

OSM

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## Beethoven and Shostakovich

Beethoven, *Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37* (1803-1803)

Premiered on April 5, 1803, with the composer as soloist.

He didn't like to share the spotlight, preferring to take care of his concerts himself, in order to include his new works in the program. Beethoven was thirty, and his fame as a virtuoso pianist, gifted with talent of improvisation, attracted all of musical Vienna.

On April 5, 1803, at the Theater an der Wien, Beethoven presents three premieres: the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, the *Second Symphony* and the *Piano Concerto in c minor*. The preparation is very demanding on the performers, the composer is still copying the orchestral parts, and short of time, he is not able to write out the complete piano score. Never mind, Beethoven is soloist himself...

His friend, Ignaz von Seyfried, who turned the pages, remembered years later :

I saw almost nothing but empty pages; at the most, on one page or another, a few Egyptian hieroglyphs wholly unintelligible to me were scribbled down to serve as clues for him; for he played nearly all the solo part from memory, since, as was so often the case, he had not had time to set it all down on paper.

Only a year later, Beethoven managed to write the piano part for his student Ferdinand Ries, the first pianist to play the concerto after the premiere. He wanted to make sure that the soloist would not play the invisible notes, even the cadenzas.

The concerto announces a turning point in his career; Beethoven is becoming aware of his growing deafness and is worried about the consequences of his life as musician and composer. He is going through a major life crisis, whose tragic impact is revealed in the *Heiligenstadt Testament* (1802), testimony of his despair and his strong will to overcome his destiny and to carry on his task : "I'm not satisfied with my works till this day. From now on, I will open a new way."

Although the shadow of Mozart is still present, the *Third Piano Concerto* takes its distance from the classic model. There are some reminiscences of the Mozart's *Piano Concerto K. 491*, in the same tonality, c minor. But the piano style is more muscular, more intense; storm and turmoil rumble, challenging instruments and performers, announcing a new vision of the concerto, in the dramatic character of the themes and an unprecedented sense of power. The adventure of the romantic concerto starts there; it opens the "heroic" period of Beethoven's work, under the

mark of c minor: *Piano Sonata op.13* (“Pathetic”), and the first sketches of the *Fifth Symphony*.

The impressive symphonic orchestral *tutti* introduces the first movement, ***Allegro con brio***; it is a full exposition, ending with the dramatic organ point before the soloist’s entrance. The principal theme, stated by the strings in unison, repeated by the piano, is heightened by the lyrical second theme, sung by the violins and clarinet. The central section follows, developing thematic elements in a dense musical fabric, until the main idea comes back again. The recapitulation starts with the orchestra in fortissimo octaves and the piano joins playing light arpeggio notes, before taking again the principal role. Then the stormy cadenza, brilliant virtuoso section, ends on pianissimo trills. In a rising crescendo, the orchestra leads up to the climax of the movement.

Inspired by the nocturne’s mood and form, this ***Largo*** is Beethoven’s most enchanting slow movement. Its three-part structure (A - B - A) is a frame of a meditative and serene melody; the piano singing as inspired by the opera lyric aria. It borrows from the opera some typical devices, such as consecutive thirds, characteristic vocal ornaments and orchestral accompaniment. In the hands of an other musician, it could sound trivial; but Beethoven gives it a sublime intensity, each note is a gem in music.

The final movement, ***Rondo- Allegro***, in the traditional refrain form, is enriched by a few elements of sonata design, even including some fugato passages in the second episode, giving it musical and emotional depth, unusual in the vivacious rondo. The piece opens in the dark c minor tonality, concluding in the bright C Major.

The piano for which Beethoven composed this concerto was very different from the modern instrument. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the pianoforte had a velvet, milder sound, less shining than the piano used today. Under firmer hands the strings are at risk to be broken, and the resonant structure was also less resistant. Composer’s imagination reached far beyond the capabilities of the pianoforte of his time. Would Beethoven have appreciated the sonority of the modern instruments and their technical richness? Pianists of our time are certain of this.

### **Shostakovich, *Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Opus 47* (1937)**

The first performance on November 21, 1937, in Leningrad, by the Leningrad Philharmonic, under the direction of Yevgeny Mravinsky.

On its Leningrad premiere, the *Fifth Symphony* gained an unprecedented triumph, acclaimed by the public, recognized by the Party’s cultural authorities. It was reported that the audience was overcome with emotion; there was “such a feeling of joy, of happiness: We finally heard the music which we wanted to hear.” The political comment said: “Shostakovich had seen the light. He had become a Soviet man.” The official tone was expressed by the critic Alexei Tolstoy:

Our audience is organically incapable of accepting decadent, gloomy, pessimistic art. Our audience responds enthusiastically to all that is bright, clear, joyous, optimistic, life-affirming.

To fully understand these statements, it would be interesting to consider their context. Shostakovich composed his *Fifth Symphony* following the controversial debate raging around his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1934). At first, the opera had been a huge success; the audiences acclaimed it enthusiastically at home and abroad. But two years later, the work was banned after Stalin saw it in 1936, and was insulted by its veiled criticism of the regime. Following his orders, political authorities denounced and censured *Lady Macbeth*. “Chaos instead of music”, titled *Pravda* (Truth), the official Communist Party newspaper. The work was derided as “formalist”, “a farrago of chaotic, nonsensical sounds”, accused of modernistic, deliberately dissonant language. Shostakovich was accused of cynicism and crude naturalism; his “decadent tastes ruined the aesthetic ideals of socialist realism, giving an unrealistic portrayal of life”. An anonymous article in *Pravda* threatened: “A game...that may end very badly”.

As young composer, he was considered as the star of Soviet music, but with the *Lady Macbeth* scandal, he found himself in the abyss of political rejection, overtly threatened by the authorities. Shostakovich was in an untenable position. Socialist realism had established the guide lines for the artists: monumental, glorious forms, celebrating the communist way of life; music inspired by folk sources, creating a bond among the people. Furthermore, it should be tuneful, accessible to the masses by its simplicity, following the classical heritage, in optimistic and hopeful spirit. Everything that was missing in *Lady Macbeth*.

This was no small matter: the composer’s life was at stake. It was a terrifying time, at the height of the greatest Stalinist purge, when persecution, labor camps, and uncertain fate threatened each individual, smashing social relations, forbidding any personal thought and feeling. Many of Shostakovich’s friends were arrested and disappeared. In such an atmosphere, how to live without fear? By immersing himself in his work, Shostakovich kept a low profile, composing, avoiding exposure to political critics. From music, he drew his strength in the face of irresistible pressures during his tormented and tragic life.

Shostakovich never intended to be a Soviet dissident; rather an anti-stalinist, trying to survive under terror. In such an atmosphere, he adapted his activities, admitted his “errors”. One should read between the lines. In an interview granted to the *New York Times* in December 1931, he declared:

There can be no music without ideology...We, as revolutionaries, have a different conception of music. Lenin himself said that “music is a mean of unifying broad masses of people”. It is not a leader of masses, perhaps, but certainly an organizing force! For music has the power of stirring specific emotions...Even the symphonic form, which appears more than any

other divorced from literary elements, can be said to have a bearing on politics... Music is no longer an end in itself but a vital weapon in the struggle. Because of this, Soviet music will probably develop along different lines from any the world has ever known.

(December 20, 1931, interview by Rose Lee)

To get over the hard times in 1936/7, Shostakovich concentrated on a new *Fifth Symphony*. He was well aware that all eyes were on him, whatever music he wrote. How to apparently yield to Party pressure, to compose works acceptable to the Socialist realist ideology, in order to mark his political rehabilitation, and, at the same time, avoid self-betrayal? The symphony is subtitled "A Soviet artist's reply to just criticism." The last two words are especially telling: are they really a "repentance" for his formalist "sins"? Or a clear response to the attack published in January 1936, in *Pravda*? Maybe it's a way to restore his position, in order to escape the threat of persecution?

The composer had no choice, but to simplify his musical style. Following traditional symphonic form, he organized the thematic material along clear lines on a base of tonal harmony. Despite these concessions, he found a way to preserve his personal imprint: irony, humor, meditation, intensity and grandeur, in the frame of the Romantic symphony. Shostakovich's *Fifth* withstood the test of time and is still his most popular work. Why so?

The symphony is conceived in the classic four-movement form using a normalized orchestra, avoiding some of the irritating excesses of his earlier works. The composer explains:

Not everything in my preceding works was of equal value. There were some failures. So I have tried in my *Fifth Symphony* to show the Soviet listener that I have taken a turn towards greater accessibility, towards greater simplicity.

A short program note mentions that the symphony is « a spiritual struggle leading to the victory". Forty-five minutes of pure music, without any programmatic suggestion, even without the slightest allusion to the folk borrowed melodies. It evolves from a dark d minor to a triumphant D Major. Could it be the reminiscence of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*?

The first movement, *Moderato*, adopts the traditional sonata form, developed on an epic theme. Desolate, at times frightening, the symphony opens in a ferocious confrontation between violins and violoncellos, joined by piano and horns playing in their deepest range, followed by trumpets announcing the funeral march. Two lyrical themes, in sharp contrast, bring moments of contemplation to the dramatic atmosphere of the movement.

In the spirit of a scherzo, the short *Allegretto* plays on the notes of sarcastic humor, still present in his *First Symphony* and the *Piano concerto*. Conceived as a set of variations on the lyric theme of the first movement, in the waltz-like rhythm, the

piece is a witty, raucous parody of romantic dance. The orchestration effects, such as the solo on piccolo clarinet, pizzicato strings, the hoarse voice of horns joined to the harsh dissonances are reminiscent of Mahler and Prokofiev.

The intense *Largo* is the central part of the work. Singing the long, wide melodies, the string sound overshadows the piece, alternating with the solo woodwinds. Harps and celesta create a contemplative ambience of unbearable sadness and sorrow. The music echoes the chants of the Russian Orthodox Requiem. For an audience that suffered under the Stalinist terror, these musical references were an expression of its deepest emotions, and many wept during the *Largo*. How not to think of the lament of the Innocent (Yurodiviy) concluding Mussorsky's *Boris Godunov* ?

The monumental finale, *Moderato*, seems to celebrate victory and the "sunny tomorrows" in the triumphant march, strong contrast to the melancholic *Largo*. Concession to political pressure? Irony or sincerity? For the western critics, the question remained open for a long time; but the soviet audiences heard it as an expression of their innermost feelings. Underneath all rattling drums and blaring trumpets, the music contains the composer's hidden subversive message, clear only for the initiated.

On the day of the premiere, Shostakovich declared:

There is nothing more honorable for a composer than to create the works for and with the people. The composer who forgets this high responsibility, loses the right to bear this name.

The booklet of the concert reportedly quotes the words of the composer:

The idea behind my symphony is the making of a man. I saw him, with all his experience, at the centre of the work, which is lyrical from beginning to end. The Finale brings an optimistic solution to the tragic parts of the first movement.

Four decades later, in the account of Volkov's *Testimony, the Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich* (1979), there is a very different sound :

It is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat, as in *Boris Godunov*. It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying: « Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing » and you rise, shaky, and go marching off, muttering "Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing." What kind of apotheosis is that? You have to be a complete oaf not to hear that.

Clear for everyone??? Only recently, the composer's words become clear, referring to the origins of the hidden musical message. In the controversial period, just a few months before starting to work on his *Fifth Symphony*, Shostakovich completed a set of *Four Pushkin Romances* (Op. 46), left unpublished for a long time. The melody of one of them, *Rebirth* (Vozrozhdeniye), serves as the initial theme of the *Finale* of the symphony. This musical self-quotation reveals its true meaning in the

words of the Pushkin's poem, missing in the symphony, but present in the vocal romance:

*An artist-barbarian, with a casual brush  
Blackens a genius's picture,  
And his lawless drawing  
Scrawls meaninglessly over it.*

*But with the years the alien markings  
Fall off like old scales;  
The work of genius appears before us  
In all its former beauty.*

*Just so do delusions fall away  
From my exhausted soul  
And within it there return visions  
Of original, pure days.*

Following this work, Shostakovich composed ten more symphonies. He went through cyclical periods of celebrations and condemnations, speaking the “politically correct” language, using musical irony and satire, inserting hidden messages. Trying to survive as best as can be. The publication of his *Memoirs* raised a number of questions concerning his personality and his music, using a double language, often with codes, wearing a mask to protect his inner truth. The most haunting question? The issue concerning the relation between the politic and artist's freedom, and his resistance to the ideological pressures out of his grasp.

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