

Dmitri Shostakovich
(1906-1975)

Symphony No.9 in E flat major, Op.70

Allegro

Moderato

Presto -

Largo -

Allegretto – Allegro

Ninth Symphonies have a certain mystique - Beethoven's Ninth, Dvorák's *New World*, Bruckner's Ninth (dedicated to God, and left unfinished on Bruckner's death). Schoenberg once said 'it seems that the ninth is a limit. He who wants to go beyond it must pass away...' Mahler tried to sidestep a Ninth by writing a 'song-symphony' *The Song of the Earth*. But then he wrote a Ninth and died shortly after.

Shostakovich broke the hex, eventually writing 15 symphonies, but his Ninth was supposed to have some of the 'Ninth' mystique as well. A Ninth Symphony had come to mean some sort of ultimate statement. Beethoven introduced words and singers into the finale of his Ninth, and, according to Wagner, had pushed western art music's most substantial form beyond its supposed limits.

A 'Ninth' was certainly what Stalin was expecting. It was late 1944; the Nazis were clearly going to be defeated; the Russians sensed victory in the Great Patriotic War, and the foremost composer of symphonies in the Soviet Union, indeed the world, would no doubt provide an appropriate work of celebration.

Shostakovich had become a celebrity during World War II. He had continued composing during the siege of Leningrad and his message broadcast from that besieged city stirred hearts; his Seventh Symphony had been spirited out of war-torn Russia on microfilm via Tehran to the USA, where Stokowski and Toscanini vied for the honour of presenting the US premiere of the work of their noble ally. Shostakovich was depicted on the front cover of *Time* magazine in his fire warden's helmet. Shostakovich then composed an Eighth Symphony (premiered in Moscow in 1943) – the second instalment in a trilogy of war symphonies? As biographer Ian MacDonald describes the run-up to the Ninth: 'Shostakovich saw out 1944 with a cluster of minor pieces...none of which took him more than a day or two to finish. His duty done, he then paused to ponder one of the most difficult and dangerous decisions of his entire career: what to make of his Ninth Symphony.'

Why dangerous? What is in this music, premiered in Leningrad under Yevgeny Mravinsky on 3 November 1945?

The first movement is in a recognisably standard sonata form, complete with traditional repeat of the exposition. We have here some of Shostakovich's most characteristic orchestral fingerprints – the insouciant opening violin melody, clucking oboe... A trombone call introduces the second theme. The piccolo quick-march will be taken over by a solo violin when this material recurs in the recapitulation. There is some turbulence after the repeat of the exposition. Perhaps if

this symphony were subtitled something like 'Leningrad' - like Symphony No.7 - this turbulence could be read as revolutionary alarm. But here it is no more unrest than one would expect in a normal classical development section.

The second movement begins with a mournful clarinet melody which gradually picks up a lilt. MacDonald describes this rhythmic characteristic as 'heel-dragging' and sees the 'two-note' pattern as depicting the heavy-footed thug Stalin. Certainly the movement builds in intensity. The lilt ends up as a glassy, ghost-like dance.

The bracing *presto* of the third movement with its thrilling Russian woodwind writing subsides into the recitative-like fourth movement. Some hear Wagnerian tones in the brass. Is there homage to Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* in the lower brass' stentorian announcements? No arabesquing violin replies, but a bassoon's chill lament, which however, eventually picks up speed to lead us into the constantly-accelerating finale. Here, as is not uncommon in last movements of Shostakovich symphonies, are effects that would not be out of place in circus music – double-tonguing trumpets and shrill piccolo, Shostakovich pleasing the audience in line with the strictest precepts of Soviet Social Realism. The movement ends neatly, if perfunctorily, as did the first.

MacDonald sees obvious references in this music, even daring caricatures of Stalin. No wonder he uses the word 'dangerous'. But he stands on one side of a debate that has wracked the music world since the 1970s, when *Testimony*, Shostakovich's purported memoirs, was published. *Testimony*'s authenticity has been questioned, but the picture it conveys of a Shostakovich aware of Soviet evil and encoding subversive messages in his music, was latched onto by western commentators relieved to find that Shostakovich wasn't a lapdog of the regime after all. The man who cancelled his Fourth Symphony and wrote a less abrasive Fifth as a 'Soviet Artist's Reply to Just Criticism' could be embraced as a secret dissident. (Of course none of these disapproving commentators had physically to face Shostakovich's reality: friends taken in the night, vanished, shot.)

But music's meaning is reduced when we look too hard for concrete meaning, as Richard Taruskin has pointed out, on the other side of the Shostakovich debate. He mocks the idea of music considered 'beatifically exempt from [the wider world's] vicissitudes'; but nevertheless urges a less-programmatic analysis.

Certainly this work is, if anything, as close to *music as music and nothing but as anything* Shostakovich wrote. There is a rising emergency in the last movement but it merely prepares a musical resolution, not dramatic climax.

But Stalin was expecting a grand celebratory symphony, and here 'there was no chorus, no soloists and no apotheosis.' How could Shostakovich at War's end have composed something this innocuous? Could it be the ultimate irony? The Shostakovich work in which the music is about nothing but itself, is therefore the most subversive? Perhaps Shostakovich was lucky to have evaded the hex of 'Ninths'.

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