

Playing the Holy Fool

The bassoon's message for Stalin in Shostakovich's 9th Symphony

Julian Roberts examines the composer's struggle with Soviet disapproval and how he chose the bassoon to convey it.



Julian Roberts

It was perhaps my greatest privilege during the 12 years I was Principal Bassoon of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra to have participated in playing consecutively all 15 of Shostakovich's symphonies under maestro Alexander Lazarev, performed as a series over two years. Lazarev shared with us some of the insights into this music that can only come from being born into, and living and breathing the Russian musical tradition.

In all symphonic music, there's nothing quite like this. A solo movement – a cadenza! – in the middle of a symphony... for bassoon! What is this all about? And come to that, what is the symphony about?

One grey autumn day a few years ago I was quite mundanely on my way to work. The train came into Glasgow Central station, and I knew I had a few moments to jump into a shop there to get a paper to read for the bus journey to Dundee where we were to record some unknown viola concertos. But there, between me and the shop, was a quite unusual sight. A motionless crowd, a man speaking slowly and solemnly, banners held by people in uniforms. Darn! I wouldn't be able to get anything to read!

Then I realised: 11 o'clock, the 11th November. 'They gave their lives for our freedom'. Two minutes of stillness: had I got time or would I miss the bus?



Alexander Lazarev

Gradually the spell was taking hold of me. I thought: 'freedom... to record unknown viola concertos for the world's viola fetishists!'

Then the extraordinariness took over. If there's anywhere you don't have two minutes to spare it's at a railway station where time, or the lack of it, rules everything. How we can curse if our train is delayed for two minutes! Although Glasgow Central station in some ways could be said to resemble a cathedral in the scale and magnificence of its architecture, normally it is very un-cathedral like, with swarms of people rushing about their business. Yet here we all were, a big crowd of unsuspecting travellers forced to stop and think, to pause and remember.

Very strangely a wave of feeling seemed to pass around, and yes, a stifled sniffing came from nearby. The *Last Post* sounded, banners were raised. No trains seemed to have come or gone, there had been no announcements. The utter incongruity of the whole situation knocked me for six. The Central Station had for a short time become the cathedral, madly dashing travellers a congregation, while for an altar and cross we had the clock above us reminding us of the sacrifice we were making: two minutes.

It was a while before it hit me that this is exactly what Shostakovich was creating in that bassoon movement. In its massive stillness, time is temporarily completely suspended. In the utter incongruity, Shostakovich's partygoers and merry-makers are

paralysed into remembering the huge suffering that the war victory had cost, transfixed by one lone voice. Then in the 5th movement they slip back into ordinary forgetful life, albeit rather hysterical, unsettled and disturbed.

Here is the context. In 1945 Shostakovich was expected to produce some fitting music to celebrate the Allies' World War 2 victory. But, further than that, he faced every composer's challenge with a ninth symphony: to create a comparable masterpiece to Beethoven's 9th. After his momentous 7th and 8th Symphonies, what could possibly follow?

What is the thing that we fear the most? To play badly at a concert? A reed not as good as we wanted? Not to be asked back? Maybe these or worse: economic insecurity, emotional crises, family misfortunes, physical problems, death of a loved one? What did Shostakovich fear most? He feared being shot dead at any time of day or night, at the whim of Stalin.

It is impossible for us to begin to comprehend the level of terror that was normality in Stalin's Russia. People of every walk of life could at any time disappear, to labour camps or to death squads. Artists, poets, composers were particularly vulnerable. Their work had to please the authorities, and if it could be seen as critical of the party or Stalin himself, there might be a night visit from the police, and they would simply vanish. Shostakovich, being one of the nation's foremost musicians,

was under Stalin's close scrutiny. The dictator was in many ways a man of culture: a regular at the opera; he possessed a fine tenor voice; a devotee of music and reportedly a recording of his favourite pianist was playing on his gramophone as he died.



Joseph Stalin

Through all his life, until the dictator's death, Shostakovich walked the tightrope of paying lip service to the party line – for which he was expected to produce 'positive' music – and his own artistic integrity. After the notorious front page of Pravda denunciation of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (almost certainly penned by Stalin himself) in 1936, and while at the youthful height of his powers (he was 29), he withdrew his 4th Symphony from its imminent first performance, and it was not played until 1961. Listen to it to hear what he truly wanted to write about real life in Russia at the time. After this, the 5th Symphony saw him restored to party acceptance; he had learned to write in a musical language that was ambivalent enough to fool the authorities. To me, this is what the 9th is all about: multiple layers of ironic ambivalence resulting from a life lived between a rock and a hard place.

His dilemma was most acute now in 1945. After years of enormous human losses and massive suffering (listen to the 7th and 8th Symphonies), with a peace deal of uncertain prospects, a victory symphony was required to please the party and Stalin, and yet needing to be something worthy of Beethoven's 9th to boot. In fact he told friends that he was composing something huge with chorus, factory sirens and locomotive whistles; sketches were produced, but abandoned,

and in the end he composed the 9th in just a few weeks.

The BBC's 'Discovering Music' presenter Stephen Johnson tells a joke rather well that goes something like this. 'Why is so much Russian music so sad and in the minor key.' The response: 'Ah, but in Russia we reserve the major key for *inexpressible sadness!*' Of all Shostakovich's symphonies this is the one most overtly and simply in the major key. And that is the point: sadness is, in the circumstances, inexpressible. It can only be allowed to be felt and stated by the joke instrument of the orchestra, the bassoon. And even then, the interruption of the prevailing mood is so appallingly tragic, so over the top, so grotesquely out of place that the listener can't be sure Shostakovich isn't sending up that too. This especially as the bassoon's lament seamlessly becomes the dance theme of the last movement, as if saying, 'only joking'. Indeed, to most people this is Shostakovich's 'joke symphony'. After perplexing audiences for a couple of years the symphony, and all his music, was banned by the authorities, evidently finding the joke no longer so funny.



Dimitri Shostakovich

The key may be E flat major but the piece is a send up of the whole notion of war victory music, and of the very idea of emulating Beethoven's last symphonic masterpiece: therefore an 'anti-9th'. The jollity is banal: indeed the banality and triviality is as much in the 25-minutes length of the work, less than half that of most of his other symphonies.

A pointer to the irony of the opening movement that Lazarev talked to us about is the trombone's constantly interrupting and repeated declamatory rising 4th, as if announcing a motif – but there's nothing to follow. Shostakovich, he said, often used the trombone to represent Stalin: plenty of bombast but in this case nothing to say, no follow through.

When it came to the 4th movement, what Lazarev showed me was that this is meant to be *very slow* – painfully or almost horribly so – both from the perspective of the player's stamina and for the listener. Although it is marked *cadenza* it is not to be played with the rhythmic freedom that the word normally implies. Indeed the score has the mark 'quaver equals quaver sempre' where the quavers first appear. It's rather – like at the railway station remembrance ceremony – as though time itself is temporarily suspended.

Lazarev said that in this movement, more than anywhere else, Shostakovich revealed his heart. To Shostakovich the bassoon represented the human voice, meaning 'the voice of humanity'. That is also the feeling of the opening of the last movement of the 8th Symphony when, after all the tragedy, the bassoon sets off on a simple folk-like tune in C major.

Following Lazarev's approach to executing the *cadenza*, I found all sorts of images coming to mind. Indeed the whole symphony presents itself to me as a drama, much more programmatically than any of his other works, much in the same way as Beethoven's 6th is so clearly depicting those country scenes. The first movement shows general boisterous merrymaking, the second a lullaby of inebriation and gentle slumber, the third is the morning after the night before with everyone waking up to more festivities and clowning (the dancing tuba reminding me of the bear in Stravinsky's *Petrushka*). At the rehearsals for the first performance Shostakovich was heard saying: 'The Circus, the circus'. Then a rising tide of anxiety seems to sweep over everyone. It is as though something terrible has been discovered: someone who won't celebrate and dance.

The brass announce in unison a frightening fanfare – they sound like a harshly neon-lit firing squad preparing to shoot – and the cymbal sounds on the command ‘fire’. The double dotted fanfare suggests the baroque style, the notation perhaps of a recitative from an oratorio. The cymbal reminds us of a pantomime magic trick, of letting the djinn out of the bottle. Reality is suspended, time stands still. It is a *Don Giovanni* moment, when the Commendatore comes to life and a shiver of horror runs through the audience for the mocking Don. The bassoon will tell the truth of the war and what the victory has cost. In the tradition of the Court Jester or Holy Fool, only the orchestral joker is allowed to tell the truth. There is a ring of Old Testament prophet about him, and of the tragic clown in *I Pagliacci*.

At the start the bassoon plays a falling 4th (the first two notes of the symphony), the inversion of the trombone’s gesture in the first movement – as if saying ‘here is your answer, Stalin: there *is* something to say’ (see Postscript). Then there are two excruciatingly painful, dissonant, laments. The first is delivered over a sustained F major 1st inversion (in violas and double basses only, providing a thinner, rather more strained sounding string texture, perhaps implying a hostile crowd). Following another brass fanfare, the second lament is over a sustained A major 1st inversion. This key is about as far away as possible from the movement’s home key of Bb minor, and is the tritone (historically the ‘devil’s interval’) to the symphony’s key of E flat. There isn’t pathos however, nor sentiment; pity is not invited. It is simply a statement of complete horror, not only about the war but of Stalin’s reign of terror, each note representing the thousands of dead, tens of thousands injured and millions of ordinary people’s suffering. The falling 4ths feature throughout – the most powerful the last, Eb to Bb – against that A major triad.

Like the experience at the station, and how we all feel during the Remembrance Day two minutes of silence, we should feel deeply uncomfortable during this music (particularly the player!) As though time has stopped. This is the quality that the Russian tradition of performing this

music has. For some, it is too embarrassing. For just a few moments the monumental scale, the silence, the feeling of vast wastelands of frozen tundra that Shostakovich conjures in his other symphonies, should be present in those simple sustained major chords.

Not least we should feel uncomfortable because of the nature of the writing for the bassoon. The statement seems to require a more powerful sounding instrument of more heroic quality, a bigger range of tone and expression. The music’s most heartfelt phrases are like screams, written at the very top of the instrument’s range. They are not comfortable to play; they are extreme and they should sound extreme. They may risk accident; a high note may not speak and that risk should be part of it. But in a way this frailty is also the point: at these occasions it is down to one, maybe frail or thinly voiced man or priest, to pronounce the immensely meaningful words.

And then the magic continues. There is a poignant moment of complete silence before the bassoon seemingly relents, slipping down the semitone from A to A flat. The music is now metrical, in time, conducted. The strings respond, moving to A flat minor: at last it seems there might be reconciliation. The strings stop and the bassoon is left holding a questioning, almost pleading C flat. Will there be understanding for the point of view expressed? Alas no: there is silence. There can be no relenting and the bassoon must join in the official celebrations, and dance too. No alternative is available.

Just maybe this moment of extraordinary psychodrama represents how Shostakovich managed his life-long artistic dilemma. In this moment of managed schizophrenia, of controlled bi-polar disorder, the last note of the 4th movement – a long groan on low C flat (lower than any of the music so far) – *becomes* the beginning of the theme of the last movement.

This theme is a bitter dance of state-enforced jollity. Note the tritone on the first beat of the theme (A in the bassoon over E flat major chord)

repeated three times on the 3rd and 4th bar. The solo ends with another great sigh, extinguished in a short note of resolution – like the dropped tambourine of Petroushka’s death – though here no one notices in the gathering string sound as they take up the theme.

Gradually the party atmosphere goes sour and evaporates. The music becomes restless and unsettled, twice coming to a questioning momentary halt. The only way out is increasing freneticism, and in the end it is as though everyone just runs away. The abrupt and not quite satisfactory end – no triumphant blazing tonic key coda here – always seems to take audiences by surprise. The victory party has bombed, the state celebration has disintegrated into nothing.

The composer once said: ‘If they cut off both hands, I will compose music anyway, holding the pen in my teeth!’ During the Cold War, western critics used to denigrate Shostakovich as morally weak, one who sacrificed his creative individuality in order to survive the oppressive demands of the Soviet system.

Just imagine being the bassoonist playing that symphony at its first performance, in front of Stalin and the State entourage, a new symphony written to praise the Soviet and Allied war victory. That cadenza is the most monumental act of defiance of authority, and could have been the composer’s suicide note if things had turned out badly. As it was, his music was banned from 1948 until after Stalin’s death in 1953.

Postscript

Probably it is coincidence, or perhaps a subconscious association in the composer’s mind: the first two notes (that falling 4th) of the solo cadenza are the same as those for first bassoon in bar 113 of the slow movement of Beethoven’s *Eroica Symphony*, music written for a fallen leader. The bassoon interrupts the funeral march to declaim something new, but here injecting a mood of optimism, albeit one that by bar 150 is shown to be a foolish hope, unable to overcome tragedy.

Finally, two excerpts from *Testimony, The Memoirs of Dimitri Shostakovich* (as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov):

‘It was very unfortunate, the business with the 9th. I mean, I know that the blow was inevitable, but perhaps it would have landed later, or less harshly, if not for the *Ninth Symphony*... When my 9th was performed, Stalin was incensed. He was deeply offended, because there was no chorus, no soloists. And no apotheosis.

There wasn’t even a paltry dedication. It was just music, which Stalin didn’t understand very well and was of dubious content... I couldn’t write an apotheosis to Stalin, I simply couldn’t. I knew what I was in for when I wrote the 9th... and my stubbornness cost me dearly.’

Volkov writes in the book: ‘Shostakovich became the second great *yurodive* composer. The *Yurodivy* is a Russian religious phenomenon... he has the gift to see and hear what

others know nothing about. But he tells the world about his insights in an intentionally paradoxical way, in code. He plays the fool, while actually being a persistent exposé of evil and injustice.’