

## Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

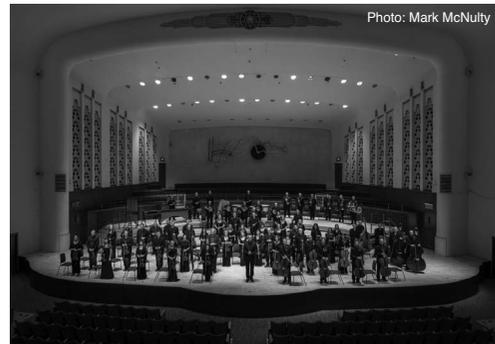


Photo: Mark McNulty

The award-winning Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra is the UK's oldest continuing professional symphony orchestra, dating from 1840. The dynamic young Russian, Vasily Petrenko was appointed Principal Conductor of the orchestra in September 2006 and in September 2009 became Chief Conductor. The orchestra gives over sixty concerts each season in Liverpool Philharmonic Hall and tours widely throughout the UK and internationally, most recently touring to China, Switzerland, France, Spain, Germany, Romania and the Czech Republic. In recent seasons world première performances have included major works by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, Sir John Tavener, Karl Jenkins, Michael Nyman and Jennifer Higdon, alongside works by Liverpool-born

composers including John McCabe, Emily Howard, Kenneth Hesketh and Mark Simpson. Recent additions to the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra's extensive and critically acclaimed recording catalogue include Tchaikovsky's *Manfred Symphony* (2009 Gramophone Awards Orchestral Recording of the Year), the world première performance of Sir John Tavener's *Requiem*, an ongoing Shostakovich cycle (the recording of *Symphony No. 10* is the 2011 Gramophone Awards Orchestral Recording of the Year); Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances*, and *Piano Concertos Nos. 2 and 3* and *Nos. 1 and 4* with Simon Trpčeski; and Rachmaninov's *Symphony No. 2 and No. 3*.

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## Vasily Petrenko



Photo: Mark McNulty

Vasily Petrenko was appointed Principal Conductor of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra in 2006 and in 2009 became Chief Conductor. He is also Chief Conductor of the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, Principal Guest Conductor of the Mikhailovsky Theatre of his native St Petersburg, and Principal Conductor of the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain. He was the Classical BRIT Awards Male Artist of the Year 2010 and 2012 and the Classic FM/Gramophone Young Artist of the Year 2007. He is only the second person to have been awarded Honorary Doctorates by both the University of Liverpool and Liverpool Hope University (in 2009), and an Honorary Fellowship of the Liverpool John Moores University (in 2012), awards which recognise

the immense impact he has had on the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and the city's cultural scene. He now works regularly with many of the world's finest orchestras, including the London Philharmonic, Philharmonia, Russian National, Netherlands Radio Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, Philadelphia, Czech Philharmonic, Vienna Symphony, Sydney Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic and San Francisco Symphony Orchestras, the National Symphony Orchestra Washington, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, and the Rundfunk Sinfonieorchester Berlin. His wide operatic repertoire includes *Macbeth* (Glyndebourne Festival Opera), *Parsifal* and *Tosca* (Royal Liverpool Philharmonic), *Le Villi*, *I due Foscari* and *Boris Godunov* (Netherlands Reisopera), *Der fliegende Holländer*, *La Bohème* and *Carmen* (Mikhailovsky Theatre), *Pique Dame* (Hamburg State Opera) and *Eugene Onegin* (Opéra de Paris, Bastille). Recordings with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra include Tchaikovsky's *Manfred Symphony* (2009 Classic FM/Gramophone Orchestral Recording of the Year), an ongoing Shostakovich cycle, and Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances*, *Second* and *Third Symphonies* and complete *Piano Concertos*.

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# SHOSTAKOVICH

## Symphony No. 7 'Leningrad'

### Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

### Vasily Petrenko



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## Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

### Symphony No. 7 'Leningrad'

The fifteen symphonies of Dmitry Shostakovich presently stand at the very centre of the orchestral repertoire: together with those of Mahler, they can fairly be said to represent 'modern' music as it appears to the non-specialist concertgoer. Yet unlike any comparable symphonic cycle since that of Beethoven, these works do not progress in a way that might have endowed their career-spanning inclusivity with a logical evolution which carries them from aspiration to fulfilment.

Of the symphonies, the *First* is a graduation work that quickly accorded the teenage composer national acclaim and then international prominence. The *Second* and *Third* both represent the reckless accommodation between modernist means and revolutionary ends, while the *Fourth* stakes out the boundary between the individual and society that was to remain a focal point thereafter. The *Fifth* clarifies that boundary through paradoxically making it even more equivocal; a process that the *Sixth* continues by subverting the 'private/public' relationship still further. The *Seventh* is an unequivocal reaction to civil conflict and social collapse that finds its conceptual equivalent in the *Eighth*, and which in turn finds its opposite in the *Ninth*. The *Tenth* effectively marks the genre's culmination as the outlet for an abstract programme. The *Eleventh* initiates a period in which Russian concerns were to assume dominance, its historical acuity being diluted by the relative impersonality of the *Twelfth* and then intensified by the undeniable explicitness of the *Thirteenth*. The *Fourteenth* stands outside the symphonic genre as regards its form though emphatically not in terms of content, while the *Fifteenth* marks a belated re-engagement with an abstract approach to symphonic thinking such as might or might not have been continued.

The two years following the *Sixth Symphony* [Naxos 8.572658] were largely taken up by several highly contrasting film-scores, along with incidental music to Grigory Kozintsev's Leningrad staging of *King Lear* that was to be Shostakovich's last such undertaking. An orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* went unheard until 1959 – while his only abstract piece from this

period, the *Piano Quintet* [8.554830], was a resounding success at its première on 23rd November 1940; being awarded a Stalin Prize and also receiving comparable acclaim in the West, where musical 'officialdom' remained equivocal over the nature of Shostakovich's engagement with the formal and expressive tenets of the classical tradition.

The weeks after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on 22nd June 1941 saw Shostakovich volunteer with the Home Guard, though his duties as fire-fighter amounted to little beyond a photograph of the suitably attired composer on the roof of the Leningrad Conservatoire. He made arrangements of numerous songs and arias for entertaining the troops, and sketched a large-scale choral work based on the *Psalms of David* before abandoning it for what became his *Seventh Symphony*. Begun on 19th July (though its underlying premise may well have been conceived some months earlier), the first movement was largely complete by 29th August as the siege of Leningrad (which lasted 870 days and cost over a million lives) intensified. The second movement was finished by 17th September and its successor 12 days later – before, on 1st October, Shostakovich and his family fled to Moscow before boarding a train, with various other artistic figures, heading east. They planned to travel to Tashkent (where the Leningrad Conservatoire had reassembled), but alighted at Kuybyshev (now Samara) on 22nd October and remained there for five months. This loss of creative impetus meant that work on the finale did not begin until 10th December and was completed 17 days later, by which time the work's status as an embodiment of and response to the Grand Patriotic War was being circulated as a propaganda tool of real potency.

Fraught conditions meant the première had to take place in Kuybyshev, where Samuil Samosud (who tried to persuade the composer to provide a choral apotheosis in praise of Stalin) conducted the Bolshoy Theatre Orchestra on 5th March 1942, in a performance broadcast nationwide and transmitted abroad. The dedication 'To the City of

Leningrad' set the seal on a work whose symbolic importance caught the public imagination like few before it, not least when given by the combined Bolshoy Theatre and All-Union Radio orchestras in Moscow on March 29th, and it was little surprise when a Stalin Prize was bestowed. The score had been microfilmed and flown via Tehran to the West – Henry Wood giving the UK première with the London Symphony as a radio broadcast on June 22nd (having made several cuts so that the nine o'clock news could begin on time), followed by a performance at the London Proms seven days later. Arturo Toscanini gave the American première in a broadcast with the NBC Symphony in New York on July 19th, while Serge Koussevitzky gave it in concert at Lenox with the Boston Symphony on August 14th. Most significant was the Leningrad première on August 9th, Karl Eliasberg conducting the Leningrad Radio Orchestra along with brass players recalled from the front in an account broadcast on loudspeakers throughout the city as a psychological weapon against the German troops.

The symphony's first recording, made by Toscanini and the NBC Symphony, was a transfer from the July 19th 1942 radio broadcast. It was followed in December by Leopold Stokowski conducting the same orchestra, from another NBC broadcast. The first studio recording was made by Yevgeny Mravinsky and the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra in Moscow on 7th January 1953. Karel Ančerl and the Czech Philharmonic followed in September 1957, while Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic's slightly abridged reading came in October 1962. Yevgeny Svetlanov and the USSR Symphony followed early in 1968, with the first UK recording made as late as January 1974 when Paavo Berglund conducted the Bournemouth Symphony.

The *Seventh Symphony* is scored for three flutes (doubling piccolo and alto flute), two oboes, cor anglais, three clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contra-bassoon, eight horns, six each of trumpets and trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (up to six players), two harps, piano and strings (around 60 desks). Shostakovich spoke of a programme running across its four movements representing 'War', 'Memories', 'Native Expanses' and 'Victory', but he quickly suppressed any such subtitles. A

moderately paced sonata design, its development largely replaced by the (in)famous 'war machine' episode, is followed by a fusion of scherzo and intermezzo, a rondo-like *Adagio* then a formally fluid yet highly systematic finale.

The first movement commences with a resolute theme on strings and woodwind, punctuated by incisive brass chords. This yields a number of related motifs before returning to the opening idea, after which it subsides via pensive woodwind writing into the second theme – a gently lyrical melody for upper strings above an undulating accompaniment on lower strings, which is presently joined by a hymn-like motif from woodwind and expands in almost balletic terms before the theme's initial gesture emerges plaintively on piccolo above lower strings. The exposition then fades out contemplatively on piccolo then violin and strings – at which point a new theme is heard, as if in the distance, on pizzicato strings against a martial rhythm on side drum. Firstly this passes to subdued flutes over gently rocking strings; then to capricious flutes and piccolo over more animated strings; then to a 'double variation' on oboe and bassoon; then to muted brass with side drums countered by an insistent ostinato on piano; then to lively imitative exchanges between clarinets and oboes; then to violins as the theme comes decisively into the foreground; then to all the strings in rhythmic unison; then to lower brass with the ostinato on strings and percussion; then to all of the brass against surging strings and percussion; then to strings and woodwind against swooping brass with the ostinato on percussion; finally to all of the brass and woodwind against offset interjections on strings and percussion, with the martial rhythm on no less than three side drums. At last a new version of this theme strikes out on brass, initiating an extended transition upon various of its motifs as tension mounts towards the climactic return of the opening theme – thundered out in baleful terms across the whole orchestra, with a fateful undertow from timpani.

Further martial elements intervene before the music can subside into weary recollections of the second theme on violins then flute over lower strings. There follows the extended reprise of this theme as a stoic recessional for bassoon over a halting ostinato on the piano – austere chords from lower woodwind and brass leading to the

coda. The consoling strains of the first theme on strings attain a brief climax, followed by a wanly radiant version of the second theme's hymn-like motif for upper strings, then finally a distant recollection of the martial theme for muted trumpet, pizzicato strings and percussion: the side drum receding beyond earshot effecting the quietest of conclusions.

The second movement is unusual among Shostakovich symphonies through its being an intermezzo rather than a scherzo (anticipated by the second movement of the then unplayed *Fourth Symphony*). This starts with a gently capering theme on strings which unfolds at a leisurely pace before it becomes the accompaniment for a plaintive melody on oboe that briefly passes into a warmer variant on cor anglais which is offset by lower strings. The initial theme's return on pizzicato strings is curtailed by a strident idea on upper woodwind against an insistent ostinato on pizzicato strings then percussion – this latter propelling the music to an energetic march-like theme on brass and percussion, incisively partnered by strings. Aspects of these combine in a brief climax which subsides on strings and brass into a curtailed reprise of the initial theme on strings. The plaintive melody now reappears reflectively on bass clarinet with deft accompaniment on flutes and harp. The warmer variant emerges, then strings have a fragmented recall of the initial theme prior to a calmly equivocal ending.

The third movement begins with a plangent chorale on woodwind and harp in rhythmic unison, twice alternating with a passionate string cantilena whose second appearance elegiacally subsides into an inward recollection of the chorale from lower woodwind. Pizzicato chords initiate an elegant melody for flutes over halting strings, which latter then expand on this theme in more expressive terms before recalling the chorale in a codetta of truly Mahlerian pathos. Strings now launch the central section with a dramatic theme which unfolds as a confrontation between strings and brass, martial percussion much in evidence. A rapid crescendo brings with it a heightened return of the chorale on brass against surging strings, the cantilena heard resplendent on brass,

before the woodwind then the strings continue this reprise in more literal terms. The elegant melody reappears on violas then full strings prior to intensified restatements of both chorale and cantilena being allotted mainly to strings, and reaching a fatalistic close on woodwind underpinned by echoing chords deep in the bass.

The fourth movement proceeds from the above chords during a span of calmly expectant music whose string theme is twice offset by enquiring asides on woodwind. At length the momentum picks up space with an incisive theme on strings that soon builds in a rapid crescendo of activity towards a heated confrontation with the brass, then on to an explosive climax that is urged on by incisive tattoos from percussion. The initial music is now recalled by woodwind as the music subsides into ostinato patterns on strings; these in turn are countered by aggressive *col legno* strikes with upper woodwind warily in attendance. The rhythmic motion soon slows to an intensely wrought 'sarabande' for all the strings that alternates with more reflective passages in which clarinets then flutes come soulfully to the fore. The strings round off this section with a subdued postlude, which itself passes into an extended recall of the initial music that proceeds as though in slow motion – building in a gradual crescendo (with elements of the composer's favoured 'passacaglia' form) where earlier motifs are recalled on the way to a final apotheosis. Strings unfold an intensified version of the initial idea, continued by horns as strings begin a circling ostinato that is made the basis for a climactic return on brass of the work's opening theme, propelled by urgent gestures on side drums and timpani, which brings about a massively determined close.

Lavishly praised in wartime then largely dismissed in its aftermath, the *Seventh Symphony* has latterly enjoyed a return to favour – not least through the possibility of its inspiration stemming from atrocities committed by Stalin as much as Hitler. More than that, however, it stands as a testament to human endurance in the midst of social conflict and cultural crisis.

Richard Whitehouse