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Rapides Symphony Orchestra

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)
Symphony No. 10 in E minor, Op. 93

In 1979 when Solomon Volkov published *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitry Shostakovich as Related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov* he cast music scholars into a debate that has now lasted for more than a quarter of a century concerning the political allegiances of Shostakovich as well as their reflection in his music. Ever since, many scholars have treated Shostakovich's music as a code language waiting to be cracked as if Shostakovich was a soldier at war trying to secretly relay a covert message. The "war" Shostakovich was fighting, many have argued, was with Joseph Stalin himself – the man who for over thirty years ruled the Soviet Union with an iron fist – the tyrant whose image among his people was yet so favorable that for years after his reign ended a policy of de-Stalinization was seen as the only way to restore normalcy.

The Symphony No. 10 appeared in 1953 – the very year that Stalin died and his terrifying reign came to an end. Therefore, this Symphony is one of those works that receives the most analysis from scholars hoping to discover Shostakovich's secret code. In fact, to listen to the music with this subtext in mind, the first movement does seem weighed-down and oppressed from the outside; the second, could easily depict a battle scene; the third, a grotesque and insincere funeral dirge; and the fourth, a final triumph not without reminisces of the frightening battle we heard earlier. And, scholars have also discovered an actual code of sorts: the four-note motif D-S-C-H. According to German musical notation, the letters D-S-C-H correspond to the pitches we call D, E flat, C, and B. Throughout much of his career, Shostakovich used this motif to represent himself – a sort of musical signature which first appears explicitly in the third movement of the Tenth Symphony. If you also assume much of the frightening brutality found in the Symphony is representative of Stalin, suddenly this symphony does become an actual struggle between Shostakovich and Stalin.

Would it also be possible, however, to assume that the Tenth Symphony does not possess a program at all? Shostakovich did not append a subtitle to the Tenth as he did with so many of his other symphonies: the Second is subtitled "To October – A Symphonic Dedication;" the Third, "The First of May;" the Fifth, "A Soviet Artist's Response to Justified Criticism;" the Seventh, "Leningrad;" Eleven is "The Year 1905" while Twelve is "The Year 1917;" and Thirteen is "Babi Yar." With

the exception of the last which did get Shostakovich in some trouble, these titles are all meant to appease Soviet officialdom. The title "To October" praises the October Revolution of 1917 which first brought the Communist Party to power in Russia and laid the groundwork for the Soviet Union. This revolution is again honored in Symphony No. 12 whereas the Eleventh memorializes an earlier revolution in 1905. The Third Symphony's title "The First of May" references International Workers' Day – a holiday honoring the laborers that form the ideological basis of any Communist system. The subtitle of the Fifth promises a stylistic reform after the Communist Party's criticism of Shostakovich's previous compositions. And, the Seventh memorializes the horrific three-year siege on the city of Leningrad (with its patriotic namesake) by the German forces in World War II. If one assumes there is a program of post-Stalin liberation in the Tenth Symphony, could Shostakovich even have revealed it with such a subtitle the year of Stalin's death when most of the nation would have still been in mourning for their fallen leader? Therefore, Shostakovich has confirmed nothing regarding the existence or non-existence of a program by not attaching a subtitle to his Tenth Symphony.

What only confuses the situation more is the tonal nature of the symphony and the Classical format of its movements. The first movement is rooted in E minor just as one should suppose from the key signature in the title; its second theme insinuates the expected G major. By the end of the final movement, the symphony has reached E major, the required resolution to E minor according to the Soviet doctrine of Socialist Realism – a doctrine which states that music should reflect the heroic struggle of the common people. Admittedly, E major is only reached belatedly with the finale actually beginning in a dark B minor and remaining in such a mood throughout much of the movement. Fear, however, would have likely prevented Shostakovich from writing anything that did not conform to such a straightforward tonal plan – he had just been condemned by officialdom five years earlier in 1948 after his "victory" symphony (No. 9) had been scored so frivolously and mockingly.

Then, there is also the layout and structure of the movements to consider. The Tenth Symphony is set in the traditional four movements of the Classical Era – those that Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and their contemporaries employed so frequently. The first movement faithfully adheres to Classical sonata form, although its character does divert from the elegance found in so many Classical symphonies. The second and third also take their places in the Classical format: the second is short, fierce, and scherzo-like while the third fulfills the requirement for a slow movement, although not without the dance-like feel of the other interior

movement according to the Classical layout. (Although Classical structure dictates that the slow movement comes before the dance-like movement, Russian composers of the nineteenth century regularly switched the two interior movements as Shostakovich seems to here – think of Tchaikovsky’s *Serenade for Strings*, for example.) Finally, the fourth movement reflects the Classical tendency towards a fast movement sometimes with a slow introduction as heard here. Despite all of this, we must remember that a hundred years earlier, Romantic composers like Hector Berlioz and Franz Liszt had freed the program symphony from a reliance on the Classical layout of movements. Regardless, Shostakovich imposed programs on other Classically-structured works – the *Leningrad Symphony*, for example – so there could certainly be a program in the Classically-structured Tenth Symphony too.

Whether or not Shostakovich intended his Symphony No. 10 as a final triumph over Stalin’s oppression – whether Shostakovich even despised Stalin – we might never know. When Shostakovich was asked if the Tenth Symphony had a program, he answered listeners should “guess for themselves.” Volkov published his *Testimony* four years after Shostakovich’s death and there is some question as to just how much he “edited” the related memoirs. Would Shostakovich have related the same memoirs, considering he was hailed as a Communist hero upon his death? Today, it is generally accepted that Shostakovich’s music – particularly his series of fifteen symphonies – is his testimony, but what the composer is testifying to remains and might forever remain in question.

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