

Shostakovich: Symphony no. 5 - Conductor's Note

On 28 January 1936, Pravda, the official Communist Party newspaper, published an editorial entitled 'Muddle Instead of Music'. It ran in part: 'The listener is flabbergasted from the first moment of the opera by an intentionally ungainly, muddled flood of sounds. Snatches of melody, embryos of musical phrases, drown, escape and drown once more in crashing, gnashing and screeching. Following this "music" is difficult, remembering it is impossible.' The subject was Shostakovich's internationally successful opera Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District, and the author, it now appears, was none other than Stalin himself.

Overnight the 30-year-old composer's rapidly ascending star plummeted. He came to regard himself, and to be regarded, as a doomed man, waiting with packed bags for the secret police to take him away during the night. In fact, the police never came, but the fear of official reprisals for any displeasure which his music might occasion coloured every moment of his life after that. He was never to know freedom again, except surreptitiously in some of his music.

Shostakovich withdrew the Fourth Symphony from its scheduled performance and began the composition of a fifth which had as its subtitle, 'An artist's practical answer to just criticism'. His intention was to reinstate himself, through this work, in the eyes of the Politburo. The Fifth Symphony 11 did indeed do that: the first performance was a huge success. It is anything but cheerful: the first movement is dark and foreboding, the second is ironic and brittle, and the third a deep song of sorrow. However, only the message at the end was important to the Soviets, and Shostakovich knew that. The long final movement, as they heard it, climaxed in a triumphant march, a paean of praise to the Soviet State.

The musical director conducted a faithful first performance, but for one thing. He, and a generation of conductors who followed, missing the clear indication by Shostakovich that the concluding section of the symphony was to be played at $\text{♩} = 184$, a very slow tempo, conducted it at twice the indicated speed. One edition printed in Russia changed the metronome marking to $\text{♩} = 184$, doubling the tempo because the editor assumed that Shostakovich had made an error. However, when the final march is played at the tempo indicated in the score, the joyful celebration heard at the faster tempo turns into a scream of pain, a crying out against a relentless and inhuman force. This was Shostakovich's message to the world, one that for all his fear he knew he could risk encoding into the text, confident that the eagerness of the Soviet authorities to hear what they wanted to hear would keep them from hearing the subversive message that was actually there.

Years after the first performance, the great Romanian conductor Sergiu Celibidache wrote a letter to Shostakovich from Switzerland asking the question: 'Is the tempo marking $\text{♩} = 184$ correct at the end of the Fifth Symphony?' He received a postcard from Moscow, unsigned. On it was a single word: 'Correct'.

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