

Symphony No. 7, Op. 60, Leningrad

Dmitri Shostakovich

The years of World War II counted as a low point for nearly everyone who lived through them. In Soviet Russia, where life was a challenge to begin with, survival became generally precarious and, in many places, unlikely. Composers were enlisted to support the Soviet efforts in the Great Patriotic War, as it was generally known there, by producing propagandistic pieces; thus while the hostilities were going on, Dmitri Shostakovich created two, and perhaps three, “war symphonies” that related directly to the experience of Soviet citizens. The first of this group was his Seventh Symphony, the so-called *Leningrad* Symphony.

In the years directly preceding the war, Shostakovich’s situation was relatively stable — far better than it had been during the dark days after his operas *The Nose* and *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* had been condemned by Soviet authorities in 1930 and 1936, respectively. He had achieved redemption through his Fifth Symphony (1937), and since then had been living with his family in Leningrad (called Saint Petersburg when he was born there, as it is again today), in an apartment at the House of Composers provided by the Composers’ Union. In 1937 he was also appointed professor at the Leningrad Conservatory, and once the war got underway he was busy writing scores for Soviet propagandist films.

In June 1941 Germany invaded the USSR. Shostakovich tried to enlist in the Soviet Army but was rejected, due to poor eyesight. He then volunteered to serve on the Leningrad Conservatory’s fire brigade. A photograph of him in that capacity was widely printed in Russian newspapers, and it served as the basis for the illustration, titled “Fireman Shostakovich,” that graced the cover of *Time* magazine on July 20, 1942. Be-

hind his resolute portrait are fiery scenes of destruction plus a staff of music, on which is written the four-note motif played by strings and bassoons in the second and third measures of his Seventh Symphony.

By September 8, 1941, Nazi forces had surrounded Leningrad, beginning a siege that would last for 872 days, until January 27, 1944, when the European theater of war began to play out in favor of the Allied Forces. The Siege of Leningrad was an atrocity that may have led to more casualties than any other single event in the history of warfare. Nobody knows how many citizens died of starvation, freezing, deprivation, disease, and despair, not to mention the usual casualties from military bombardment. Estimates range from about 600,000 to 1.5 million. We will not recount details here. Interested persons might steel themselves to read Brian Moynahan’s book *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony* or to view the BBC documentary film *Leningrad and the Orchestra that Defied Hitler*.

IN SHORT

Born: September 25, 1906, in Saint Petersburg, Russia

Died: August 9, 1975, in Moscow, USSR

Work composed: July 15–December 27, 1941; dedicated to the City of Leningrad

World premiere: March 5, 1942, in the Palace of Culture in Kuibyshev, USSR, by the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra, Samuil Samosud, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: October 14, 1942, Arturo Toscanini, conductor, which marked the New York Premiere

Most recent performance: April 9, 2005, Semyon Bychkov, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 77 minutes

Certainly, the massive *Leningrad* Symphony is tied to the siege, and it includes descriptive military passages, but it does not strive to depict only gloom. (That lay ahead in the Eighth Symphony.) In fact, Shostakovich began the Seventh Symphony prior to the Siege of Leningrad, although most of the composition took place during that time. In a radio broadcast, Shostakovich stated that the work had to do with how “life goes on in our city.” He continued:

When I walk through our city a feeling of deep conviction grows within me that Leningrad will always stand, grand and

beautiful, on the banks of the Neva, that it will always be a bastion of my country, that it will always be there to enrich the fruits of culture.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling alto flute and one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, three clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet) and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, eight horns, six trumpets, four trombones and two bass trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, field drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, xylophone, two harps, piano, and strings.

At the Premiere

The premiere of Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony took place in Kuibyshev, a city deep in Russia’s interior where Stalin had evacuated a group of creative artists, including Shostakovich and the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra, appreciating the role that they could play in the war effort; Samuil Samosud conducted. “I worry that there are not enough orchestral forces here to cope,” he wrote to his friend Isaak Glikman, “because the symphony does call for a very large orchestra.” He would have preferred to entrust the new work to the Leningrad Philharmonic and Evgeny Mravinsky, but they had been removed far away to Siberia.

The real prize however, was to have it played in besieged Leningrad. An ensemble was assembled by military musicians released from combat for the occasion, along with remnants of the

Leningrad Radio Orchestra, local instrumentalists who were still among the living — some of them by the slenderest of threads. Conductor Karl Eliasberg insisted on the highest musical standards, although his players sometimes fainted from hunger and toppled from their chairs. Twenty-seven of the musicians who had participated in rehearsals did not play in the concert, 25 of them because they had died. Listeners jammed the Philharmonic Hall on August 9, 1942 — the 335th day of the siege — with audience and musicians approximating “concert dress” as best they could. “People were captivated,” a witness reported, “tears of deep feeling welled up in their eyes. They had not cried over the dead bodies of their loved ones in winter, but now the tears came, ‘bitter and relieving’ and unashamed.”

Shostakovich, in Leningrad Conservatory fire brigade dress, on the cover of *Time*, 1942

