

## The Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra

Undoubtedly, more codes in the Fifth will be revealed in the coming years but it is hard to think that we will ever fully understand all the cryptic references in his music which increased with the passage of time, culminating with his enigmatic Fifteenth Symphony in 1971.

From its earliest years, however, the Fifth was admired purely as a musical masterpiece and, whilst we might be horrified by the condemnation that Shostakovich experienced in 1936, there is no doubt that this did result in a thorough personal reflection on the future direction of the Symphony in Shostakovich's oeuvre.

It is difficult to think how he might have progressed following the Fourth Symphony without this period of enforced reflection and we can be reasonably sure that the subsequent 'simplification' of his musical language helped ensure his enduring popularity.

We can marvel at the purely musical mastery in the Fifth, how tender musical themes presented at the start of the first movement are transformed into brutal marches in the central development. His use of the orchestra remains distinctive, the brutality of the central section emphasized by the use of low braying horns, playing well out of their comfort zone.

Shostakovich's admiration for Mahler is strikingly evident throughout the Fifth, and no more so than in the second movement with its echoes of similar dances that are such a distinctive part of the Mahlerian sound-world.

Any suggestions of irony or ambivalent emotions are completely absent when we reach the third movement Largo, the heart of the Fifth, its tragic lament in the key of F sharp minor. It is fully understandable why many present at the work's premiere in November 1937 wept openly when hearing this music. Shostakovich showed himself to be truly in tune with the feelings of the people who had all been affected by anxiety, fear and loss during the Great Terror.

The coarse interruption of the Finale completely shatters the mood of the preceding Largo, but prepares the way well for the conclusion of this dramatic Symphony; it starts with excitement and brutal energy, before giving way to the central reflective section that culminates in the aforementioned Pushkin quotation.

And so to the ending. Volkov has already quoted Shostakovich allegedly referring to the forced celebration at the coronation scene in Mussorgsky's Boris Godunov. But there is a Russian tradition of ambivalent endings and most markedly so with Tchaikovsky: Tchaikovsky's explanation (in a letter to Nadezhda von Meck) of his Fourth Symphony's finale is strangely apt for Shostakovich:

'The fourth movement. If within yourself you find no reasons for joy, look at others. Go among the people. Observe how they can enjoy themselves. Surrendering themselves wholeheartedly to joyful feelings. A picture of festive merriment of the people... O, how they are enjoying themselves, how happy they are that all their feelings are simple and direct!... Rejoice in others' rejoicing. To live is still possible.'

(letter to Nadezhda von Meck, 1877, as quoted in David Brown's Tchaikovsky, Volume II: The Crisis Years)

And one cannot help hearing that the Finale of Tchaikovsky's Fifth sounds similarly forced in tone, Tchaikovsky himself expressing his dissatisfaction with it on several occasions afterwards because of its questionable authenticity.