

Shostakovich Symphony No. 5
Analysis by David Mitchell

In 1937, Shostakovich wrote *Symphony No. 5* to redeem himself with the communist party. His preceding work, *Lady MacBeth of the Mtsensk District*, was an international success, but it was considered by communist party officials to be an elitist work that only intellectuals could understand. It received this designation after Stalin attended one of the performances. He was not impressed with the cacophony of sound in *Lady MacBeth*. As a result, Shostakovich was denounced by Pravda, the official communist party newspaper. The paper ran an article that criticized Shostakovich's opera as "Muddle Instead of Music." The article went on to say "This is playing at things beyond reason that can end very badly." This meant that he was a persona non grata in the eyes of the state. His work opportunities dried up and he was in real danger of losing his life. Many people had been shot and sent to the gulags by Stalin for similar offenses. Essentially, Shostakovich was being used as an example to other artists to get in line with communist policy or suffer a similar fate. This is the situation that Shostakovich found himself in 1937.

Symphony No. 5 had to conform to communist party expectations. This meant that it had to be an accessible work that the people could understand and it had to extol the virtues of Stalin's communist state. With this in mind, Shostakovich returned to a traditional four movement symphonic form. This gave *Symphony No. 5* a clear formal structure. He also simplified his harmonic language compared to *Lady MacBeth of the Mtsensk District*. His goal was to appeal to a broad audience and conform to the communist party idea that music should appeal to the ordinary man and not just the educated elite.

Despite working under these creative restrictions, Shostakovich rose to the challenge and produced a great work of art. He could have grudgingly written a meager work of no consequence just

to satisfy party officials. Instead he produced a symphony that is arguably one of his best works. It is as if he wanted to prove that the party could not restrict his creativity.

Symphony No. 5 is a good example of restrictions that sometimes enhance a composer's creativity. Restrictions can make a composer approach the compositional process in a different way out of necessity. For example, music written for unpitched percussion often challenges the composer to focus exclusively on timbral, rhythmic or gestural development. For example, Dr. Ball's electronic midterm exam that limits students to a single sound source is another example. It forces the students to use tape manipulation to produce variety. The students are also forced to concentrate on gestural development. Shostakovich found himself in a similar situation. He was forced to conform to an aesthetic imposed on him by the communist party.

Even though Shostakovich simplified the harmonic vocabulary, there is still a great deal of harmonic ambiguity in the first movement. For example, the open gesture tonicizes d minor in measure 1. Measure 2 tonicizes E minor. In both measures, the leading tone of the key is present, but it does not resolve to the tonic. The third measure tonicizes Bb major in the first and second violins. The Cello and Viola play notes E, F#, and G from the key of E minor. These measures are a good example of what happens throughout the first movement. It is made up of quickly changing diatonic referential collections with no key confirmation or traditional chord progressions. This means that there is a great deal of harmonic variety and at the same time there is very little dissonance to offend the ear of Stalin. Its phrases are organized motivically in order to give the movement clarity. His motivic organization avoids the "Muddle Instead of Music" scenario that got Shostakovich into trouble in the first place.

The exploration of timbre in this piece is interesting. This is accomplished through doubling and the introduction of unexpected instruments to the orchestral ensemble. Doubling creates variety by combining timbres to create new sounds. At the same time, doubling keeps the harmonic texture simple. A good example of timbral exploration is the introduction of piano at rehearsal number 17. This

is very effective because the piano creates an ominous tone in a section that would otherwise sound like a straightforward military march. Additionally, this piano section prepares the listener for the unexpected introduction of a celeste near the end of the first movement. Without this piano section the celeste would sound like it came from nowhere.

The first movement is also an example of how to build tension and create a peak of intensity. Shostakovich creates a peak at 2 measures after rehearsal 38. He accomplishes this with increased rhythmic activity, sequencing, dynamics, and pitch. He avoids creating a “muddle of music” by doubling most of the parts instead of using a polyphonic texture.

There is also a good deal of rhythmic unity in the first movement. The dotted eighth note sixteenth note gesture that begins the first movement is found throughout. It becomes the dominant rhythmic gesture from rehearsal 32-36. There is also an eighth note followed by two sixteenth notes gesture that was introduced in measure 3. This gesture becomes an accompaniment figure later in the movement.