

ASO Program Notes

Festive Overture

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 – 1975)

Dmitri Shostakovich was a composer whose music was inseparable from his personal experiences. As such, it was very much a barometer of life in Stalinist Russia. As an impressionable youngster in 1917, he saw a small boy suspected of stealing killed by a policeman during the Bolshevik Revolution. Ten years later he wrote his Second Symphony in memory of the revolution, but also, as some suggested, as a funeral march for the boy who had been killed. He was continually walking a fine line between loyal Stalinist and bitter man denying alliance to the Soviet system. Following the success of his First Symphony in 1926, Shostakovich was recognized by the Soviet government as a very talented, completely Soviet artist. He became an instrument of propaganda aimed toward Western countries. But he was also twice reprimanded publicly by Stalin, as if to remind him where the power lay. Later compositions were criticized and maligned, described as “crude, primitive and vulgar”, and in his memoirs Shostakovich recalls waiting with his wife for the knock on the door in the middle of the night that would mean imprisonment or execution, as it had to many others.

With resilience Shostakovich bounced back into national favor. In 1940 he was awarded the Stalin Prize for his Quintet for Piano and Strings. Once again he found himself among the most highly honored of Soviet composers. His Seventh Symphony reflected the spirit of the Soviet people during the siege of Leningrad, a vibrant testament of the times and a strong weapon in the war effort. He received the Stalin Prize for the second time. His popularity remained undiminished, and for his fiftieth birthday he received the Stalin Prize, now renamed the Lenin Prize, for the third time. In his sixtieth year he was awarded the title of Hero of Socialist Labor, the first musician ever to be awarded that prize.

Shostakovich has been accused of writing for his audience, adopting styles and subject matter currently in favor with governmental authority. Integrity has sometimes been sacrificed for superficial effect. Nonetheless when he draws from his own resources and remains true to himself there is no one better at depicting honest emotion, nobility and grandeur. He also possesses a gift for creatively presenting the Russian experience through music. The Festive Overture, composed in 1954, some say in celebration of the death of Stalin, is a short, very lively work, in which the composer gives free reign to the rhythmic vitality and excitement he does so well.

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