



Russian Festival: Johannes Moser Returns

For the final weekend of our Russian Festival, Johannes Moser performs one of Shostakovich's greatest scores, the Cello Concerto No. 1. After intermission, Music Director Laureate Edo de Waart conducts Rachmaninoff's lush Symphony No. 2.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born 25 September 1906; St. Petersburg, Russia
Died 9 August 1975; Moscow, Russia

Concerto No. 1 in E-flat major for Cello and Orchestra, Opus 107

Composed: 1959

First performance: 4 October 1959; Leningrad, Russia

Last MSO performance: February 2014; Santtu-Matias Rouvali, conductor;
Andreas Brantelid, cello

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo); 2 oboes; 2 clarinets;
2 bassoons (2nd doubling contrabassoon); 1 horn; timpani;
strings; celesta

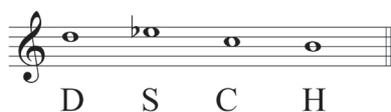
Approximate duration: 30 minutes

Widely regarded as the greatest symphonist of the mid-20th century, the Russian master Dmitri Shostakovich wrote 15 works in that genre. Additionally, his impressive compositional catalogue includes six concertos for various instruments, chamber music (including 15 string quartets), solo piano music, three operas, several cantatas and oratorios, three ballets, 36 film scores, incidental music for 11 plays, choral music, and songs.

Shostakovich penned his Opus 107 – “one of his most important works” (Boris Schwarz) – for his friend and erstwhile student, Mstislav Rostropovich. As a result of the Stalinist government's 1948 decree on so-called “formalist” composers, Shostakovich lost his professorships in both Leningrad and Moscow. Rostropovich, at that time a 21-year-old student at the Moscow Conservatory, dropped out in protest. Though the composer was 21 years older than the cellist, their admiration for one another was mutual. In the 1950s, as they played concert tours together all over Russia – including Shostakovich's Cello Sonata (1934) – their friendship deepened.

Rostropovich had long held the hope that Shostakovich would write a concerto for him. On the advice of the composer's wife Nina, he never mentioned such a wish. When, one day in 1959, Shostakovich handed Rostropovich the concerto, seemingly out of the blue, the cellist was ecstatic. He learned the work and committed it to memory in just four days' time.

The concerto is set in four movements; the final three are played without pause. With his opening notes, the soloist states the first movement's main theme, one derived from the composer's musical signature, the DSCH motive (shown below). Shostakovich employed this motto in his Symphony No. 10 and String Quartet No. 8, among many other works. In Opus 107, it serves as both a source of thematic material and as a cyclic unifying device, appearing in all but the second movement. Throughout the Allegretto, its intervals, rhythm, and overall shape are continually manipulated and reworked.



The Moderato opens in an elegiac mood as the strings play a quiet folk-like theme. At the cellist's entrance a new melody is introduced, and the principal horn becomes, at times, almost a co-soloist. As the movement progresses, the music becomes increasingly agitated. Toward the end, as the disquiet subsides, there's a haunting dialogue between the celesta and the soloist – sounding high-pitched cello harmonics – that references thematic material from earlier in the movement.

The Cadenza follows straight on, beginning with the cello's mournful second theme from the Moderato. The DSCH motive is also present. Though the soloist's technique is challenged in any number of ways – extremely high pitches, two-part counterpoint, increasingly short note value, and an accelerating tempo – its *raison d'être* is not that of a showpiece. Rather, stated the Russian musicologist and cellist Lev Ginsburg, it is a work of "deep meditation, reaching philosophical heights."

The third movement dovetails directly into the fourth, a spirited Allegro con moto. It commences with a jaunty dance tune in duple meter. Chromatic half-steps add to the music's deliciously sardonic tone. A triple-meter melody eventually morphs into the opening theme of the concerto. (Again, the principal horn has its say.) As a private joke, Shostakovich inserted snippets of a Georgian folksong called "Suliko," supposedly Joseph Stalin's favorite. The work's dedicatee wryly confessed, "I doubt if I would have detected this quote if Dmitriyevich hadn't pointed it out to me."

Recommended recording: Mstislav Rostropovich; Eugene Ormandy, Philadelphia Orchestra (Sony) 🎧

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born 1 April 1873; Semyonovo, Russia
 Died 28 March 1943; Beverly Hills, California

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Opus 27

Composed: 1906-07

First performance: 8 February 1908; St. Petersburg, Russia

Last MSO performance: February 2016; Edo de Waart, conductor

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo); 3 oboes (3rd doubling English horn); 2 clarinets; bass clarinet; 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 3 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion (bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, snare drum); strings

Approximate duration: 60 minutes

Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony dates from the years 1906-07, more than a decade after his D minor symphony of 1895. It was composed in Dresden, where he had moved with his wife and infant daughter to escape the celebrity of his native Russia. Of the three completed symphonies, No. 2 is by far the most familiar and the most loved. Its sumptuous romantic melodies have even been incorporated into popular music. Think, for instance, of Eric Carmen's "Never Gonna Fall in Love Again" (1976), which borrows from the symphony's slow movement. In addition to his warm melodic style, the master's multi-hued orchestral colors are on full display in this work. The instrumentation is opulent, but always varied and always discerning; nothing is overblown. Rachmaninoff handles the large-scale structures with confidence.

The long first movement opens with mysterious *pianissimo* low strings introducing a motto theme that will recur at various places in the symphony, at times more apparent than others, and serve as a unifying device. An English horn solo signals the Largo's end and leads into the sonata-form Allegro moderato. The second movement Scherzo brings Rachmaninoff's genius for orchestral color into plain sight and also offers one of his broad, lush tunes. The second violins launch the trio with an imitative passage, and when the scherzo returns, we hear the "Dies irae" (Day of Wrath) chant the composer was fond of quoting.

The A major Adagio begins with a beautifully sighing violin melody that soon gives way to a long-phrased clarinet solo, the movement's main theme; the violins continue this even further. The movement as a whole is cast in a broad three-part form. Its second section is based on the motto theme heard at the very beginning of the symphony, and when the principal melody returns, fragments of the motto are heard in the accompaniment. The Finale, set in E major, rushes headlong into playful music and continues with a big lyric tune that will return at the work's triumphant close. But before we get there, there's much more to come, including a six-measure return of a melody from the Adagio. The development reaches its highpoint with a passage of descending scales that cascades from different heights at different speeds, creating a bell-like swirl of sound. And, as promised, the big lyric melody returns to bring the symphony to a heart-pounding conclusion.

Recommended recording: Edo de Waart, Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra (Philips) 

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.