The enigma of Shostakovich’s Leningrad Symphony

By Verena Nees
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A memorable concert took place 70 years ago. On August 9, 1942, Dmitri Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony, the “Leningrad”, was performed in the city of Leningrad, now St. Petersburg. At the time, the city had been besieged by German troops for more than a year and its inhabitants subjected to relentless starvation. Karl Eliasberg conducted an orchestra of 15 surviving musicians from his radio orchestra and other musicians who had been recalled from the front specifically for the occasion. The Leningrad Philharmonic, then under the direction of Yevgeny Mravinsky, had been evacuated to Novosibirsk, where its performance of the Seventh Symphony had already met with great success in July.

The symphony’s musical score was transported in a special aircraft that flew around the blockade to reach the besieged city. On the very day of the concert, the German army began an offensive that subjected the city to heavy bombardments. The Soviet Army in Leningrad allowed their anti-aircraft guns to remain silent for the duration of the concert.

“People came in small groups or individually. They hurried along the well-worn routes from the most remote parts of the city, widely avoiding places where notice boards warned: ‘Use the other side of the street. Danger of artillery shelling’. So they went to the other, safer side of the road and watched as plaster and cornices crumbled, as stone fell from the walls of the houses being shelled. They walked carefully, hearing the thunder from the front, and listening for detonations that perhaps signalled the approach of shelling to the street they were hurrying along to reach the concert in the great hall of columns”. [1]

Valerian Bogdanov-Berezovsky, a composer friend of Shostakovich and a visitor to the concert, wrote two days later in the Leningradskaya Pravda newspaper that the concert was “stormy and passionate—like a ceremonial occasion, grand and solemn—as on a national holiday”. [2] It was said the music could also be heard in the trenches of the German soldiers.

Soon after its premiere, the “Leningrad” symphony began a triumphal march through concert halls all over the world and became Shostakovich’s most popular work. Apart from its reception in the cities of the Soviet Union, there were 60 performances in America alone, as well as in most major cities in eastern and western Europe. It was first performed in Berlin at the German State Opera under the direction of Sergiu Celibidache in the winter of 1946-47. It received an enthusiastic response from audiences everywhere. Music critics, musicians and conductors compared Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony to Beethoven’s “Eroica”, declaring the composer to be a genius. His Seventh was generally identified with the struggle of the Soviet people against the forces of fascism.

The Seventh Symphony was rarely performed in the postwar period. In the Soviet Union, Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin’s cultural functionary, disparaged the work for lacking optimism. Shostakovich was accused of failing to counterpose to the violence of the Nazi invaders, depicted in the first movement, the power of the Red Army. In the West during the Cold War, Shostakovich’s works and particularly the “Leningrad” symphony were denounced and abandoned because they were regarded as music commissioned by Stalin.

This view remained unchallenged until 1979, when Shostakovich’s memoirs were posthumously published by Solomon Volkov, the young Soviet music critic who had emigrated to the United States after Shostakovich’s death in 1975. [3] The memoirs were based on minutes of meetings, authorised by the composer himself and revealing Shostakovich as an opponent of Stalin and the ruling Soviet bureaucracy. The memoirs were first violently attacked in the East and West and regarded as forgeries. Although it was known that Shostakovich had come into conflict with the ruling bureaucracy in 1936 and 1948, the bureaucracy had nevertheless used him as the preferred showpiece for Soviet music during the war and also later during the Cold War.

The advent of the Gorbachev era and especially the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to a significant upturn in the reception given to Shostakovich’s music. Musicologists began to reinterpret his works, discovering in them a concealed “criticism of the political system”. The end of the Soviet Union, which was declared to mark the end of socialism and triumph of capitalism, altered the intellectual climate in all fields of cultural and socio-political life in the 1990s, and the change was reflected in contemporary musicology. This trend is exemplified by the British musicologist, Ian MacDonald, whose Shostakovich biography was published in 1990. He tried to find “coded messages of resistance to communist tyranny” in every detail of Shostakovich’s music. [4]

The memoirs of Solomon Volkov were also rehabilitated. Numerous friends, musicians and conductors who knew Shostakovich confirmed that the assertions Volkov made in his book amounted to a substantially correct account of the composer’s views. However, Solomon Volkov resisted the now widespread interpretation of Shostakovich’s attitude. Interviewed by Hamburg musicologist Gunther Wolter in New York in 1995, he said, “Nowadays, everybody says, yes, of course, we always saw Shostakovich as a kind of secret dissident, but that wasn’t the case. Placing Shostakovich in the camp of the dissidents would be just as wrong as labelling him a partisan of Stalin and the later official Soviet bureaucracy”. The truth is that Shostakovich was always on the side of the oppressed. [5]

The “Leningrad” symphony today

Since then many of Shostakovich’s works have become part of most concert repertoires. However, the Seventh, the “Leningrad” symphony, remains largely neglected and is rarely performed. Why is this so? It still poses a puzzle for critics and performers alike. The Seventh Symphony cannot be easily reconciled with the conventional interpretation, maintaining Shostakovich practised covert criticism of the “communist system” in his works. Such thinking is especially contravened by the first movement, in which clear reference is made to war and the threat of fascism. Many also criticised it for being too long and too loud, and
therefore no longer acceptable for today’s concert-goers. The symphony is said to be primarily valued as an historical document. Under the circumstances existing at the time, its simplified musical language had swept up the masses, but times have changed.

Solomon Volkov also fell into line with the changing trend. In his book, *Shostakovich and Stalin: The Extraordinary Relationship Between the Great Composer and the Brutal Dictator* (2004), he points out that the Seventh Symphony had primarily been planned as music opposing the Stalinist terror, but took on a different significance after the Nazi invasion. He claims the symphony’s great success was mainly due to the propaganda campaign waged by both Stalin and the Americans. Other composers such as Béla Bartók and Sergei Rachmaninoff had criticised it immediately after its first performances abroad. He concludes his comments as follows: “The Seventh Symphony was always a convenient target: a strange, incongruous hybrid of Mahler and Stravinsky, on first hearing too long and too emotionally open”. [6]

Krzysztof Meyer, the Polish composer who personally knew and respected Shostakovich and whose authoritative Shostakovich biography was first published in Poland in 1980, writes: “Is the Leningrad Symphony truly a masterpiece that overshadows everything else Shostakovich created? Such a claim can no longer be maintained. ... Its programmatic elements and its simple musical language make it easy to understand and thus certainly able to sweep up and impress the masses. But today one is disturbed by some of the unduly extended passages in the Leningrad Symphony”. [7]

In 1981, Krzysztof Meyer, by then a professor of music in Cologne, completed Shostakovich’s opera “The Player”, fragments of which the composer had left behind after his death. The work was premiered in Wuppertal in 1981. In the 1970s and 1980s Meyer sympathised with the Polish intelligentsia gathered around Jacek Kuron, who co-founded the Solidarity trade union. At the beginning of his biography, he accuses Shostakovich of lacking “... courage in the struggle against the hated system of power”. [8]

Bernd Feuchtnier, current director of the Heidelberg Opera, published his book, *And Art Gagged by Crude Power* in 1986. His comments on the Seventh Symphony in this work are particularly abstruse. Adopting a postmodern style, he interprets it as a general indictment of violence and writes: “Shostakovich obviously remained true to himself during the war years, writing an angry indictment of dwindling vigilance in the face of violence—whether this is Stalin’s terror or the fascist aggression which was denied during the ‘friendship’ period [i.e. the Hitler-Stalin Pact]”.

Feuchtnier, formerly cultural spokesman for the Maoist Communist League of West Germany, relates the variations theme running through the first movement—which, he claims, arouses “anxiety in us”—expressly to the Red Army as well: “The idea that this base military conduct has a specific national character cannot be derived from the music”. He accounts for the public’s enthusiastic response to the “Leningrad” symphony as follows: “At the same time, however, this demonstration of violence also has its own fascination. Quite a few listeners succumb to this fascination at first hearing. Whose upbringing was without lectures on the virtues of the military? ... Nothing more can be said about Shostakovich’s variations theme than that it embodies the stupidity that it itself celebrates. This stupidity is not national, but universally human—internationally inhuman”. [9]

It would be best to answer such smug and directly falsifying criticisms as those of Feuchtnier with the composer’s own words. He wrote the symphony’s first three movements in Leningrad in September 1941 and played them on the piano to his closest friends. Later, he recalled in his memoirs: “I wrote my Seventh Symphony, the ‘Leningrad’, very quickly. I couldn’t not write it. War was all around. I had to be with the people. I wanted to create the image of our country at war, capture it in music”. [10]

Isaak Glikman, Shostakovich’s theatre critic and director friend, states in the preface to his 1998 correspondence with Shostakovich that the composer had asked Glikman to visit him in early August 1941. On the piano he played “the magnificent, noble exposition of the Seventh Symphony and the variation theme depicting the Fascist invasion. ...We sat on, plunged in silence, broken at last by Shostakovich with these words (I have them written down): ‘I don’t know what the fate of this piece will be’. After a further pause, he added: ‘I suppose that critics with nothing better to do will damn me for copying Ravel’s Bolero. Well, let them. That is how I hear war’”. [11]

In the April 19, 1942 edition of the *Moskovsky bolshevik* newspaper, Shostakovich is quoted as saying: “I was told to leave the city. I certainly did not want to do so, especially because the whole place was infused with a fighting spirit. Women, children and old people showed extraordinary courage; I’ll never forget the heroism they showed during the bombing; I’ll never forget. The women, especially, behaved so admirably during the siege of the city”. [12]

At the beginning of the blockade the composer vainly tried on three occasions to join the Red Army, but was then deployed as a fireman at the conservatory and assigned to digging trenches. Ultimately, he and his family were evacuated to Kuibyshev at the beginning of October. He completed the symphony there in December 1941. He had no doubts about what side he was on. He supported the people’s “violence” used to defend Leningrad and the achievements of the October Revolution.

“I appeal only to people who are able to hear”

Failure to understand the Seventh Symphony is also reflected in the widely varying interpretations offered by conductors and orchestras. The first performance abroad, conducted by Arturo Toscanini, which complied with the request for a heroic war symphony, was angrily denounced by Shostakovich: “Everything is wrong”. In the postwar period, interpretations have ranged from blandly unemotional to overly melodramatic, from briskly cheerful to mournfully sad; or they have simply been too slick and superficial, for example, like some of today’s recordings from the former Soviet Union. In most cases, little remains of the Leningrad population’s fighting spirit, and just as little of the tragedy of Soviet history.

Shostakovich himself said the best interpretation was that of Yevgeny Mravinsky and the Leningrad Philharmonic. He felt it was precise and consistent with his intentions. The author of this article therefore tracked down a Yevgeny Mravinsky recording from the 1950s in order to experience the original interpretation of the “Leningrad” symphony as closely as possible.

The view that today’s listeners would no longer be able to understand this symphony is an elitist prejudice held by well-off academics and arts journalists. In reality, the symphony has lost none of its emotional force. It once again accords with the spirit of the times and the feelings of millions.

The first 27-minute long movement—with the sudden incursion of the march theme and its 11 variations, softly recited by violins and violas accompanied by a small military drum, thereafter varied by flute, oboe and bassoon, becoming increasingly dominant with the addition of more and more instruments, and finally culminating in a hurricane of wind instruments and drums to the “raging backdrop of violins whose strings are struck with the bow stem—an instrumental technique evoking the image of dancing skeletons” (Ivan Sollertinsky) [13]—such an experience can leave no audience unmoved!

The so-called invasion theme is borrowed from the opera “Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk”, and also recalls the operetta song “You’ll Find Me at Maxim’s” from Franz Lehr’s “The Merry Widow”—Hitler’s favourite operetta.

Shostakovich originally provided his four movements with the titles
“War”, “Memories”, “Homeland Steppes” and “Victory”, but then withdrew them—they complied too readily with the Stalinist bureaucracy’s requests for a heroic war symphony.

Shostakovich after all, knew the truth: Stalin had prepared the way for Hitler by decapitating the Red Army. In 1937, his close friend, Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, was accused of being a “German spy” and “Trotskyist conspirator”, and was subsequently executed. Tukhachevsky had warned Stalin of an impending attack from Hitler but Stalin ignored the warning, concluded the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939 and fed the country with illusions. Leningrad had little in the way of provisions and lacked military defences. Shostakovich remarked in his memoirs that the little that was available was due to Tukhachevsky’s foresight and command. Stalin allowed Leningrad to be ruined and Hitler delivered the final blow.

The first two themes of the first movement therefore have nothing to do with the idyll of the “peaceful construction of socialism” that Stalinist cultural officials tried to write into the music. A beautiful and yet thought-provoking melody at the beginning passes into a song-like, lyrical theme, which engage in a dialogue with one another. The violins of the second theme, however, are vibrating, sounding blurred, at least in Evgeny Mravinsky’s interpretation.

Is it a dialogue between the living people of Leningrad and the countless dead revolutionaries of October 1917, who—like Tukhachevsky—were murdered on Stalin’s orders? The tremor of the violins seems to rise from unmarked graves, admonishing and plaintive. Tukhachevsky was not only an outstanding army general who had been appointed commander at a young age by the former leader of the Red Army, Leon Trotsky. He was also a fairly competent violinist and is even said to have built violins! Shostakovich says in his Memoirs that he wanted his Seventh Symphony to stand as a monument to Tukhachevsky, the theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold and the many other victims of Stalin buried in unknown places.

At the end of the war inferno of the first movement, the reprise enters with an adagio. Oboe and bassoon lament the victims of the battle, but the violins draw on the opening theme and try to resume the march theme—but are again warned of the imminent peril by the quietly vibrating strings, the voices from the graves. A soft drum beat promptly sounds the march theme, emerging from the distance and bringing the movement to an end.

The second movement is a scherzo with an unusual structure, elements of dance, and a thought-provoking close. It is permeated by changing moods of humour, joyful dance and grief.

Shostakovich described this movement with the words: “... a very tender, lyrical intermezzo. It contains no programme and no concrete pictures as does the preceding movement. It has a little bit of humour (I cannot do without it!). Shakespeare knew best of all about the value of humour in tragedy, and he well understood that you can’t constantly hold the audience in suspense”. [15] The keys switch between major and minor, and are interspersed with the trembling sounds of oboes and violins that subside into a quiet dance episode. Leningrad’s population is felt to live in an “atmosphere of held breath” [16], having been subjected to a roller-coaster alternating between hope and despair.

A shiver runs down one’s spine when the third movement gets underway. It begins as cumbersomely and gloomily as a funeral, followed by mournful flutes and string cantilenas (songs) expressing infinite sorrow for the suffering of the population. But this turns into anger and militancy, conveyed by the sudden major of loud horns, a waltz rhythm and resumption of the march theme. Sigrid Neef, a musicologist and playwright from the former Stalinist German Democratic Republic, observes here an “amazingly fine differentiation between an almost petrified grief and a free and unhindered outpouring of pain”. [17]

The final movement, which was supposed to convey confidence in the victory of the Red Army, indeed develops into a kind of victory march. But the march has an ironically alienated quality and suddenly slides from bright major pitches into gloomy minor pitches to clear the way for plaintive nuances undermining the jubilation. The engagement of the full orchestra at the end increases the sense of torment. Grief is made to resonate. The fate of the Soviet Union will not only be decided by the victory of the Red Army.

The Red Army was able to defeat Hitler despite Stalin’s treachery only because of the Soviet working class’s readiness to fight. However, a collapse of the Stalin regime following the catastrophic war and a renewal of the workers’ state—which not only Shostakovich had hoped for—did not take place.

After the war, Stalin exploited the victory to consolidate his oppressive apparatus. He continued his persecution of artists such as Shostakovich, who was condemned as a formalist at a Composers Union conference in 1948 and banned from performing many of his works.

“Composing the Seventh, I began to return to life ...”

Critics of the Seventh Symphony like to refer to the fact that Shostakovich had already planned the work before the fascist attack. The Leningrad Philharmonic had indeed announced the inclusion of Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony in its 1941-42 season. He himself also stressed in the memoirs that it was not a mere echo of Hitler’s aggression; it was his “requiem” for the many victims of the Stalinist terror.

If this strikes one as contradictory, it is only apparently so. Shostakovich’s opposition to the Stalinist regime had nothing to do with anti-communism. He intuitively rejected the idea of a return to capitalist relations, unlike dissidents such as Solzhenitsyn or Sakharov. The outbreak of the war against the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941—he had just planned to go to a football match with his friend, Isaak Glikman—had given a new meaning to the general idea for the Seventh Symphony already conceived, and spurred him to get it down on paper as soon as possible.

“Even before the war, in Leningrad there probably wasn’t a single family who hadn’t lost someone. … Everyone had someone to cry over, but you had to cry silently, under your blanket, so that no one would see. Everyone feared everyone else. … I had to write about it, I felt that it was my responsibility, my duty. I had to write a requiem for all those who died, who had suffered. I had to describe the horrible extermination machine and express protest against it. But how could I do it? I was constantly under suspicion then. … And then the war came and the sorrow became a common one”. And he went on to stress: “I came back to life after the Seventh [symphony]. … It was still hard, but you could breathe”.[18]

What most biographers and interpreters of his work fail or refuse to understand is Shostakovich’s profound solidarity with the Soviet workers. Born in 1906 to an enlightened Leningrad family with revolutionary Polish ancestry, he was one of the many Soviet artists inspired by the October Revolution. At the age of 11, during the February Revolution of 1917, his first political impressions began to form when a Cossack drew his sword and cut down a boy before his eyes. “I will never forget him”, he says in the memoirs. The piano piece commemorating the incident—“Funeral March in Memory of the Victims of the Revolution”—is one of his earliest compositions. He had only recently begun learning to play the piano.

In April 1917, he and fellow students gathered at the Finland Station, where Lenin arrived from exile—without any of them being fully aware of Lenin’s role in the coming events, of course. Aged 16, he was admitted into the Conservatory by Alexander Glazunov. When asked to submit a final thesis prior to graduation, he wrote his First Symphony, whose sparkling revolutionary optimism ensured it an immediate and resounding
success.

The legendary theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold, who was to fall victim to Stalin’s purges, later drew him to his Moscow Theatre, where the artistic avant-garde met following the end of the Civil War. Here Shostakovich collaborated with Meyerhold to produce his opera, “The Nose” (based on a story by Gogol), set to music Mayakovsky’s “The Bed Bug”, and eventually wrote his opera, “Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk”. This opera was successfully performed more than 20 times before it was suddenly condemned in a 1936 Pravda article dictated by Stalin entitled “Muddle Instead of Music”. The article also denounced the opera’s composer as a “public enemy”. Shostakovich was banned from staging any performances for almost two years, and spent every day under threat of arrest.

Unlike many other composers, such as Prokofiev, Shostakovich declined to emigrate to the West, trying instead to find a way to continue composing in the Soviet Union without capitulating to Stalin. He took the view that composers should not stand aloof from the population and wanted to write for a wide audience. He begins his memoirs with the words: “I have not spent my life as an idle onlooker, but as a proletarian”. During the Civil War years, he had to earn money for his family’s subsistence by providing the piano accompaniment to films in cinemas. Until the end of his life, Shostakovich had an almost physical aversion to privileged intellectuals who curried favour with Stalin for the sake of their own advancement. His distrust of the Western countries sprang from the same antipathy. In discussion with Solomon Volkov, he speaks with biting sarcasm about Western journalists who ask the stupidest questions and are paid for doing so. He reserves especially sharp criticism for left-wing intellectuals from the West who came to Moscow as “friends of the Soviet Union” and wrote articles mitigating the barbarity of the Moscow trials. These included Leon Feuchtwanger, André Malraux, George Bernard Shaw and “the even more famous humanist, Romain Rolland”, who made him “nauseous”.

Before composing the Seventh Symphony, Shostakovich had grappled with the orchestration of Modest Mussorgsky’s opera, “Boris Godunov”. It is interesting to observe in the Memoirs the parallels he draws between the theme of this opera and the Stalinist regime: “I was also caught up in Mussorgsky’s certainty that the contradictions between the rulers and the oppressed people were insoluble, which meant that the people had to suffer cruelly without end, and become ever more embittered. The government, in its attempt to establish itself, was decaying, putrefying. Chaos and state collapse lay ahead. … I expected it to happen in 1939.”

Later he says he agreed with the ethical basis of “Boris Godunov”. “The author uncompromisingly decries the amorality of an anti-people government, which is inevitably criminal, even inexorably criminal. It is rotten from within and it is particularly revolting that it hides under the name of the people”.[19]

Shostakovich was no politician, and although he may have admired the attitude of Trotskyists like the art critic Alexander Voronsky, he failed to understand the importance of the political and theoretical disputes between the Left Opposition and the Stalinist bureaucracy. At one point in his memoirs, he declares that these conflicts were rather scholastic in nature and Voronsky would have been wiser to concede to Stalin that his vision of building socialism was correct; perhaps he then would not have been murdered, and might have been able to continue helping other artists. [20]

Nevertheless, Shostakovich was artistically aware of two basic positions of the Left Opposition, even though he did not fully grasp their significance. First, the Stalinist bureaucracy could not be reformed because it was “rotten from within”; second, the fact that Stalin committed his crimes in the name of socialism had the gravest consequences and was “particularly revolting”. This is why Shostakovich had such an affinity for sympathizers of Leon Trotsky like Meyerhold and Tukhachevsky.

The “Leningrad” symphony is an expression of Shostakovich’s solidarity with the Soviet Union’s revolutionary traditions that continued to inspire workers in 1941, despite the brutality of Stalin’s rule. They did not hesitate to defend what remained of the achievements of the October Revolution. Some 50 years later, the Stalinist bureaucracy perpetrated its final crime and disbanded the Soviet Union in 1991.

Shostakovich transformed the history of the Soviet Union, with all its contradictions and tragedy, into a musical masterpiece. He saw the mobilisation of workers in defence of the Soviet Union as an opportunity for a cultural renewal of the workers’ state and the overthrow of the reactionary Stalinist regime. Herein lies the enigma of his Seventh Symphony.

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