



Dmitri SHOSTAKOVICH

Cello Concerto No. 1

Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich (25 September 1906 – 9 August 1975) was a Russian composer and pianist. His father worked as an engineer under Dmitri Mendeleev, who published the original Periodic Table of Elements. Meanwhile, Shostakovich's mother introduced him to music and began teaching him piano at the age of 9. Clearly displaying musical talent, Shostakovich began composing around that time and enrolled in the Saint Petersburg Conservatory only a few years later. Shostakovich graduated from the conservatory at 19, and his graduation piece - the *First Symphony* (1926) - made him an instant success. On January 26th, 1936, Joseph Stalin and his entourage attended a performance of Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1934), which Stalin severely disliked. After this, Shostakovich was attacked in the magazine, *Pravda*, and his music was subsequently campaigned against. 1936 also marked the beginning of the Great Terror, in which political repression led to the deaths and imprisonment of many of Shostakovich's colleagues. The fear of being captured led Shostakovich to withdraw the premiere of his 4th Symphony, but his much more conservative 5th Symphony (1937) made him a critical and political success once again. During World War II, Shostakovich wrote his 7th Symphony (1941), which was famously performed in Leningrad during its siege by the Nazis by an assembly of starving amateur and professional musicians. It even involving a Russian military offensive to keep the concert hall safe and quiet during the performance, which reportedly received an hour-long ovation. Shostakovich again fell out of favour when his 8th and 9th symphonies were denounced for not accurately reflecting the current spirit of the Soviet Union. In 1948, under the Zhdanov decree, Shostakovich's music was essentially banned for "formalism" until Stalin's death in 1953. Shostakovich finally gave in and joined the Communist Party in 1960 (by force, many speculated) and saw his health deteriorate and purportedly became suicidal. He would continue to compose, completing a total of 15 symphonies, before he passed away from lung cancer in 1975.

The *Cello Concerto No. 1, Op. 107* (1959), was composed by Shostakovich after Boris Pasternak was forced to decline a Nobel Prize in Literature for the anti-Stalin themes in his novel, *Doctor Zhivago*, in 1958. The piece was made for Shostakovich's friend Mstislav Rostropovich, arguably one of the greatest cellists of all time. Despite the piece being famously difficult, Rostropovich memorized the score in only 4 days. The piece is presented as one movement followed by three movements played without pause.

The first movement (*Allegretto*) is jostled in by an aggressive 4-note theme that outlines a minor triad. The pace and intensity of the first movement never ceases, as a second theme - essentially a single, crying note - and a third theme based on a Jewish melody from Shostakovich's *From Jewish Folk Poetry* (1948) carry the tempo onward. Despite the opening movement's anger and chaos, the orchestration is noticeably - and perhaps, disturbingly - minimal.

The second movement (*Moderato*) begins with homophonic strings that ominously test the balance between tonality and chromaticism. While an elegiac theme is introduced by the soloist, the background strings continue to add tension to the harmonies. While there are moments of relief (a dance-like song is introduced with a jovial lilting accompaniment), the cello becomes increasingly agitated, and finally bursts into a sinister rendition of the initial elegy, presented with a spooky countermelody from the celesta.

The third movement (*Attacca*) is, in reality, the second movement's cadenza. The soloist begins slowly, allowing long legato notes to ring out. As the cadenza moves along (with the cello revisiting many of the themes already heard in the concerto), the tempo accelerates, building to a frenetic pace which launches directly into the last movement.

The final movement (*Allegro con moto*) begins with a flurry of coupled chromatic notes, first played by the woodwinds, and then taken over by the soloist. Shostakovich introduces two harrowing dance themes, one which sounds like a chase, and the other in a 3-beat pulse. This highly energetic and angry movement is rich with callbacks to previous themes, notably the first 4-note theme of the entire concerto, and even mockingly incorporates *Suliko*, one of Stalin's favourite pieces.