

Abergavenny Symphony Orchestra Workshop

Shostakovich Symphony No 7, *Leningrad*

Background to the Symphony

Shostakovich's seventh symphony was born in a time of war and unimaginable suffering. In June of 1941, Adolf Hitler abandoned the non-aggression pact he had signed with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin two years earlier and embarked on an invasion plan, code named "Operation Barbarossa", that would eventually claim more than twenty million Soviet lives. The historic city of Leningrad, former capital of Russia and cradle of the revolution as well as an important military and industrial centre, was a prime target for conquest. It soon became apparent that the anticipated rapid defeat would not be possible and as German casualties mounted Hitler ordered that the city should not be stormed but starved into submission, then razed to the ground. In a directive sent to the army he wrote:

"After the defeat of Soviet Russia there can be no interest in the continued existence of this large urban centre. Following the city's encirclement, requests for surrender negotiations shall be denied, since the problem of relocating and feeding the population cannot and should not be solved by us. In this war for our very existence, we can have no interest in maintaining even a part of this very large urban population."

So on 8th September 1941 began the 872 day Siege of Leningrad, probably the most lethal siege in human history in which it is estimated that over a million people died, a third of the city's population. Civilians in the city suffered from extreme starvation, especially in the winter of 1941–42. In the early stages of the siege people started eating their pets. From November 1941 to February 1942 the only food available was 125 grams of bread per day, of which 50–60% consisted of sawdust and other inedible admixtures. Leather was boiled to extract jelly, wallpaper paste made from potato starch was scraped off walls. As desperation increased some of the population turned to cannibalism. Deaths peaked in January–February 1942 at 100,000 per month, mostly from starvation and hypothermia as temperatures dropped to -30 °C.

Leningrad was also the birthplace of Dmitri Shostakovich, and the city where he now lived with his wife and children. The years prior to the war had been extraordinarily difficult for him; in January 1936 an article which everyone could tell had been written by Stalin himself denounced his recent opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* as 'coarse, primitive, and vulgar'. Entitled 'Chaos instead of Music', it made clear that 'things could end very badly' for the composer unless he changed his avant-garde style. Shostakovich was immediately shunned by almost everybody he knew. People crossed

the street to avoid him. He was listed in the press as an enemy of the people and even to know him was dangerous. His brother-in-law, mother-in-law, and uncle were all taken away. He had even taken to sleeping in the hallway occasionally so that his family would not be disturbed when the knock at the door came.

Nevertheless when war was declared he quickly volunteered for service. He was rejected for the army due to his poor eyesight, but managed to sign up with the Home Guard before being assigned to the fire brigade, protecting the Leningrad Conservatoire against incendiaries.

Work on the symphony began in earnest on 19th July 1941, the massive first movement being completed by 29th August, a mere six weeks. The second and third movements followed rapidly, finished on 29th September.

“Neither the raids of German planes nor the grim atmosphere within the beleaguered city could interrupt the flow of ideas. I worked with an inhuman intensity I had never before achieved.”

But by now the authorities had recognised the propaganda value of the work and two days later Shostakovich was persuaded to leave the city, fleeing initially to Moscow with his family and then on to the relative safety of Kuybishev. There, despite being given comfortable accommodation, he found composition difficult and it was not until 27th December 1941 that he completed the work. The premiere took place on 5th March 1942 in the Kuybishev House of Culture, with the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra conducted by Samuil Samosud. This performance was broadcast nation-wide and transmitted abroad to great acclaim. After a performance in Moscow the score was microfilmed and flown from Moscow to Tehran, driven from there to Egypt, flown over North Africa to Casablanca and then taken by US Navy ship across the Atlantic to Brazil and finally arriving in the United States. It was performed there on July 19th conducted by Arturo Toscanini and received more than 60 performance in the US through the following year.

The most extraordinary performance of all, of course, was the one that took place in Leningrad itself on 9th August 1942. With the city still under siege, only 15 members of the Radio Orchestra were left alive, emaciated, skeletal figures with only enough energy for 15 minutes of playing at the first rehearsal. In an effort to bolster numbers any soldier who could play an instrument was sent back from the front lines. Such was the importance attached to this symbol of resistance that extra rations were found. The conductor Karl Eliasberg was a strict disciplinarian and would withhold these from anyone he felt wasn't pulling their weight, even if they took time off to bury a family member.

On the day itself loudspeakers broadcast the performance throughout the city as well as to the German forces in a move of psychological warfare. The Soviet commander of the Leningrad front, General Govorov, ordered a bombardment of German artillery

positions in advance to ensure their silence during the performance of the symphony; in a special operation, code-named "Squall," 3000 high-calibre shells were fired. Those in the city who heard the symphony were inspired to continue their defiance of the Nazis. German soldiers listening to it said after the war that it was at that time they realised that Leningrad would never be conquered.

A BBC documentary about the Leningrad performance is being shown at 00:30 on February 11th 2019, and will be available afterwards on iPlayer.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34292312>

Programme Notes for the Symphony

I Allegretto – ‘War’

The first movement opens with a sturdy theme suggesting, as the composer put it, “people sure of themselves and their future.” The tranquil music that follows, he said, indicates “the simple, peaceful life lived before the war.” The sonata form of the first movement is interrupted by an 18-bar march-theme, the "invasion theme" played over an unvarying drum tattoo, whose twelve repetitions, building in volume and intensity, lead to an awful crisis, completely overwhelming what has gone before. Shostakovich allowed the movement to be interpreted programmatically as the march of the invaders, though his programme note for the première described it as "a requiem for the heroes who died for us": a potentially more ambiguous remark. However there is an unmistakable undercurrent. Quiet and seemingly innocuous at first we hear the invading army approaching from the far distance. The sense of menace grows as they get ever closer until finally one could imagine in the rising and falling thirds, the distinctive whine of gearboxes as the German heavy armour moves into position. Then all hell breaks loose in a great sonic cataclysm. The fury at last gives way to a mournful bassoon solo and then more hopeful music scored for strings, though the final moments make clear that martial sounds have not been banished.

II Moderato (poco allegretto) – ‘Memories’

The second movement opens in a lightweight whimsical manner, dance-like at first. Shostakovich gave it the title ‘Memories’, but these are sad memories, sad because it is so hard to dance now, hard even to remember how you used to dance. The central section is an anger of bitterness, and the emptiness that follows is perfectly orchestrated. The harps, making their first appearance, attempt to console. But the rhythms of the flutes are unaffected and the bass clarinet is left to sing the melody bleakly, staring out into the nihilistic future. Only the alto flute at the very end gives some cause for hope. For many people, hope was all they had.

III Adagio – ‘The Open Spaces’

In the Adagio, the battle lines are again clearly drawn. The implacable winds, fortissimo and accented, are contrasted against the flexible strings, only forte and warm. The poignant, semplice flute solo suggests that loneliness of silence, of not being allowed to sing. It is here perhaps that we most clearly see Shostakovich's hidden theme, the oppression of the Soviet people under Stalin. It stirs up great anger which explodes in the movement's central section. Unlike the previous movement's bitterness, this anger is one of passion. It is passion that ultimately has the greater success. It is followed by the entire viola section singing espressivo the flautist's earlier private tune. It is as if Shostakovich is saying that if we stick together we can survive. If we all sing, we can't be beaten. The victory will be ours and the triumph of that is the entire string section playing the opening music of the movement. What had been cold, unrelenting and inhuman is now invested with every ounce of human joy. It is the emotional climax of the work.

IV Allegro non troppo – ‘Victory’

The battles that it was suggested would return do so in the finale. But the third movement has taught people the way to survive and it is their unremitting spirit which leads the symphony out of its long tunnel and into the light. Many people wonder whether this piece is optimistic or pessimistic. Just at the very end, when the opening theme is blazingly intoned by the whole orchestra in a triumphant C major, the side drum returns. It reminds us that however well we might be able to conquer tyranny, evil will always be there, lurking in the background. The optimism is that it can be resisted but the realism is that it will always be with us.

Music's innate ability to be ambiguous is one of its greatest strengths and for Shostakovich it saved his life. He could express his beliefs that one day Stalin would be overthrown, that humanity could defeat tyranny, and he could survive in doing so. By substituting one tyrant for another he could compose a masterpiece which was able to be performed to millions of people in his lifetime, without betraying his conscience. This piece is not about Hitler. It is not even really about Stalin. Its timelessness and its greatness is its constant relevance. The tragedy of this piece is that there will always be tyrants, there will always be suffering. What the piece offers is the hope that despite that, the human spirit will never be broken. Evil will always be present, but so will humanity's constant ability to be able to resist it.

Background and programme notes based on work by Kristian Hibberd, Dominic Nudd, Paul Schiavo, Mark Wigglesworth and the collective wisdom of Wikipedia.