

# Symphony in shorthand

Geoffrey Norris talks to *Vasily Petrenko* about Shostakovich's Leningrad Symphony

The first thing I notice when Vasily Petrenko opens his score of Shostakovich's *Leningrad* Symphony is that its pages are littered with pencilled hieroglyphs. A triangle here, parallel vertical lines there, an S on its side and a long wiggly arrow – what can they all mean? Petrenko happily explains. A triangle indicates triple time, the wiggly arrow *accelerando*, the S on its side *ritenuto*, vertical lines common time, and so on. These are conductor's cryptograms, a sort of shorthand to alert the eye to the symphony's tempo changes, particularly useful when hurtling along at speed. 'I did my first performance of the Seventh Symphony some years ago,' Petrenko says, 'and it was important to have these marks. But now I don't need them.'

Petrenko has consulted a number of scores – this one is the newish DSCHE edition – but there appear to be no fundamental differences between that and the two versions I go armed with, the *Muzyka* one in the 1980 Shostakovich Collected Edition and the miniature study score issued by the State Music Publishers in 1958. Petrenko has noticed that there are a few discrepancies between his score and the orchestral parts – a couple of brass notes missing from the first movement, an absent second trombone around fig 29, various *crescendo* and *diminuendo* markings – but these are things that can be ironed out in rehearsals.

Mention of the brass raises an interesting point, because, aside from the standard four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, there is an additional band that doubles the number of horns, trumpets and trombones required. 'These instruments are absolutely indispensable for the performance of the symphony,' insists my Russian

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miniature score. But why? 'There are two reasons why Shostakovich added so many brass instruments. One was that the people of Leningrad and musicians coming back from the front had been starving for a number of years and he knew that their breathing abilities would be rather weak. He wanted a big sound; hence the reinforcements. The second reason was that the musicians performing the piece got a quadruple norm of food, and he knew that while they were rehearsing they would be fed better. He was very humanistic.'

Petrenko has clear ideas about the picture that the *Leningrad* Symphony is painting and the 'anti-humanistic force' lying behind the first movement's famous long march. 'From the opening side-drum



Vasily Petrenko's recording of Shostakovich's Tenth won a 2011 Gramophone Award

taps it's a tricky *crescendo* for 10 or 15 minutes,' he says, mentioning that part of the theme resembles the song 'Da geh' ich zu Maxim' from Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow* (apparently Stalin's favourite work) and that the descending scale could be drawn from the third bar of 'Deutschland über alles'. 'So the anti-humanistic force is coming from both sides,' Petrenko maintains, explaining that 'another difficult thing to achieve is the stillness after the climax with the flute at figs 57-59. You need to get this stillness just right.'

Petrenko takes the second movement more slowly than normal, because the music 'needs to be more weighted on the bow. It's night music. You need time for the music to speak.' Pitching the woodwind chorale at the start of the third movement poses another problem: 'They need to be loud, but woodwinds playing *fortissimo* can lead to sharpening, so whenever I'm doing this piece I spend quite a lot of time on those sections.' With the finale, 'the difficulty is that you are going from the slow third movement to extremely fast music. The challenge is to keep it very soft to suggest emptiness.' He then speaks passionately of the finale's 'rebellious spirit', its 'protest', the 'ambivalent ending – in C major but still with unresolved conflict'. And with those final bars shifting mercilessly between 3/4 and 5/4, the diagrammatic shorthand certainly comes in handy. 🕒

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## The historical view

*Dmitry Shostakovich*  
(*Pravda*, March 29, 1942)

'Working on the symphony, I thought about our great nation, about its heroism, about mankind's high ideals, about man's fine qualities, about humanism, about beauty... I dedicate my Seventh Symphony to our fight against fascism, to our future victory and to my native city of Leningrad.'

*Virgil Thomson*  
(*New York Herald-Tribune*, October 18, 1942)

'[The symphony] is written for the slow-witted and the distracted...[it is] thin of substance, unoriginal and shallow...[Shostakovich is] willing to write down to a real or fictitious psychology of mass consumption in a way that may eventually disqualify him from consideration as a serious composer.'

*Mark Wigglesworth*  
(*Booklet-notes to BIS-CD873*, 1996)

'Music's ability to be ambiguous is one of its greatest strengths and for Shostakovich it saved his life. He could express his beliefs that humanity could defeat tyranny and he could survive...This piece is not about Hitler. It is not even really about Stalin. Its timelessness and its greatness is its constant relevance.'