Shostakovich's Seventh Played Again and Well

BY CECIL SMITH.

Dimitri Shostakovich's seventh symphony, perhaps the most successful musical best seller since Saint-Saens' "Bolero," was repeated in magnificent style last evening. Any tentativeness which may have marked Tuesday's playing—I was not there, and cannot say if it had completely vanished. Whenever the content of the work permitted, the orchestra played with exceptional clarity, and Mr. Lange's interpretation, now fully matured, evinced the fullest possible musical values out of the long, unrelenting score.

If you want to be completely swept away by this symphony, you will do well to concentrate at least half your thoughts upon Russia, the siege of Leningrad, and the brave stand of the Russian armies. Strip the music of its timely connotations, and there is remarkably little left to substantiate the claim that this is one of the great symphonic works of our time, or of any time at all. It is most consciously a piece of program music which leans much too heavily on its program, in the hope of concealing appalling shortcomings of technical workmanship. Tchaikovsky's "1812" overture is both a more effective piece of program music and an infinitely better work of art.

Shostakovich is very good at beginning musical ideas, extremely clumsy at continuing them, and virtually unable to stop them. Throughout the symphony a really large number of valuable and expressive themes are introduced, but it can accurately be said that not a single one of them is well developed.

The composer has not grown in his craft since the fifth "hand and hand." His seventh is not better than the fifth or sixth; it is longer, noisier, and more pretentious. He still persists in using three stock devices, more or less in rotation, to this susceptibility for developing his material into a unified symphonic structure: (1) He repeats, either with or without crescendo; (2) he wanders off into rhapsodic and shapeless extensions of the thematic material, which get nowhere and spend a long time doing it; or, (3) he gives up altogether and introduces new subject matter.

Well, the symphony goes on the shelf for a while, after this afternoon's repetition and a performance in Milwaukee on Nov. 13. I wonder what it will sound like after the war?