Though the symphony received a warm reception in Russia and abroad -- and remains one of the composer's most frequently programmed works -- Prokofiev's attitude toward it remained ambiguous, vacillating between dismissive and defensive.

The First Symphony is especially intriguing in light of the view of Prokofiev as a leading figure of

the Russian avant-garde in the early decades of the twentieth century. The work's anachronistic "Classical" moniker seems particularly apt in respect to a number of its features. The symphony is in a familiar four-movement form, the two fast outer movements (Allegro and Vivace, respectively) bracketing a slow movement (Larghetto) and one inspired by a stylized dance (Gavotto); its textures are economical, its scoring appropriate to an orchestra of the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century; and it is of a decidely lighthearted, even humorous character, much in the spirit of the symphonies of Haydn. Indeed, it should be noted that the "Classical" subtitle was Prokofiev's own; scholar R.D. Darell has suggested that the composer may have chosen it partly to describe the work's character, partly because he hoped that the work would one day become a classic, and partly out of pure mischief directed at critics. (In regard to the last, Prokofiev wrote that he meant to "tease the geese.")

Though the symphony is at times sharply dissonant, it maintains a steadfastly tonal basis. Certainly, the "Classical" model is stretched in the work's harmonic language, which is marked by Prokofiev's characteristic ambiguous cadences and sudden shifts between tonal centers. Still, the work retains many of the trappings of Viennese Classicism, from the sonata-allegro form of the first movement, to the Mozartean gavotte and trio of the third, to the exuberant, witty finale. Despite the suggestion of its title, the "Classical" Symphony is not really neo-Classical along the lines of contemporaneous works by Stravinsky, but rather a work of elegant simplicity that evokes the spirit of high Viennese Classicism filtered through the more adventurous sensibilities of Prokofiev's own musical language. ---Alexander Carpenter, allmusic.com

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