Music During World War II
Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony

By Stephen Loverde

“The Leningrad Symphony purportedly portrays common emotions during one of the most trying eras of the twentieth century”

The first page of the original score to Symphony No. 7. In the top right corner, Shostakovich writes: “Dedicated to the city of Leningrad”.

It might seem that music during the Second World War was stifled due to the turmoil in war-stricken countries; however, this is not the case. The heightened emotions of a world engulfed in chaos led to a number of spectacular compositions in many different genres. Within the circle of classical music, Dmitri Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 7, termed the Leningrad Symphony, stands out among the rest for its musical and cultural significance.

As can be expected, the Leningrad Symphony was born out of tense times, but that was not only due to the Second World War. Political tensions were prevalent in the Soviet Union, which constrained many citizens, including Shostakovich. Having been blacklisted by Pravda, a Soviet newspaper, for composing a piece that Joseph Stalin detested, Shostakovich had to come up with music that could serve as his redemption. However, he was fearful of making another wrong move. His fifth symphony, the most recognizable of Shostakovich’s symphonies, brought him back into the favor of his political leaders, and he subsequently enjoyed the world spotlight for his brilliant compositions. Despite his great successes, however, he was constantly under the watchful eyes of Stalin and needed to continue to stay in line, lest his family be hurt for his indiscretion. This kind of unyielding tension took a major toll on Shostakovich’s life. It is no surprise that living under such strict and horrific conditions only added unnecessary amounts of anxiety and terror. Yet in spite of this, or maybe because of it, Dmitri Shostakovich composed some of the most magnificent works of music in all of Western classical tradition.

Shostakovich was living in Leningrad when it was besieged by German forces in 1941. He remained through all the bombings until Stalin had him evacuated to ensure his safety. His worldwide musical successes had by then rendered him precious cargo.
Shostakovich himself was quite a patriotic man and actually enlisted in the army during World War II, but because of an ailment was assigned to work for a fire crew in Leningrad. Thus, when Shostakovich’s home was threatened by aggressive Nazi advances, the personal effect on his life was enormous. He decided to express his emotions in the form of Symphony No. 7. However, this symphony was not meant to depict the physical aspects of a war, such as the bombings and destruction. Instead, the Leningrad Symphony purportedly portrays common emotions during one of the most trying eras of the twentieth century.

In his program notes for the symphony, Shostakovich writes that the first movement illustrates the peaceful times before the German invasion, the second movement sets to music memories of a happier time when war was not a concern, the third movement expresses “ecstatic love of life and the beauties of nature”, and the fourth movement toys with the idea of approaching victory. There is some controversy over the legitimacy of these descriptions, however, due to the techniques that Shostakovich employs throughout the symphony, which become apparent with a closer musical analysis.

In Symphony No. 7, Shostakovich follows the traditional sonata cycle and creates very tonal melodies. During the twentieth century, composers began experimenting with the world of atonality. While Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern were all great pioneers of this movement, Shostakovich did not find them particularly inspirational. His war symphony, depicting the harshest of times and one of the lowest points of humanity, is focused in a tonal world. This is a particularly striking choice because atonality is typically associated with dark and dreary sentiments, whereas tonality has a tendency to focus on the lighter aspects of human nature.

When examining the first movement, it must be remembered that Shostakovich intended to represent the feelings of the general public in the years leading up to the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. Simply reading the title of the work conveys this sentiment because the symphony is written in C major, a key that typically exudes happiness and jollity.

Using a very bright sound and remaining well within the boundaries of tonal harmony are significant choices on Shostakovich’s part. There does not seem to be a more appropriate way to symbolize peace and cheer through music than through such deliberate decisions. In addition to this, the symphony opens up with a dramatic unison from the string sections. This striking opening is a forceful thrust of power that asserts a notion of joviality in a manner that is not overly aggressive. At first glance,
the first movement appears to be structured in typical sonata form, but further musical analysis reveals that the development section, which usually introduces modulations and chromatic harmonies, seems to be nonexistent. The clear lack of development shows that Shostakovich did not want to be confined to such structure, and signifies a foreboding atmosphere indicative of the approaching war. In place of a development, he introduces a new theme that is repeated twelve times, each time with different instrumentation. This march-like theme is only partially Shostakovich’s own composition; he based this militaristic motif off of Franz Léhar’s *The Merry Widow*, which was known to be one of Adolf Hitler’s favorite operas. It is hard to say why Shostakovich may have chosen this particular opera. It may have been to add a foreboding atmosphere to a movement that purportedly depicts the serene antebellum life. Even in the Soviet Union, where war didn’t arrive until the 1940s, people could feel the presence of the fighting and were subconsciously aware that war would soon be on their doorstep.

The middle section will be called the development section for lack of a better term. It is an unrelenting ostinato in E-flat major that comprises the majority of the first movement. Typically, composers would use the development section to modulate to the relative minor key, which tends to portray feelings of sadness and melancholy. Shostakovich, however, remains in E-flat major for the duration of the development. This small, easily overlooked link clearly illustrates Shostakovich’s concerted effort to maintain a lighter and more peaceful air during the movement. His goal is to represent a happier time before Leningrad was attacked, or even before World War II began, and his choice key signature definitely achieves this. The twelve repetitions of the march theme featured in the first movement bog down the work and prevent any harmonic development from occurring. This mechanical ostinato reminds the listener of the sound of troops marching, which could potentially represent the German forces moving into Russia. However, it is unlikely that this is the case. Bearing in mind that he intended to capture the emotions, rather than the logistics of war, this superficial analysis of the music does not fall in line with Shostakovich’s own program notes for the movement. The first movement purportedly presents the feeling of a more cheerful time long before the war. For this to be true, the middle section must instead be indicative of the heightened emotions of the public as the war became more real and the threat of a German invasion became all too possible. The march starts out very quietly, with the strings playing with the wood of their bows rather than the hair. With each repetition, the music becomes more intense and more heavily orchestrated, until finally the march is taken up by the brass and supported by a flurry of frantic string music, just before settling into a symphonic unison of the theme. Even though Shostakovich explicitly describes his intention to convey the feelings of a happier time, he clearly seeks to do more. This march ostensibly takes the listener on a journey from a jovial antebellum sentiment to an increasingly unsettled and anxious period immediately before the war hit the Soviets.

Following what has been termed the development section, the initial theme of the piece is recapitulated, but it carries a very
different meaning. Here, the same feeling that the audience may have had when the symphony began is conspicuously absent. The happiness that Shostakovich reprises at this point is tinged with anxiety and the listener is less naïve. There is less confidence among the Soviet people that war will not find its way into their homes and this sentiment taints the happy theme that Shostakovich initially presented.

The first movement of this symphony is the most important in terms of representing the sentiment of the people during World War II, and yet the other three movements of this monumental work still bear weight in the discussion. The third and fourth movements are perhaps less significant, primarily because the third movement merely portrays “love of life and beauties of nature” and the fourth movement represents the Soviet victory, which had not yet occurred at the time of the symphony’s completion. (The third movement could have been written in response to the severe casualties of war and to the atrocities being committed.) The second movement is much more relevant, both analytically and historically. As Shostakovich notes in his description, the second movement recalls the happier times, but this happiness is plagued “by a certain sadness.”

There are many Baroque techniques present in this movement, including the ritornello principle, use of fugues, and chamber-like dialogue between various instruments. More importantly, everything is incredibly clean and precisely written. These techniques can lead one to believe that this movement is written in the neoclassical style, which is characterized by the attempt to revive classical tendencies, and that it may in fact be absolute music, meaning it lacks emotion. If this is the case, the second movement succeeds in taking its listeners back to the time of Bach and Haydn, thus making them forget about the tumultuous present of the Soviet Union. This would be the only feeling taken away from this movement had Shostakovich not included a middle section in C-sharp minor. This part of the movement effectively carries out the goal of embellishing the music with sadness by adding a sense of desolation and despair. Here, one of the controversies regarding Shostakovich’s program notes is seen. If the second movement is described as recalling happier times and exuding a sense of nostalgia, why would there be such a strange C-sharp minor section? It is hard to know exactly why Shostakovich would write this, but we must remember that the music came before the program notes, and is thus most important.

"After the premiere in Leningrad, the symphony became a symbol and a musical weapon for the Allied forces"

Although the musical analysis of the symphony makes the underlying meaning of the music more accessible, understanding the historical significance of the piece is just
as important. The Leningrad Symphony was premiered in March 1942 in Kuybyshev and later had its Western premiere in New York City in July 1942.\textsuperscript{13} The music enjoyed immediate success, and plans were made to premiere the work in Leningrad. At the time, Leningrad had sacrificed music played on the radio in favor of political news and updates, as the citizens cared more about the happenings of the war. Eventually, the idea to reinstate music in Leningrad was put into effect, and a symphony orchestra was assembled.\textsuperscript{14} It was this orchestra that took up the role of learning the gargantuan Symphony No. 7 after being flown into the city via military aircraft.\textsuperscript{15} Knowing that the Symphony was to be broadcasted throughout the city, the Germans planned on halting the premiere through military strikes. However, their plan was thwarted by the Soviet military, which bombarded them unexpectedly.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, Shostakovich’s famous symphony was projected throughout the city and onto the front lines. This was arguably one of the greatest tactical strikes made against the Germans, as it took a major toll on their morale; notably, the finale of the symphony predicted a clear Soviet victory, thus motivating Soviet forces. After the premiere in Leningrad, the symphony became a symbol and a musical weapon for the Allied forces.\textsuperscript{17} The symphony is unequivocally Russian, has a great nationalistic element to it, and was composed by one of the Soviet Union’s greatest cultural figures. Between this fact and the role it played during World War II, Dmitri Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 7 is one of the most significant pieces of music in recent history.\textsuperscript{18}

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1. Ross, Alex. The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century. 2007. New York. 216, 233-34
2. Ibid., 245
3. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 68
7. Hurwitz, David. Shostakovich Symphonies and Concertos. 2006. 84
8. Ross, 247
10. Norris, 65
13. Ross, 246
14. Volkov, 179
15. Ross, 191
16. Ibid.
17. Volkov, 180
18. Blokker, 81

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5. The replacement ratio is defined as pension income after retirement divided by job income before retirement. It is an indicator of the living standards of the elderly.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
12. Unless otherwise noted, data and information is collected from the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People’s Republic of China.

Endnotes & References 69