

# SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1314

## DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH ~ FIRST RECORDINGS

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH was born in St. Petersburg in 1906. His father was a pianist and biologist with interests in revolution. His first piano lessons were from his mother. In 1919 he entered Petrograd Conservatory to study piano and composition with Shteinberg and Zhitomirsky. Two years later the exhausting interventionist war with its blockade was followed by a winter of severe cold and a terrible famine. Strict rationing was imposed, but there was an 'academic' ration for important workers in the arts, literature and the sciences for which, as a student, Shostakovich did not qualify. Glazunov, who was involved in the allocation at the local level, commented, "Mitya could be the Russian Mozart... if they don't manage to arrange it, then tell the council to give Mitya my rations."

Shostakovich suffered from nerves, and his health generally was poor, nevertheless, whilst studying, it was necessary for him to play in cinemas to help support his widowed mother and younger siblings.

After he passed his finals, in piano in 1923, in composition in 1925, it was not obvious whether he should be a pianist or a composer, but it soon became clear that he would excel at both.

His first symphony, written for his graduation, was performed in Leningrad by Nikolai Malko in 1926, in Berlin by Bruno Walter in 1927 and in Philadelphia by Leopold Stokowski in 1928.

At the time of the Revolution Shostakovich was eleven years of age. Chaliapin, Heifetz, Horowitz, Polyakin and Prokofiev were amongst those who left; temporarily or permanently. Shostakovich stayed. No man can read into the soul of another; report can be only of what is public. On this basis Shostakovich was at all times loyal to the Soviet Union, obedient to the Party and aware of his responsibilities to his fellow citizens. His second and third symphonies, *To October* and *First of May* respectively, intended to depict Marxist ideology in music, were well received by party hacks.

Around 1928 Shostakovich began to compose for the stage; a ballet, *The Golden Age*, an opera, *The Nose*, and incidental music to *The Flea* by Myakovsky.

In 1934 *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* was loudly trumpeted as a shining beacon of Soviet culture. However, as Stalin reviled it so Pravda attacked it. Thus after some 180 performances in Leningrad and Moscow it was suddenly realised that it was chaotic, coarse, neurotic, primitive, vulgar and much more besides.

Shostakovich cannot have been unaware of possible consequences. Whatever went on behind the scenes, his next work, his fifth symphony, was hailed as "The creative reply of a Soviet artist to just criticism" and in 1940 his piano quintet was rewarded with the Stalin Prize.

He commenced his seventh symphony in Leningrad when the siege started in 1941, and it is dedicated to Leningrad. It was first performed in Kuybishev, to which Shostakovich was evacuated, and Moscow in 1942. At the same time a microfilm of the score was flown to Toscanini in New York. He performed it immediately; it was heard to great acclaim throughout the allied world.

In 1948 Shostakovich, Prokofiev and others were discovered to be guilty of formalistic perversion, anti-democratic tendencies in music... atonality, dissonance and other similar matters. Shostakovich recanted with expressions of self-abasement which would have satisfied the Spanish Inquisition. His repentance must have been acceptable; during the following years he received five state honours, and state patronage meant that his material needs were looked after.

Nevertheless, until the death of Stalin in 1953 Soviet composers walked a tightrope. Shostakovich divided himself between conformist composition and art. Throughout his life he was much influenced by Jewish culture. A song cycle of settings of Jewish poetry of this period was published only after Stalin's death. The tenth Symphony, first performed immediately after Stalin's death, at first caused puzzlement, but was soon acknowledged as a great work.

After Prokofiev's death, he died on the same day as Stalin, Shostakovich became the sole great Russian composer. One might have expected him to flower in the easing political atmosphere. Strangely, however, he did not move from his musical and political mould, as before, never commenting; perhaps he had aged.

*Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* was revived as *Katerina Izmaylova* and recognised as a great opera in 1962. In 1962 it was heard in London and in 1965 in New York. There were also honours from abroad, a D.Mus.h.c.Oxon in 1958 and the Gold Medal of the Royal Philharmonic Society in 1966.

Motor neuron disease, diagnosed in 1965, and a heart problem in 1966 were followed by a gradual decline in health, but, seemingly equally indifferent to approval or disapproval, major works continued to flow from him; among them the fourteenth symphony, a song-cycle in tribute to Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death*, and the fifteenth symphony, which he called a protest against death.

Dmitri Shostakovich died in Moscow in 1975, a month after finishing his viola sonata.

Shostakovich is amongst very greatest composers of the twentieth century and without doubt the greatest composer educated within the Soviet system.

He was influenced by Borodin, Mahler, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. He, in turn influenced his followers, not only through his music, but also through his teaching in Leningrad and Moscow.

He was admired by Soviet musicians, and he admired them. He dedicated compositions to the Beethoven Quartet, Gilels, Mravinsky, Oistrakh, Rostropovich, Richter and Vishnevskaya, and they championed his work with fine performances.

He wrote with facility, showing wit and sarcasm, sometimes startlingly quoting themes from other composers, building huge blocks from short themes rather than from extended melodies, but perhaps he might have followed the very self-critical Brahms by withholding some lesser works.

He is widely accepted as the greatest symphonist of the twentieth century, his fifteen works in this form including his responses to the political system of his surroundings, to war and to old age.

His fifteen string quartets move in parallel progression in the more intimate manner appropriate to the medium.

The twenty-four piano preludes, Op.34, illustrate well his success in controlling within himself the incompatible springs of tradition and innovation.

In *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* is found Russian understanding of verismo flavoured with *Wozzeck*.

Of his 147 published works 37 are film scores, many of the silent period. The political content of these, particularly *Fall of Berlin* in 1950, probably saved him from prison.

The trio is dedicated to the memory of the composer's "closest and dearest friend" Ivan Sollertinsky.

The Moscow Conservatoire formed a student string quartet with Dmitri Zifanoff, leader and 1st violin; Vassili Shirinsky, 2nd violin; Vadim Borisovsky, viola; and Sergei Shirinsky, 'cello. In 1923 this became the Moscow Conservatoire Quartet, and as an honour in 1931, the Beethoven Quartet. Zifanoff lead the quartet for over 50 years, 41 with the same personnel; one year longer than the Amadeus Quartet.

DMITRI ZIFANOFF, or Tzyganov, was born at Saratov in 1903. His father was a violinist and his mother a pianist. His father began to teach him when he was 8. His next teacher was Yaroslav Gayek. At the Moscow Conservatoire he was a student of Alexandre Moguelewsky and he was in the post-graduate class of Lieff Zeitlin; both famous quartet players. He became one of Russia's leading violinists. VASSILI SHIRINSKY (1901-1965) a distinguished composer and musicologist, was a very close friend of Shostakovich. The Quartet's début was with a quartet by Vassili Shirinsky in the Conservatoire's composition exam.

VADIM BORISOVSKY (1900-1972) was born in Moscow and studied at the Conservatoire, first violin with Press, then viola under Bakaleinikov, who persuaded him to play the viola, as, most unusually, he could handle the largest instruments. He graduated in 1922 with a first prize in viola. In 1964 he had to retire due to ill health, but he continued to teach. His pupils include Barshai, Boguslavsky, Shebalin, and Tolpygo. He enlarged the instrument's repertoire with over 250 editions and transcriptions; he has been called the Lionel Tertis of Russia. SERGEI SHIRINSKY (1903-1974) was a younger brother of Vassili. He died during rehearsals of the 15th quartet.

In the 1923/1924 season the quartet performed 27 quartets. Typical for the following seasons were 210 rehearsals with 70 public performances.

The complete Beethoven cycle was given for the first time in 1928.

The quartet worked very closely with Shostakovich, giving the first performances of all his quartets but 1 and 15, and Shostakovich dedicated a quartet to each of them: no.12 to Zifanoff, no.11 to the memory of V. Shirinsky, no. 13 to Borisovsky and no. 14 to S. Shirinsky. A major event was the première in 1940 of Shostakovich's Piano Quintet, with the composer at the piano. The quartet also gave the first performances of most of the quartets of Miaskovsky and Shebalin, and of Prokofiev's second quartet.

All four players were professors of the Moscow Conservatoire.

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