

# SHOSTAKOVICH

## Symphony No. 4 in C Minor

Czecho-Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra  
(Bratislava)  
Ladislav Slovák



## **Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 - 1975)**

### **Symphony No. 4 in C Minor, Op. 43**

Dmitri Shostakovich was born in St. Petersburg in 1906, the son of an engineer. He had his first piano lessons from his mother when he was nine and showed such musical precocity that he was able at the age of thirteen to enter the Petrograd Conservatory, where he had piano lessons from Leonid Nikolayev and studied composition with the son-in-law of Rimsky-Korsakov, Maximilian Steinberg. He continued his studies through the difficult years of the civil war, positively encouraged by Glazunov, the director of the Conservatory, and helping to support his family, particularly after the death of his father in 1922, by working as a cinema pianist, in spite of his own indifferent health, weakened by the privations of the time. He completed his course as a pianist in 1923 and graduated in composition in 1925. His graduation work, the First Symphony, was performed in Leningrad in May 1926 and won considerable success, followed by performances in the years immediately following in Berlin and in Philadelphia. As a pianist he was proficient enough to win an honourable mention at the International Chopin Competition in Warsaw.

Shostakovich in his early career was closely involved with the theatre, and in particular with the Leningrad Working Youth Theatre, in musical collaboration in Meyerhold's Moscow production of Mayakovsky's *The Flea* and in film music, notably *New Babylon*. His opera *The Nose*, based on Gogol, was completed in 1928 and given its first concert performance in Leningrad in June 1929, when it provoked considerable hostility from the vociferous and increasingly powerful proponents of the cult of the Proletarian in music and the arts. The controversy aroused was a foretaste of difficulties to come. His ballet *The Golden Age* was staged without success in Leningrad in October 1930. Orchestral compositions of these years included a second and third symphony, each a tactful answer to politically motivated criticism. The first of these, *Tot October*, was written in response to a commission from the state authorities

and was intended to mark the tenth anniversary of the Revolution. The Third Symphony, completed in 1929, marked another celebration of the régime and was subtitled *The First of May*.

In 1934 Shostakovich won acclaim for his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, based on a novella by the 19th century Russian writer Nikolay Leskov, and performed in Leningrad and shortly afterwards, under the title *Katerina Ismailova*, in Moscow. Leskov's story deals with a bourgeois crime, the murder of her merchant husband by the heroine of the title, and the opera seemed at first thoroughly acceptable in political as well as musical terms. Its condemnation in *Pravda* in January 1936, apparently at the direct instigation of Stalin, was a significant and dangerous reverse, leading to the withdrawal from rehearsal that year of his Fourth Symphony and the composition the following year of a Fifth Symphony, described, in terms to which Shostakovich had no overt objection, as a Soviet artist's creative reply to justified criticism. Performed in Leningrad in November 1937, the symphony was warmly welcomed, allowing his reinstatement as one of the leading Russian composers of the time.

In 1941 Shostakovich received the Stalin prize for his Piano Quintet. In the same year Russia became involved in war, with Hitler's invasion of the country and the siege of Leningrad, commemorated by Shostakovich in his Seventh Symphony, a work he had begun under siege conditions and completed after his evacuation to Kuibyshev. Its broadcast performance in the devastated city to which it is dedicated and subsequent performances in allied countries had, as the authorities had intended, a strong effect on morale in Leningrad and in Russia, and aroused emotions of patriotic sympathy abroad.

Stricter cultural control enforced in the years following the end of the war led, in 1948, to a further explicit attack on Shostakovich, coupled now with Prokofiev, Miaskovsky and Khachaturian, and branded as formalists, exhibiting anti-democratic tendencies. The official condemnation brought, of course, social and practical difficulties. The response of Shostakovich was to hold back certain of his compositions from public performance. His first Violin Concerto,

written for David Oistrakh, was not performed until after the death of Stalin in 1953, when he returned to the symphony with his Tenth, which met a mixed reception when it was first performed in Leningrad in December 1953. His next two symphonies avoided perilous excursions into liberalisation, the first of them celebrating The Year 1905 and the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution of 1917 in 1957, and the second The Year 1917, completed in 1961.

In 1962 there came the first performance of the Thirteenth Symphony, with its settings of controversial poems by Yevtushenko, and a revival of the revised version of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, under the title *Katerina Ismailova*. The opera now proved once more acceptable.

The last dozen years of the life of Shostakovich, during which he suffered a continuing deterioration of health, brought intense activity as a composer, with a remarkable series of works, many of them striving for still further simplicity and lucidity of style. The remarkable Fourteenth Symphony of 1969, settings of poems by Apollinaire, Lorca, Rilke and Küchelbecker, dedicated to his friend Benjamin Britten, was followed in 1971 by the last of the fifteen symphonies, a work of some ambiguity. The last of his fifteen string quartets was completed and performed in 1974 and his final composition, the *Viola Sonata*, in July 1975. He died on 9th August.

The career of Shostakovich must be seen against the political and cultural background of his time and country. Born in the year after Bloody Sunday, when peaceful demonstrators in St. Petersburg had been fired on by troops, Shostakovich had his musical education under the new Soviet régime. His own political sympathies have been questioned and there has been controversy particularly over the publication *Testimony*, The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich, as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov, once accused of fabrication in his portrayal of the composer as a covert enemy of Bolshevism. The testimony of others and a recent scholarly survey of the life and work of Shostakovich suggest that the general tenor of Volkov's *Testimony* is true enough. Shostakovich belonged to a family of liberal tradition, whose

sympathies would have lain with the demonstrators of 1905. Under Stalinism, however, whatever initial enthusiasm he may have felt for the new order would have evaporated with the attacks on artistic integrity and the menacing attempts to direct all creative expression to the aims of socialist realism. While writers and painters may express meaning more obviously, composers have a more ambiguous art, so that the meaning of music, if it has any meaning beyond itself, may generally be hidden. Shostakovich learned how to wear the necessary public mask that enabled him to survive the strictures of 1936 and 1948 without real sacrifice of artistic integrity.

Shostakovich began his Fourth Symphony during a state-sponsored tour of Turkey in September 1935. The opera *A Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* had been successfully staged in Leningrad the previous year, its critical reception such as to make the outright condemnation of the work in *Pravda* in January 1936 all the more of a shock. The attack on the work brought not only injury to self-esteem but an obvious physical danger, at a time when suspected political or aesthetic deviation meant deportation and death. After a space of some weeks and an approach to an influential patron for his intervention, Shostakovich was persuaded to return to work, completing the symphony in April and proceeding thereafter to orchestrate the work, a task he completed in May. The symphony was then accepted for performance by the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra, but withdrawn after a series of unsuccessful rehearsals clearly influenced by the new condemned standing of its composer. The manuscript was then put aside and lost during the course of the war. In 1945 Shostakovich made a two-piano version from his own sketches, but the original work was eventually reconstructed from the surviving orchestral parts and was first performed in December 1960 by the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra under Kyril Kondrashin. After this minor revisions were made and the work was published posthumously in 1984.

The Fourth Symphony of Shostakovich, written, it will be seen, largely before Stalin had made his views of the composer known through *Pravda*, is very much of its time, grandiose in conception, massive in its scoring and representing a mood Shostakovich later referred to as grandiosomania. The

work is scored for a pair of piccolos, four flutes, four oboes and cor anglais, four clarinets as well as an E flat and a bass clarinet, three bassoons and a double bassoon. In the brass section are four trumpets, eight French horns, three trombones and two tubas, while a large percussion section employs six timpani, triangle, castanets, snare-drum, cymbals, bass drum and tam-tam, bells, xylophone and celesta. There are also two harps in addition to the usual body of strings. These instruments are deployed in bewildering variety in the extended first movement in music that defied earlier analysts, although it is in a somewhat fragmented classical form, strained beyond breaking-point, with passages striking the hearer, only to lead to yet another musical idea, none calculated to please Stalin, had he heard the work.

The bewildering profusion of the first movement dies away to lead to a second introduced by the strings alone, the violas offering an opening theme, accompanied by plucked notes from cellos and double basses, a theme that is then transformed by the E flat clarinet, after which others have their own comments to make. The principal theme is to re-appear, its return heralded by the timpani after the fuller resources of the orchestra have been deployed on a secondary theme, the insistent rhythm of which returns, followed by the mysterious return of the main theme. The third movement opens with a slow introduction, a bassoon solo at first accompanied only by double basses and timpani. The eerie Mahlerian slow march proceeds forward to the Allegro, marked by the characteristic descending interval of its main theme. The banality of this melody is contrasted with the transitory gracefulness of a later passage and a series of apparently ironic images, a reflection of his predicament at the time of composition. In Volkov's Testimony the composer claims that this symphony is about the terrors of life in Russia in the years before the war, and his feelings apparent in the closing pages of the Fourth Symphony, feelings of despair that he had surmounted under the influence of the ideas of his friend, the writer Mikhail Zoschenko. The extended coda, seen in this light, is not pessimistic, a calm conclusion to a movement that may in general be heard as an artist's reply to unjustified criticism and unexpected betrayal.

## **Czecho-Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra (Bratislava)**

The Czecho-Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra (Bratislava), the oldest symphonic ensemble in Slovakia, was founded in 1929. The orchestra's first conductor was František Dyk and over the past sixty years it has worked under the direction of several prominent Czech and Slovak conductors. The orchestra has made many recordings for the Naxos label ranging from the ballet music of Tchaikovsky to more modern works by composers such as Copland, Britten and Prokofiev.

## **Ladislav Slovák**

Ladislav Slovák was born in 1919 in the Slovak capital, Bratislava, where, in spite of straitened circumstances, he completed his earlier musical training at the City Music School and subsequently at the Bratislava Conservatory. As a conductor he was greatly influenced by Vaclav Talich in Bratislava and from 1954 by Yevgeni Mravinsky, to whom he served as assistant in Leningrad. For some two years Slovák attended Mravinsky's rehearsals with the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra of the symphonies of Shostakovich, including first performances of Symphonies Nos. 11 and 12. In these rehearsals Shostakovich was present, hearing his music in performance for the first time and rarely interfering, except for occasional adjustments of tempi. He had great confidence in Mravinsky, with whom there was collaboration at the profoundest musical level. Slovák was privileged often to take part in discussions on problems of performance between Mravinsky and Shostakovich, and also learned much from other conductors, including the second conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic, Kurt Sanderling. On his return to Czecho-Slovakia Slovák was appointed Conductor-in-Chief of the Czecho-Slovak Radio

Symphony Orchestra in Bratislava, with guest engagements with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, which he conducted on an extended world tour to the Far East, Australasia and Russia in 1959. In 1961 he was appointed Conductor-in-Chief of the Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra and has continued with similar appointments as far afield as Australia and with a busy career as a guest conductor. His early working collaboration with Mravinsky and Shostakovich has led to performances of particular authority, in particular of the latter's fifteen symphonies.



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SHOSTAKOVICH: Symphony No. 4

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STEREO

SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No. 4 in C Minor

Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra  
(Bratislava)  
Ladislav Slovák

DDD

Playing  
Time :  
64'56"

## Symphony No. 4 in C Minor

- |   |                          |         |
|---|--------------------------|---------|
| 1 | Allegretto poco moderato | (28:15) |
| 2 | Moderato con moto        | (8:41)  |
| 3 | Largo-Allegretto         | (27:55) |

Recorded at the Concert Hall of the Slovak Radio in Bratislava,  
from 23rd May to 1st June, 1988.

Producer: Leos Komárek

Music Notes: Keith Anderson

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NAXOS

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