Notes on the Program

Violin Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 99

Dmitri Shostakovich

“I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia,” said Winston Churchill in a 1939 radio broadcast. “It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” His famous formulation might well have been applied to Dmitri Shostakovich, that nation’s most exceptional composer at the time, rivaled in posterity only by Sergei Prokofiev.

Few composers have been debated with the fervor that has been applied to Shostakovich in recent decades; indeed, one wishes that differences of opinion about the man and his music might be shared without the rancorous invective that has unfortunately come to characterize Shostakovich-related musicology. At least it may be said that the divergent opinions scholars have proposed about him arise from an unusual density of uncertainties about what lies at the heart of his music. Listening to Shostakovich provokes a sense that some message has been deeply encoded in the music, and it can be frustrating to suspect that the meaning cannot be entirely unraveled.

The composer spent most of his career falling in and out of favor with the Communist authorities. By the mid-1940s his official approval ratings had soared, plummeted, soared again, plummeted again, and soared anew. In 1945 his stock crashed yet another time when the Ninth Symphony struck Soviet bureaucrats as insufficiently reflecting the glory of Russia’s victory over the Nazis. By 1948 Shostakovich found himself condemned along with a passel of composer colleagues for “formalist perversions and antidemocratic tendencies in music, alien to the Soviet people and its artistic tastes” (as the Zhdanov Decree phrased it). He responded with a pathetic acknowledgement of guilt, and the next year redeemed himself with The Song of the Forests, a nationalist oratorio that gained him yet another Stalin Prize, backed by 100,000 rubles.

After Stalin’s death, in 1953, the Soviet government stopped bullying artists quite so much, but by then Shostakovich had grown indelibly traumatized and paranoid. He retreated to a somewhat conservative creative stance and until 1960 contented himself with writing generally lighter fare, keeping his musical behavior in check as if he suspected the Soviet cultural thaw to be simply an illusion that might reverse itself at any moment. In 1960, however, his Seventh and Eighth String Quartets launched a “late period” of productivity that would include many notable works of searing honesty.

In Short

Born: September 25, 1906, in St. Petersburg, Russia
Died: August 9, 1975, in Moscow, USSR
Work composed: 1947–48; not published until 1956, with possible revisions in the interim; dedicated to David Oistrakh
World premiere: October 29, 1955, Leningrad Philharmonic, Yevgeny Mravinsky, conductor, David Oistrakh, soloist
New York Philharmonic premiere: December 29, 1955, Dimitri Mitropoulos, conductor, David Oistrakh, soloist; this performance marked the work’s US Premiere
Estimated duration: ca. 37 minutes

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In the fall of 1955 there was a momentary warming in Cold War relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. Although the respite didn’t lead to a resolution of fundamental political issues, it did open the door for some of the leading Russian artists of the day to travel to the United States for the first time. One of those was the great violinist David Oistrakh, who would join the New York Philharmonic as the soloist for the US Premiere of Shostakovich’s Violin Concerto No. 1 in December of that year. The concerto, written for and dedicated to Oistrakh, had only been performed twice before, both times in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) with the Leningrad Philharmonic.

The question of which orchestra would get the honor of the first US performance was still up in the air when the violinist arrived in America that November. Oistrakh was scheduled to perform with The Philadelphia Orchestra and the Boston Symphony Orchestra before his New York Philharmonic debut. The original plan was for the Shostakovich concerto to be premiered in Philadelphia, but a last-minute program change bumped the work from the program — for reasons of “insufficient rehearsals.” On December 4 the Philharmonic sent out a press release announcing that Music Director Dimitri Mitropoulos would conduct the work in three concerts at the end of the month, and that a studio recording would be made immediately following the performances.

Years later, New York Philharmonic violist Leonard Davis recalled: “Oistrakh didn’t speak a word of English, and he was always surrounded by Soviet security people when he came to rehearsals and even onstage at the concerts. He had a big, round, rolling sound that we had never heard before … with great technical control and much heart.”

Critic Miles Kastendieck, of the New York Journal-American, agreed:

in the cadenza bridging the third and fourth movements, [Oistrakh] displayed mastery enough to make any violinist breathless and then matched Shostakovich in the scintillation of the finale. Mitropoulos and the orchestra did much more than play along with Oistrakh. They excelled in their own way.

Sedgwick Clark — who produced the Philharmonic ten-CD set titled The Historic Broadcasts 1923–1987, which included the live radio broadcast of the program with Oistrakh — compared that performance with the Orchestra’s studio recording of the work, saying it served as a prime example of the sparks that can ignite in a live performance, for one can sense both the Orchestra and its audience on the edges of their seats as the conductor and soloist tighten the screws from the first note to last. Their studio recording for Columbia a day later, while undoubtedly distinguished, can’t touch the inspired intensity and excitement of this one-time-only, single-take performance.
Shostakovich wrote his Violin Concerto No. 1 in 1947–48 and assigned it the opus number 77, which accurately depicted where the piece fell in his output. But the Violin Concerto No. 1 is universally identified as his Op. 99, which corresponds to its belated publication in 1956. What occasioned the delay? Cellist Mstislav Rostropovich blamed it on the violinist David Oistrakh. “I despised Oistrakh,” he told the Shostakovich scholar Elizabeth Wilson, “because the brilliant violin concerto written for him in 1948 was allowed to lie around waiting for its first performance. ... To my mind this was shameful and cowardly.” Yes, well ... the amount of finger-pointing that went on after the fact in Soviet musical circles was staggering and sometimes offensive. A complete account would not neglect to mention that the piece was completed on the heels of the Zhdanov Decree, the authoritarian slapdown that got Shostakovich fired from the faculty of the Leningrad Conservatory. That Shostakovich himself might well have had qualms about releasing such a piece at that moment must at least be entertained as a possibility. The fact is that Oistrakh provided considerable advice on the crafting of the solo part, did see the piece through its premiere, and, furthermore, was honored by the composer through the score’s dedication.

**Instrumentation:** three flutes (one doubling piccolo), three oboes (one doubling English horn), three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, tuba, timpani, tam-tam, tambourine, xylophone, celeste, two harps, and strings, in addition to the solo violin.

— James M. Keller, former New York Philharmonic Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair; San Francisco Symphony program annotator; and author of Chamber Music: A Listener’s Guide (Oxford University Press)

**Witness to the Premiere**

In March 1948 the violinist and composer Venyamin Basner, then 23 years old, attended Shostakovich’s last class at the Leningrad Conservatory, during which the composer “played for us for the very first time his newly finished violin concerto.” Basner reported:

Dmitri Dmitriyevich asked if I wouldn’t mind trying something out on the violin. Shaking like a leaf, I got my violin out. The very idea, that I should be the first violinist to attempt to play this difficult music and, what’s more, to sight-read it in the presence of the composer! ... The Concerto is a relentlessly hard, intense piece for the soloist. The difficult Scherzo is followed by the Passacaglia, then comes immediately the enormous cadenza which leads without a break into the finale. The violinist is not given the chance to pause and take breath. I remember that even Oistrakh, a god for all violinists, asked Shostakovich to show mercy. “Dmitri Dmitriyevich, please consider letting the orchestra take over the first eight bars in the finale so as to give me a break, then at least I can wipe the sweat off my brow.”

Immediately Dmitri Dmitriyevich said, “Of course, of course, why didn’t I think of it?” By the next day he had made the necessary correction by giving the first statement of the theme in the finale to the orchestra. The violin soloist comes in with the passagework afterwards.