

TIME

Monday, Jul. 20, 1942

Music: Shostakovich & the Guns

When guns speak, the muses keep silent, says an old Russian proverb.

Last winter, as he listened to the roar of German artillery and watched the sputtering of German incendiaries from the roof of Leningrad's Conservatory of Music, Fire Warden Shostakovich snapped: "Here the muses speak together with the guns."

This Sunday afternoon the U.S. will hear the proof of his assertion, but the proof is already old: Blood flowed like water and froze like ice on the steps of Petrograd's Winter Palace. Over bodies and frozen blood the Red Guards swept through the barricaded doors. By the time the final echoes of that historic assault had died, the last vestiges of Russia's old order had (in the Bolshevik phrase) been thrown on "the garbage heap of history." Russia of the Tsars, of Byzantine ritual, of mad monks and Cossack whips, Russia of fatalistic chaos and fatalistic inaction, was now to be kneaded with the butts of rifles into the Russia of the proletariat, of modern industry, of determined socialistic dictatorship. The time was November 1917, Year One of the Russian Revolution.

It was the year eleven in the life of a pale, slight, impressionable little bourgeois boy who clung to a servant's hand in the battle-littered streets of Petrograd. Said the servant: "This is the revolution, Mitya." Young Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich only stared and clutched the servant's apron. But what he saw and heard he pondered in his precocious head. Once safe at home, he sat down and composed two pieces: Hymn to Liberty and Funeral March to the Victims of the Revolution. A prodigy and a prodigious event had met.



This Sunday, a special NBC Symphony broadcast (4:15 to 6 p.m. E.W.T.) will give the Western Hemisphere its first chance to hear what Shostakovich's Marxist muse, now 25 years older, has to say in his Seventh Symphony,* his biggest, most ambitious orchestral work to date—the work that he wrote last year between tours of duty digging trenches in the outskirts of Leningrad and fire-watching on the roof of the Conservatory.

Not since the first Manhattan performances of *Parsifal* (in 1903) had there been such a buzz of American anticipation over a piece of music.

Last month a little tin box, no more than five inches around, arrived in the U.S. In it were 100 feet of microfilm—the photographed score of the Seventh Symphony. It had been carried by plane from Kuibyshev to Teheran, by auto from Teheran to Cairo, by plane from Cairo to New York. Photographers went to work printing from the film. In ten days they reproduced four fat volumes, 252 pages in all, of orchestral score.

Battle Royal. Before the first strip of film had gone into the enlarger, three topflight U.S. conductors, all Shostakovich champions—sleek, platinum-haired Leopold Stokowski, the Cleveland Orchestra's Artur Rodzinski, Boston's Serge Koussevitzky—were locked in a polite battle royal for the glory of conducting the première.

For a while it looked as if Conductor Koussevitzky had gained the prize. Without even waiting to see the score of the coveted Seventh Symphony, he rushed to the Am-Rus Music Corp., U.S. agent for Soviet music, nailed down the first concert-performance rights for the Western Hemisphere. Then with quiet triumph he announced that his student Berkshire Music Center Orchestra would play the Seventh Symphony on August 14. But the truth of the matter was that he had been nosed out by his 75-year-old rival, Arturo Toscanini, the old fire-&-ice Maestro himself. Toscanini would conduct the Seventh on July 19, a month before Koussevitzky.

Maestro Toscanini was very well connected. He was connected with National Broadcasting Co., and NBC, it seemed, had been exceedingly forehanded. Last January, before a note of the symphony had been heard in rehearsal in Kuibyshev, NBC started dickering, through its Moscow correspondent, for first Western Hemisphere performance rights. By April the rights to conduct the Seventh were tucked away in NBC's pocket.

NBC now had the Seventh Symphony and the orchestra to play it, but it was not sure it had the conductor. Both Toscanini and Stokowski are under contract to NBC next winter, but next winter is a long way off. Maestro Toscanini might conduct the musical scoop this summer, if he liked the score. (But four years ago he had been offered the first performance of Shostakovich's Fifth, and declined.) So the photostat pages of the score were rushed to Toscanini, and NBC held its breath. He looked, said: "Very interesting and most effective." He looked again, said: "Magnificent!"

Leopold Stokowski, who had hopefully dashed East from Hollywood, went crestfallen back to the West Coast; Rodzinski had not even had a lookin. Hurriedly NBC augmented its Symphony Orchestra to the extra-large size the performance required. Night after night, nearsighted Maestro Toscanini, who conducts from memory, never from notes, sat up with his nose buried in the score.

The Symphony. Written for a mammoth orchestra, Shostakovich's Seventh, though it is no blatant battle piece, is a musical interpretation of Russia at war. In the strict sense, it is less a symphony than a symphonic suite. Like a great wounded snake, dragging its slow length, it uncoils for 80 minutes from the orchestra. There is little development of its bold, bald, foursquare themes. There is no effort to reduce the symphony's loose, sometimes skeletal structures to the epic compression and economy of the classic symphony.

Yet this very musical amorphousness is expressive of the amorphous mass of Russia at war. Its themes are exultations, agonies. Death and suffering haunt it. But amid bombs bursting in Leningrad Shostakovich had also heard the chords of victory. In the symphony's last movement the triumphant brasses prophesy what Shostakovich describes as the "victory of light over darkness, of humanity over barbarism."

The Seventh Symphony's proportions are heroic, most obviously so in the 27-minute first movement. The deceptively simple opening melody, suggestive of peace, work, hope, is interrupted by the theme of war, "senseless, implacable and brutal." For this martial theme Shostakovich resorts to a musical trick: the violins, tapping the backs of their bows, introduce a tune that might have come from a puppet show. This tiny drumming, at first almost inaudible, mounts and swells, is repeated twelve times in a continuous

twelve-minute crescendo. The theme is not developed but simply grows in volume like Ravel's *Boléro*; it is succeeded by a slow melodic passage that suggests a chant for the war's dead.

As in most of Shostakovich's later music, there are traces of Beethoven, Berlioz, Rimsky-Korsakov, Mahler, moderns like Poulenc and Busoni. The Seventh Symphony has been described by those who have already heard it as a modern Russian version of Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique*. It has also been called a sound-track for a psychological documentary film on Russia today.

The Composer. Dmitri Shostakovich's father was an engineer. His mother, a student of the St. Petersburg (later Leningrad) Conservatory of Music, believed that children should never be taught music before the age of nine, otherwise they become pedantic. But Dmitri Shostakovich had other ideas.

At five he was taken to see Rimsky-Korsakov's *Tsar Sultan*. After one hearing he could and did sing long passages from the opera. Sometimes he would sit at the piano, strike a chord and lisp: "That's the stars." Sometimes he struck a treble note, said: "That's somebody looking out the window." At 13, he entered Leningrad Conservatory. At 19, he composed his First Symphony (one of the most popular) as part of his course.

For some 80 years Russian music had been strongly influenced by "The Five"—César Cui, an engineer; Modest Mussorgsky (*Boris Godunov*), a government clerk and famed tosspot; Alexander Borodin (*Prince Igor*), a doctor; Nicolas Rimsky-Korsakov, a naval officer; Mily Balakirev, a professional musician. In opposition to the international style of Tchaikovsky, "The Five" believed that the source of Russian music should be Russian—folk songs and church music. Igor Stravinsky (*Petrouchka*, *The Fire Bird*) continued this nationalist tradition, though he later abandoned it for severe and arid abstractions.

The Russian Revolution destroyed many things, but it did nothing to destroy this nationalist musical heritage. Shostakovich admits his debt to "The Five." But he is far too much of an eclectic to stay in the nationalist groove. He is also too much of a revolutionist. His Second Symphony he subtitled October (after the October Revolution). His Third Symphony he called May Day.

Neither were as good or as popular as his First; so next he turned to satiric ballet and opera. His *Lady Macbeth of Mzensk* is a kind of musical Sunday supplement about small-town life in Tsarist Russia.

Condemned to years of living death in Mzensk, the heroine commits three murders to relieve her boredom. The first Soviet opera, *Lady Macbeth* became a Red fad, was given more than 200 performances in Leningrad and Moscow. In the U.S., where it arrived in 1935, the opera was called flippant, noisy, vulgar and a hodgepodge of musical styles. Nevertheless, *Lady Macbeth of Mzensk* fascinated many musicians by its vitality, shrewd musical characterization, brilliant orchestration.

It also nearly ruined Composer Shostakovich. At the height of the Purge, when Russian nerves were badly frayed and people were plopping into prison like turtles into a pond, Stalin decided to hear *Lady Macbeth*. He did not like it, walked out before it was over. Murder from boredom struck him as a bourgeois idea. Besides, Stalin's musical taste runs to simple, more tuneful things, zigzags between Beethoven's *Eroica* and Verdi's *Rigoletto*. Also, he had a seat directly above the brasses.

Promptly a *Pravda* article called Shostakovich's music "un-Soviet, unwholesome, cheap, eccentric and leftist" (atonal). A few days after that, *Pravda* attacked his ballet, *The Limpid Stream*. Friends feared that Shostakovich's next composition might have to be called *Stone Walls Do Not a Prison Make*. But Composer Shostakovich was not a revolutionist for nothing. He publicly agreed that *Pravda* knew more

about music than he did. He withdrew his Fourth Symphony (it has never been performed) after one rehearsal. He announced that he would stake his musical future on a Fifth Symphony.

Simple, romantic, perfectly keyed to the new order in Russia, the Fifth Symphony restored Shostakovich to official favor.

Two years later the Sixth Symphony brought him further official plaudits. Outside Russia, music lovers were more critical. Shostakovich's Fifth and Sixth Symphonies combined spontaneous gusto, originality and nobility, with a curious taste for trite themes and musical horseplay, as if the composer were constantly fighting down an impulse to throw musical custard pies.

Beer and Soccer. Today strangers who meet Shostakovich for the first time find him shy, serious, scholarly. At parties or among musicians, he unbends, jokes, out-drinks his companions. He likes automobiles, fast driving, U.S. magazines, reads the U.S. authors who most appeal to Russia—Mark Twain, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair. Strictly a city man, he dislikes dachas (Russia's summer bungalows), and komaryi (Russia's multitudinous mosquitoes).

Before the German invasion, Shostakovich lived in a five-room Leningrad apartment filled with his family (wife, two children, mother, sister and sister's son) and piles of scores, books on music and sport. An enthusiastic soccer fan, Shostakovich is a regular correspondent of the chief Russian sports paper, *Red Sport*. Says he:

“The climax of joy is not when you're through a new symphony, but when you are hoarse from shouting, with your hands stinging from clapping, your lips parched, and you sip your second glass of beer after you've fought for it with 90,000 other spectators to celebrate the victory of your favorite team.”

Despite the fact that it does not satisfy him as much as a soccer victory, despite its structural looseness and occasional melodic banalities, the Seventh is probably the most emotionally mature of Shostakovich's symphonies, is almost certain to be one of his most popular. But it still leaves an important question unanswered: Is Composer Shostakovich the last peak in the European musical range whose summit was Beethoven, or is he the beginning of a new sierra?

*The Symphony got its first hearing outside Russia in London on June 29, before 5,000 enthusiastic listeners at Royal Albert Hall.