

MASTERWORKS5 Program Notes

Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, Op. 47

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)

Written: 1937

Movements: Four

Style: 20th Century

Duration: 46 minutes

Many people consider Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony* to be one of the greatest twentieth-century symphonies. Orchestras frequently program it, and there is an excellent concert band arrangement of the final movement. Marching bands even perform the "triumphant" finale. Throughout the years, audiences have interpreted this work in dramatically different ways.

In the Soviet Union in the middle years of the 1930's—known as “The Terror”—Stalin executed countless millions or sent them to prison camps. Artists did not escape “The Terror.” Once hailed as the greatest of all Soviet composers, Shostakovich received a stunning condemnation. In an article entitled "Muddle instead of Music"—probably written by Stalin himself—Shostakovich was accused of the worst possible crimes for an artist: he was a "bourgeois aesthete" and a "Formalist." Curiously, the dreaded knock on the door never came. Shostakovich was never “sent away” like many artists. He simply became an "unperson."

Then, in 1937, Shostakovich wrote his *Fifth Symphony*. Supposedly repentant, Shostakovich subtitled the work “A Soviet Artist's Practical Creative Reply to Just Criticism” and gave the following description:

The theme of my fifth symphony is the making of a man. I saw man with all his experiences in the center of the composition, which is lyrical in form from beginning to end. In the finale, the tragically tense impulses of the earlier movements are resolved in optimism and joy of living.

The Soviet authorities were pleased. This symphony had, at least, a triumphant finale worthy of "Socialist Realism."

For years, this was the accepted interpretation of this symphony. Then, in 1973, *Testimony, the Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich* appeared. Westerners were shocked to discover a different meaning to the symphony.

Shostakovich claimed:

I think it is clear to everyone what happens in the *Fifth*. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat . . . It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, 'Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing,' and you rise, shaky, and go marching off, muttering, 'Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing.' What kind of

apotheosis is that? You have to be a complete oaf not to hear that. Fadeyev [a Russian author] heard it and he wrote . . . 'the finale of the Fifth is irreparable tragedy.' He must have felt it with his Russian alcoholic soul. Throughout this work, you will hear many repeated notes, which may begin to affect you like the repeated blows of an oppressor. You will hear anger and desperation in the angular themes and the militaristic march in the first movement. The second movement is a sarcastic, sardonic little thing. The third movement, written in just three days, is truly tragic. The contemporary critic Ian MacDonald claims that "understanding music like this is simple—particularly if half your family has been arrested and you are alone and terrified and trying to smile." Then, finally, there is the "triumphant" finale.

At the work's premiere, the audience openly wept during the slow movement. The applause at the end lasted longer than the work itself. Did they "get" it? Shostakovich's answer from *Testimony*: "Of course they understood, they understood what was happening around them and they understood what the *Fifth* was about."

Nowadays, there is quite a controversy going on in academic circles regarding the meaning of Shostakovich's work. Many scholars discredit Shostakovich's *Memoirs* and insist that his *Fifth Symphony*, while truly a great work, doesn't carry any political meaning. It is simply music. Here is where the audience is important. What do *you* hear? How does this music make *you* feel? What do *you* think?

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Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in A Minor, Op. 82

Alexander Glazunov (1865–1936)

Written: 1904

Movements: Three

Style: Romantic

Duration: Twenty minutes

Alexander Glazunov stands wedged—and nearly forgotten—between two great groups of Russian composers. Born a full generation after Tchaikovsky and the "Mighty Handful" (Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, Mussorgsky, Balakirev and Cui), he preceded Stravinsky and Prokofieff by a generation. His father was a book publisher and his mother a pianist. As a youngster, Alexander displayed a prodigious musical talent and an exceptional musical memory. Upon a recommendation from his piano teacher, Glazunov met Mily Balakirev, the erstwhile leader of the "Mighty Handful," who then introduced him to Nicholas Rimsky-Korsakov:

Casually Balakirev once brought me the composition of a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old high-school student, Sasha Glazunov. . . . It was an orchestral score written in childish fashion. The boy's talent was indubitably clear.

Rimsky-Korsakov took him on as a student. "His musical development progressed not by the day, but literally by the hour," he recalled. Glazunov wrote his first symphony at the age of sixteen. Glazunov made his conducting debut at the age of 23, and he became a professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory in his mid-thirties. Six years later, he was named director of the conservatory—a post he held until 1930. He gained some notoriety—and nearly destroyed Sergei Rachmaninoff's nascent career by conducting Rachmaninoff's *Symphony No. 1* while drunk. Stravinsky called him "one of the most disagreeable men [I] had ever met." On the other hand, Dmitri Shostakovich probably would not have attained his fame without Glazunov's instruction and advocacy. The great Hollywood film composer Dmitri Tiomkin (*High Noon*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*) was also a student of Glazunov. He described him as "one of the most magnanimous personalities, a friend of the poor and the outcast—a man with a real heart."

Glazunov wrote his *Violin Concerto in A Minor* in 1904—shortly before he assumed the directorship of the conservatory—for Leopold Auer, the virtuoso who declined to premiere Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto* because it was too difficult. Glazunov's *Concerto* is a deeply romantic work, somewhat resembling the form of Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto*. Both dispense with any sort of long orchestra introduction and begin with the soloist right away. Glazunov's first theme has a deep, dark Russian quality. The second has a more tranquil, optimistic character. It accelerates to flourish for the soloist; then the orchestra transitions into the second movement. A long, lyrical tune is the basis for this movement. With a couple of short chords, it sounds as if this movement is ending; but the violas present a linking theme that returns to the faster section of the first movement. It eventually fades into a long cadenza for the soloist that then launches the third movement.

The trumpets introduce the first theme of this movement, a jaunty "hunting-call" melody. A "country-dance" melody follows and then the first theme re-enters and gets faster and faster until the final pyrotechnics end the movement.

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Suite from "The Dead Souls Register"

Alfred Schnittke (1934–1998)

Written: 1983

Movements: Eight
Style: Post-modern
Duration: Thirty minutes

The great American musicologist Richard Taruskin claims that, “not since Shostakovich has a composer from the Russian sphere been such a world celebrity” as Alfred Schnittke. In the 1990s, he was “widely regarded . . . the foremost Russian composer.”

Even though Alfred was born in Russia, his first language was German. Alfred’s father was born in Frankfurt, Germany, and emigrated to Russia in 1926. He worked as a journalist and translator. His mother was a Volga German born in Russia. When Alfred was twelve, his family lived in Vienna while his father worked as a translator and interpreter for the Soviet army. It was there that Alfred fell in love with music:

I felt every moment there to be a link of the historical chain: all was multi-dimensional; the past represented a world of ever-present ghosts, and I was not a barbarian without any connections, but the conscious bearer of the task in my life.

Back in Moscow, Schnittke eventually completed his graduate studies in music at the Moscow conservatory. His early music demonstrated a strong resemblance to Shostakovich; but then, like many composers, he launched into writing serial (twelve-tone) music. For a number of years he led a bifurcated life, writing film music to earn a living and writing “serious” music “for the drawer.” Eventually he abandoned serialism and developed what he calls “polystylism:”

My musical development took a course similar to that of some friends and colleagues, across piano concerto romanticism, neo-classic academicism, and attempts at eclectic synthesis . . . and took cognizance also of the unavoidable proofs of masculinity in serial self-denial. Having arrived at the final station, I decided to get off the already overcrowded train. Since then I have tried to proceed on foot . . . In recent days . . . I make an effort to capture the sonorous visions that come to me as accurately as possible in notes.

One of his first attempts at polystylism was his *Symphony No. 1*, a work that Taruskin describes as a grim riot of allusion and outright quotation, much of it self-quotation, in which Beethoven jostles Handel jostles Mahler jostles Tchaikovsky jostles Johann Strauss, and thence into ragtime and rock. . . . [the distinctive Schnittke orchestra is an] omnivorous combine to which the harpsichord is as essential as the electric bass. All styles are potentially and indiscriminately germane to this musical equivalent of a universal solvent.

The Soviet authorities did not respond well, but Schnittke persisted, eventually composing ten symphonies, six concerti grossi, four violin concertos, two cello concertos, concertos for piano, string quartets and much other chamber music, ballet scores, choral and vocal works, and a number of operas. He also continued to write for the films, eventually scoring more than sixty. "The goal of my life is to unify serious music and light music, even if I break my neck in doing so," he once wrote.

The Dead Souls Register was a Soviet television miniseries based on the novel *Dead Souls* (1842) by Nikolai Gogol and adapted by Mikhail Shveytser. Schnittke wrote the music, and his friend—and conductor—Gennady Rozhdestvensky compiled it into a concert suite. This is wry, dark and sardonic stuff. But it's easy and fun to listen to. It's like listening to an inside joke: Each movement is almost a parody of "serious" music.

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