
SHOSTAKOVICH SYMPHONY NO.10

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Dmitri Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony in E minor (1953) came at a dangerous time in his career. In 1948, he had been formally denounced upon the issuing of the Zhdanov Doctrine, which required all Soviet art to align with the principles of Socialist Realism. The Tenth was the first symphony he had written since, and therefore marked a new point in Shostakovich's career.

It was premiered after Joseph Stalin's death in December 1953 by the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra under Shostakovich's longtime collaborator, Yevgeny Mravinsky. While he provides no explicit program, Shostakovich admitted in his memoir, Testimony, that the symphony is 'about Stalin' and the terrors of his diabolical regime.

Mark Wigglesworth has called the opening movement 'the most perfect single orchestral movement [Shostakovich] ever wrote.' It is an expansive twenty-five-minute scherzo in rough sonata form. It opens with a brooding section in the low strings, before the clarinet introduces a wistful and wandering waltz melody. This journeys around the orchestra, as the music seems to wander and float through states of introspection and nostalgia. The flute then introduces a second waltz theme, this time of a more anxious character. The strings briefly develop this theme until it seems to retreat to a whisper, when the bassoon restates the first clarinet theme and initiates an extended, dramatic development section. The nervous flute theme is transformed into a more extroverted character with furious brass chords and insistent timpani interventions. The opening themes interweave with each other as the orchestra builds ferociously in volume and textural complexity; the first clarinet theme and second flute theme dovetail with each other to stunning emotional effect. As the movement winds down, a clarinet brings back to the introduction in a more introverted



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frame, as the pizzicato strings evoke a barren atmosphere through which we visit the desolation of the Russian hinterland.

If the first movement was one of Shostakovich's longest symphonic movements, the second is by far his shortest. With over fifty crescendos, it is a movement of extreme emotional concentration. It encapsulates Shostakovich's profound but repressed anger at the terrible human cost of Stalin's regime, under which millions disappeared without a trace. Prepared by a moment of quiet, the movement bolts to a muscular finish.

The third movement presents another scherzo, quirkier and more bashful than the first movement. It is comprised of two key motives. In the first, Shostakovich spells out his initials in musical notation using the German transliteration of his name, where E flat is 'es' and B natural is H. The motif D/E-flat/C/B therefore spells DSCH. This becomes an autobiographical stamp which Shostakovich imprints throughout the symphony. The second motive, introduced by the horn, is a reference to the horn call of

Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* (1909), and is thought to be a musical spelling of Elmira Nazarova, an Azerbaijani student with whom Shostakovich was in love at the time. As the DSCH motive continually reappears, it is shadowed by the horn call, which leads the movement into a mood of desolation.

The finale begins with a melancholy set of string and woodwind solos, which seem to lose all direction until they are abruptly swept aside by a merry, racing tune. But this picaresque energy is challenged by darker sections in which staccato brass chords, deep string passages and frantic woodwind flourishes create a scene of extraordinary emotional variation. The DSCH motive asserts itself again and again until the symphony ends with a triumphant glissando. Amidst all the horror in the Tenth Symphony, it is ultimately the sense of determination, its commitment to freedom, art, and meaning, which makes it such a vivid and popular document of the twentieth century.

By Adam Weitzer

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