

# A concert of twentieth century masterworks by Britten, Bartók and Shostakovich

By Fred Mazelis  
11 April 2014

There may well still be listeners of Western classical music who shy away from anything later than the works of Johannes Brahms, the German romantic genius who died in 1897. A recent concert of the New York Philharmonic at Avery Fisher Hall should have gone a long way toward curing any halfway objective listener of a prejudice against music composed in the twentieth century (and the middle of the century at that!).

The April 2 program, with the youthful Spanish conductor Pablo Heras-Casado (born 1977) on the podium in his Philharmonic debut, proceeded in a different pattern than the usual one. Most often—and somewhat mechanically—concert programs juxtapose major works of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with an occasional nod to contemporary composers in the form of a shorter opening work. The program conducted by Heras-Casado, in contrast, consisted of three major works all composed in the space of less than a decade in the mid-twentieth century.

First came Benjamin Britten's "Four Sea Interludes" from his opera *Peter Grimes*, premiered in 1945. That was followed by the Third Piano Concerto of Bela Bartók, also composed in 1945, and after the intermission, the orchestra performed Dmitri Shostakovich's thunderous Tenth Symphony, completed in late 1953.

All three works on the program were received with tremendous enthusiasm by a packed auditorium, and Heras-Casado was called back several times. The conductor represents an exciting new generation of musicians.

Britten was a young man in his early 30s when he completed *Peter Grimes*, and it became his greatest success to that point. Bartók, on the other hand, was at the end of his life, dying of leukemia, as he labored to complete his Third Piano Concerto. The orchestration of the last 17 measures of the work was carried out by his friend and student Tibor Serly after Bartók's death on September 26, 1945. Shostakovich was 47 when the Tenth Symphony premiered, with such famous works as the Fifth and Seventh ("Leningrad") Symphonies already to his credit. His career was far from over, however. In the following 22 years he completed another five symphonies, 10 of his 15 string quartets and much else besides.

Despite the differences in the position these works occupied in the lives and careers of their creators, all three share certain obvious features. Through the particular prism of music, each reflects something of—and responds to—the great events and *zeitgeist* of the period. None of these works could be mistaken for

a nineteenth century composition. In their rhythms, orchestration and tone color, melodies that generally eschew those of an earlier era, and also in their sometimes dissonant harmonies, the compositions on the April 2 program speak to a newer period of music history and of history in general.

At the same time, and quite crucially, these works, while distinctly modern, refuse to follow the decisive break with tonality pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg and his Second Viennese School in the early decades of the century. Britten, Bartók and Shostakovich all sought to develop and to transform the earlier tradition, but not to ignore it or ostentatiously reject it, to proclaim a new system or musical language.

Britten's *Peter Grimes* (based on a poem by George Crabbe published in 1810) is presented in seven scenes, punctuated by six interludes, powerfully evocative of the sea, in its own way as important a character in the opera as Grimes himself. The composer extracted four sections—Dawn, Sunday Morning, Moonlight and Storm—and these "Four Sea Interludes" were premiered only a week after the opera itself, in June 1945.

The Philharmonic's performance did full justice to this magnificent composition, whose original orchestration and haunting melodies are characteristic of Britten's mature work. The use of percussion, including timpani, xylophone, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals and bells, is particularly striking. The moods of the interludes alternate effectively, with the eerie Dawn leading to Sunday Morning, with its spiky tune characterized by wide intervals, followed by Moonlight, with its somber and lyrical temper, and Storm, in which anger and aggression predominate, in line with the climax of the opera itself.

Bela Bartók, a bitter opponent of fascism, fled the Nazi takeover of Central Europe in 1940, and lived out his final five years of life in New York, where he was plagued by financial difficulties as well as homesickness and an inability to find a place in American life. (Only 10 people attended his funeral.) Nevertheless, even as his health worsened, Bartók wound up composing a number of his most important works, including the Concerto for Orchestra and the Third Piano Concerto. This last piece by the Hungarian composer is considered more accessible than his first two works for piano and orchestra. It has certainly achieved fame and an important place in the orchestral repertoire.

Soloist Peter Serkin, himself the son and grandson of towering musical figures (pianist Rudolf Serkin and conductor Adolf Busch) who were forced to flee Europe in the 1930s, gave a

wonderful account of the Bartók work, especially the interesting second movement, which is based on a similar movement in Beethoven's late quartet in A Minor, the movement in which he sings a hymn of praise after having recovered from a serious illness. It is possible that Bartók's own illness at this time moved him to use Beethoven's structure.

As impressive as the first half of the Philharmonic program was, the Shostakovich symphony made the greatest impression. More than 50 minutes in length, this work was completed about six months after the death of Joseph Stalin in March 1953.

The Tenth Symphony bears definite comparison to Shostakovich's famous Fifth and Seventh Symphonies. It has a grand and monumental character, in contrast to the more modest, at times openly satiric, Sixth and Ninth Symphonies. The Tenth, without any programmatic meaning attached to it, nevertheless expresses very powerful emotions and evokes the tragic and world-changing events of the previous decades through which Shostakovich had passed as a creative artist and a citizen of the Soviet Union.

Constructed in the typical four movements, the work utilizes a large orchestra of nearly 100 instrumentalists. The first movement is noteworthy for its "curve" of development, reaching a powerful climax before a gradual resolution. Noteworthy is the role of the winds, especially the clarinet, one of the composer's favorite instruments, and one that he often used in connection with Jewish folk themes, as a way of expressing his lifelong hatred of anti-Semitism.

The second movement is one of the composer's grotesque scherzos, its syncopation, driving rhythms and pulsating anger making a powerful impact. This is followed by another scherzo-type movement, but now far more relaxed. This movement makes use of the DSCH motto (for Dmitri Shostakovich, the notes spelling out D/E-flat/C/B, in the German equivalent), which Shostakovich often turned to, without spelling out any further programmatic or extramusical meaning. The finale moves toward a thrilling climax.

The Tenth Symphony, following the death of Stalin, undoubtedly coincided with hopeful whispers among Shostakovich's friends and colleagues of a relaxation in the political and cultural climate in the USSR. The work was Shostakovich's first large-scale symphonic composition since he had been denounced for "formalism" in 1948, the second major attack on the composer in the years of the cruelest Stalinist repression.

Although the bureaucratic mediocrities in the official Composers Union attempted, in the style of the past, to criticize the new work for its alleged pessimism, this time they were rebuffed. The 1950s went on to witness the de-Stalinization of the Khrushchev "thaw."

The Britten-Bartók-Shostakovich program as a whole was not just great music. It should also be seen as music by composers who shared certain aesthetic concerns, at least in the broadest terms.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the doctrines of atonality and the twelve-tone school dogmatically seized hold of classical composition, with negative consequences that continue to this day. This had its source fundamentally in an atmosphere of

discouragement and demoralization that found expression in a turn away from the wider audience.

In the period in which the works on the Philharmonic program were written, however, most of the leading composers proceeded quite differently, and their musical conceptions were bound up with definite social and political views that emerged out of the struggles of the preceding decades.

Britten, for example, was, during his 20s and 30s, sympathetic to socialism. He was the composer of the War Requiem and other antiwar-themed compositions.

Bartók, the only one of these three major figures born prior to the twentieth century (in 1881), began to collect folk melodies as a young composer, first in Hungary and then elsewhere. The composer applied himself with enormous determination to that work. He understood the importance of this popular music, but did not simply equate it with his own. Instead it found its way into his own compositions, transformed into his own distinctive and powerful language.

Bartók was also a passionate anti-fascist whose career suffered greatly during the 1930s because of his opposition to the pro-Hitler regime of Admiral Horthy in Hungary. The composer was also an atheist, who later became a Unitarian.

As for Shostakovich, he was 11 years old at the time of the October Revolution in Russia, and his entire life and career were shaped by the great hopes and the tragic decay of the revolution under Stalinism. This degeneration had an enormous impact on Shostakovich, but he continued to compose music, for example the famous "Babi Yar" Symphony No. 13 from 1962, that paid tribute to those who suffered under fascism and reaction.

All of these composers, in other words, held on to ideals that reflected the continued influence of Enlightenment and other progressive notions about humanity and about art itself. The composers' general confidence in mankind and a concern with its fate, despite the tragedies and traumas of the times, found expression in the accessibility of their compositions and their insistence on reaching a broader audience. Each was a highly private person, not politically active, and at times plagued by fears and uncertainties, but none of them shied away from the world and the general circumstances of life. That helps explain why their music, and so much else written in the stormy first half of the twentieth century, resonates so powerfully generations later.

To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>