Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 - 1975): Symphony no. 5 in D minor, op. 47

An artist-barbarian with a drowsy brush
Blackens over the painting of a genius,
And his lawless drawing
Scribbles over it meaninglessly.

But with the years the alien paints
Flake off like old scales;
The creation of the genius appears
Before us in its former beauty.

Thus the delusions fall away
From my worn-out soul,
And there spring up within it
Visions of original, pure days

— Alexander Pushkin

The above poem, Rebirth, was set to music by Shostakovich in December 1936 as the opening of his Four Romances on Poems by Pushkin, Op. 46. Eleven months earlier Shostakovich had, on Stalin's instructions, been savagely attacked for the supposedly pornographic and modernist excesses of his opera Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District. This famous Pravda article appeared under the title 'Muddle Instead of Music'. The various attacks that followed included an article condemning his ballet The Limpid Stream, as well as a number of more or less public threats. There were also threats transmitted privately through ‘friends’ and colleagues. The composer was all too aware that his life was in danger. We are told that at this time and for some time afterwards Shostakovich, like others at that unhappy period, took to sleeping by the door of his flat; he did not wish the children to be awakened by his being arrested in the middle of the night.

During all of 1936 and most of 1937 he was under immense pressure. On the one hand, this was a time when, in Anna Akhmatova’s words (from a poem dedicated to Shostakovich), ‘the last friends had turned away their eyes’, and many of his colleagues were behaving almost as though he did not exist. On the other hand there was a clear atmosphere of expectation on the part of the authorities, who were waiting for the composer to humiliate himself, to admit his crimes and declare himself ready to knuckle down to the business of writing only the music that others had deemed he should write. It was against this sombre background that he sat down to compose his Fifth Symphony. And it was against this background too that after his new work had been given a triumphant first performance on 21 November 1937, it was famously, although anonymously, described as ‘A Soviet artist’s practical creative reply to just criticism’.

We have moved a long way from the days where audiences (and, even more, conductors) apparently imagined that the finale of this Fifth Symphony was indeed just a vulgarly optimistic apotheosis, a craven celebration of Stalinist power. We can feel the obvious truth of Shostakovich’s own comment (reported by Solomon Volkov in Testimony) that:

> *I think it’s clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth. The rejoicing is forced, created under a threat, as in Boris Godunov. It’s as if someone were beating you with a stick end saying: ‘Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing’, and you rise,*

shakily, and go off muttering, 'Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing'. People who came to the premiere of the Fifth in the best of moods wept.

We can also now see that there might well be some truth in the report that Shostakovich himself agreed to the subtitle 'A Soviet artist's practical creative reply to just criticism'. It would have been utterly characteristic of this supremely ironic man to have done so. The symphony is indeed his awe-inspiringly creative reply to criticism, as well as being the only reply that was practically possible for him. As for those adjectives 'Soviet' and 'just', their tawdry hollowness is now as audible as 5 the similar hollowness of the march in the symphony's finale.

To anyone who already knew Shostakovich's music and who heard this work at its first performance under Yevgeny Mravinsky in Leningrad in November 1937, it must have been clear even from the opening notes that here was an artist who had entered upon a new field of experience, a new way of listening and a new way of making other people listen. After the childlike brilliance of the First Symphony, the experimental uproar of The Nose and the Second and Third Symphonies, and the intoxicated inventiveness and melodrama of Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District (not to mention the Fourth Symphony, which as yet no one had heard), here was something different again; a symphonism overpowering in the precision and unity of its form and in the simultaneous concision and profusion of its detail, utterly original in its grasp of thematic identity and contrast as well as in its manipulation of extended development and long-term harmonic structure, while at the same time (and for the first time in this composer's work) engaging with the greatest of models in our musical culture: with Mahler (with his Sixth and Ninth Symphonies especially), and, through Mahler, with Beethoven.

The first movement begins with music that is both a slow introduction and the symphony's exposition ('exposing', incidentally, the material not only of the first movement, but, as it later turns out, of the other three as well). Quite near the very opening, just after the first four bars or so of jagged dotted rhythms, there begins a rocking accompaniment in the lower strings over which the first violins enter with the symphony's first quiet suggestion of a melody, a descent from A to D, but the fourth note of the phrase is not an E natural (which our ears would expect) but an unexpected E flat. One need not be a musical analyst to feel the power and logic of the way in which the composer takes the listener on a journey from the bitter-sweet experience of a single 6 'wrong' note to the bitter-sweet experience of a whole, complex, but profoundly organized, symphonic world.

In a classical symphony, a slow introduction would typically lead to the fast music of the first movement proper. And so it happens here, except that, as the composer has already introduced us to his main themes and ideas, the fast music, towards which the slow music gradually and subtly accelerates, turns out to be already the movement's development section. Such a direct physical play with our conventional expectations of the rhetoric of symphonic architecture was something that was subsequently to become typical of the mature Shostakovich.

Incidentally, one of the most carefully organized aspects of this symphony is the matter of the measurement of pulse. The composer took extraordinary care with his metronome specifications to indicate how the inexorable acceleration towards catastrophe is to be achieved in performance. Interestingly the scherzo, in A minor and marked 'Allegretto', sets off at ♩ = 138, which is exactly the same as the speed of the climax of the first movement's development; in other words, the scherzo is taking off from the point where that development had left off. And although the quite new character of the second movement (with its almost startling likeness to a Mahlerian

Ländler) might seem a long way from the world of the first movement, as Shostakovich begins to twist and turn his delirious fragments of triple-time dance music, they begin to yield up echoes and memories of the earlier music.

For the slow movement in F sharp minor, Shostakovich takes the unusual step of dividing all the violins into three equal parts, as well as dividing the violas and cellos each into two parts. The resulting eight-part string texture (including the double basses) is what gives the string writing of this ‘Largo’ its peculiar feeling of mass and sonority. Like the thematic material of the scherzo, the material of this movement, although it grows into 7 a sonata structure of a kind, also holds our attention by suggesting a network of affinities and connections with the themes of the first movement. In particular the descending five-note phrase with its bittersweet E flat from near the beginning of the whole work reappears here, changing itself into a whole variety of new guises.

The last movement begins with that famous march ‘as though someone were beating you with a stick and saying: “Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing”.’ As in the first movement, Shostakovich takes tremendous care to construct a precise and calculated acceleration through his metronome indications. It is at the height of acceleration that the character of this music suddenly changes. On paper at this moment there is a further acceleration, but the real effect of the music is, if not actually slower, at any rate something akin to that of a translation into another dimension of time. All around us, the atmosphere is suddenly gentle, spacious and lilting; the horror and the bombast has ebbed away. And the high strings are heard rocking backwards and forwards on two notes.

This rocking figure, a gentle oscillation on two notes, is an idea that recurs again and again in Shostakovich’s work, and is usually a reference to one of the most famous moments in Russian music, a moment from one of Shostakovich's favourite works, Mussorgsky's Boris Godunov. The moment in the opera from which the figure comes is the opening of the monastery scene, where the curtain rises to reveal the chronicler-monk Pimen writing at his desk. The rocking seems to suggest the old man's hand moving across the parchment page. Pimen tells us (and here Mussorgsky sets almost exactly Pushkin's words) that his task is almost done; that in his chronicle he has set out all that has happened in his age so that future generations may read the truth of the crimes of tyrants and the sufferings of the ordinary people. Pimen regards his work as not merely history, but a vessel of judgment.

This characteristically Russian view 8 of the political and moral responsibilities of someone who writes things down, was probably first enunciated by Pushkin here in this very scene. Amongst Russian musicians and music-lovers it has become almost commonplace to describe Shostakovich's works as not merely music, but part of a continuous moral chronicle. We know from the accounts of his friends that Shostakovich himself came to see his work in this light. So the reference to Pimen in his cell can be seen as a signal that the composer is about to tell us something.

In fact, what Shostakovich tells us is two things. Firstly he begins quietly and inexorably to draw into the foreground of our attention memories of ideas from the symphony's first movement. In the second place, he begins to make comparisons between those memories and other curiously similar memories of musical images from that little Pushkin song, Rebirth, which he had written only a few months before, and whose text is quoted at the head of this note.

When the Fifth Symphony was first performed, no one had yet heard the Pushkin song. Therefore, either the composer intended his references to the song as an entirely private message to himself, or he intended them, like Pimen's chronicle, to become clear only later, to later generations. In either event, what is evident is that beneath the central section of this finale there is an implied text. The first fragmentary references are to the second of the song's three verses. This is the verse which tells how, with the passing of time, the crude daubings of the barbarian will dry and flake off like old scales. The beauty of the original painting, which had been obliterated by the barbarian, will become visible once more.

Gradually these sketchy references to the song's second verse transform themselves into the clearer features of the third verse, 'Thus the delusions fall away | From my worn-out soul', until finally, at the point just before the return of the brutal march from the beginning of the movement, the strings spread out into 9 a radiant chord of B flat major over which the harp can be heard playing almost the very music that, in the song, the piano plays to accompany the words, 'And there spring up within it | Visions of original, pure days'.

So what did the composer do with the song's first verse, with its description of the artist-barbarian crudely daubing over the painting of a genius? The opening notes of the song, setting the words 'An artist-barbarian', are in fact exactly the same as the opening notes of this finale, the main theme of the march that begins and ends it. In other words, this march is the march of the artist-barbarian himself. It takes no great imagination to realize who, in Shostakovich's mind, that great barbarian was, daubing crudely over the creations of others and obliterating the beauty in his path. If this music is played as it should be, following the composer's precise and detailed instructions, then indeed its meaning will be clear: the march will seem like a gross and hideous act of obliteration. We do not have to know the words of Pushkin's poem to be moved by the weight of the catastrophe. It will seem almost incredible that anyone could ever have been musically insensitive enough to have supposed that this music suggested the smallest capitulation to the demands of a tyrant.

And yet, if we do listen to the words as well, if we do lend our ears to the potentially secret message (to himself as much as to others) that Shostakovich in 1937 hid beneath the thunder of his music, we will find, oddly and ironically enough, that there is a quality of affirmation at the end of this symphony, albeit an affirmation of a kind utterly other than the one that was being demanded of him. For Pushkin's original words, the words to which Shostakovich had turned at a moment of extreme darkness, are words of triumph, words of trust that, like the chronicle of Pimen itself, the real work of art will survive to reemerge in time with its original qualities, its 'beauty, truth and rarity', as unsullied as on its first day. It is part of the strangeness of Shostakovich's finale that no amount of histrionic tub-thumping in D major on the part of the enraged barbarian can quite obliterate the radiance of that earlier moment, minutes before, when Shostakovich had conjured up in his own mind his private memories of a tiny Pushkin song, Rebirth, written at the very beginning of what was a new period, a new way of thinking and feeling, both in his life and in his music.

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