SYMPHONY NO. 5 IN D MINOR, OP. 47
By DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH
Born September 25, 1906, in St. Petersburg;
died August 9, 1975, in Moscow

One fateful evening early in 1936, Premier Josef Stalin, the despotic dictator of the Soviet Union, happened to attend a performance of Dmitri Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mzensk*, which had been enjoying a successful two-year run in Moscow. Stalin, who had unconcernedly sent thousands of his countrymen to their deaths, was greatly shocked by the opera's lurid tale of sex and violence as well as Shostakovich's dissonant, *avant-garde* music. A few days later, on January 28, there appeared in the newspaper *Pravda*, the official mouthpiece of the Soviet government, an unsigned article in which Shostakovich was bitterly excoriated and his opera denounced as "bourgeois" and "counter-revolutionary."

The inevitable had finally happened: Shostakovich, once the fair-haired boy of Soviet music, who could do no wrong, was now under official disgrace. To be sure, he was not the first Soviet composer to be so singled out for his departure from government expectations, but he was then the most famous and most respected. From all accounts, Shostakovich dutifully went into a period of retirement and self-evaluation. He withdrew his Fourth Symphony, which was then in rehearsal for its premiere by the Leningrad Philharmonic, and set about writing a work that would put him back in the good graces of his government. The result was his Fifth Symphony, which he humbly described as "a Soviet artist's practical, creative reply to just criticism." The new symphony was greeted with considerable acclaim when it was given its world premiere on November 21, 1937, by Yevgeny Mravinsky and the Leningrad Philharmonic. Shostakovich apparently had done his penance.

At that time, Shostakovich stated that the theme of his Fifth Symphony was "the stabilization of a personality. In the center of this composition—conceived lyrically from beginning to end—I saw a man with all his experiences. The Finale resolves the tragically tense impulses of the earlier movements into

optimism and joy of living." In 1979, however, information of a highly controverting nature came to light when Harper and Row published *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, a book that was purported to be a first-person narrative by the composer "as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov," a Soviet musicologist who had then recently emigrated to the United States. In this book, Shostakovich comes through, for the most part, as an unhappy, frightened man who was bitterly torn between his love for his family and his homeland, and his frustration with the political system that alternately supported and repressed him. His comments about his Fifth Symphony are especially revelatory. The "rejoicing" in the finale, for example, was intended as ironic rather than triumphant. "The rejoicing is forced, under threat, as in *Boris Godunov*," the composer was said to have explained. "It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, 'your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing. . .' " If one accepts Volkov's book as being legitimate and authentic, and there is little reason not to do so, then Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony certainly takes on a new and entirely different meaning.

Shostakovich cast his Fifth Symphony in the traditional four-movement pattern; however, the order of the two inner movements is reversed. The first movement, *Moderato*, is alternately passionate and elegiac in character. In the development section, the gentle, lyrical melody with which the symphony began is transformed into a fearsome, martial theme. This section builds to a ferocious climax, and then collapses abruptly. A peaceful, ethereal coda concludes the movement.

Marked *Allegretto*, the second movement is a grotesque, waltz-like scherzo that might be described as a Russian version of a Mahler *Ländler*. In marked contrast, the trio section includes an almost coquettish-sounding violin solo.

The emotional core of the symphony is the slow movement, an unabashedly lyrical and deeply felt *Largo*. The Russian-American conductor Serge Koussevitzky, a great champion of Shostakovich, called it "the greatest symphonic slow movement since Beethoven's Ninth."

The finale, *Allegro non troppo*, begins with a vehement march of almost unrelentless energy and power. After a quieter middle section, the march returns, albeit slightly subdued. The symphony concludes with a monumental coda in which a chorale-like paean of triumph is superimposed over decisive beats hammered out by the timpani and bass drum.

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