

Shostakovich
Symphonies Nos. 5 & 7
Czech Philharmonic
Semyon Bychkov

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)

Disc 1

Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, Op. 47

1	I. Moderato	15. 47
2	II. Allegretto	6. 00
3	III. Largo	15. 28
4	IV. Allegro non troppo	12. 05

Total playing time Disc 1: 49. 23

Disc 2

Symphony No. 7 in C Major, Op. 60 "Leningrad"

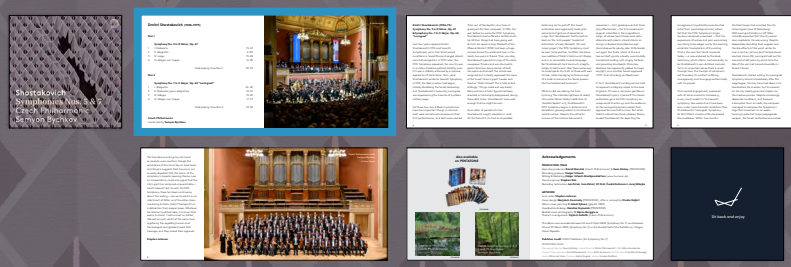
1	I. Allegretto	26. 45
2	II. Moderato (poco allegretto)	10. 47
3	III. Adagio	19. 43
4	IV. Allegro non troppo	17. 37

Total playing time Disc 2: 74. 55

Czech Philharmonic
conducted by **Semyon Bychkov**



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Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–75): Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, Op. 47 & Symphony No. 7 in C Major, Op. 60, "Leningrad"

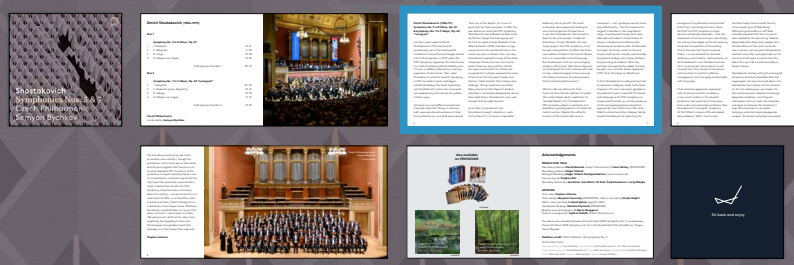
Just four years separate Dmitri Shostakovich's Fifth and Seventh Symphonies, yet in that short period conditions in Soviet Russia changed almost out of all recognition. In 1937, when the Fifth Symphony appeared, the country was in a state of relative political stability, even if it was a stability enforced by a massive apparatus of state terror. Then, when Shostakovich wrote his Seventh Symphony, in 1941, the Nazi invasion had begun, initially blindsiding the Soviet leadership, and Shostakovich's home city, Leningrad, was experiencing the trauma of a pitiless military siege.

Yet these two very different symphonies have two important things in common: both were sensational successes at their first performances, and both were created 'from out of the depths', at a time of great peril for their composer. In 1936, the year before he wrote the Fifth Symphony, Shostakovich had suffered a terrible shock. Up till then things had been going well for him: his opera *A Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1934) had been a huge success across the world and had run for nearly two years in Russia. Then, one day, Shostakovich opened his copy of the state newspaper Pravda and was stunned to read a ferocious denunciation of both the opera and himself. The article was unsigned, but it clearly expressed the views of the Soviet Union's great 'Leader and Teacher', Stalin himself. The article ended chillingly: 'Things could end very badly.' Many eminent artistic figures had been arrested, or had simply disappeared, during these dark times. Shostakovich knew well enough that he might be next.

As so often at periods of crisis, Shostakovich sought salvation in work. On the face of it, he had an impossible balancing act to pull off. The Soviet authorities were apparently looking for some kind of gesture of repentance: a sign that Shostakovich had turned his back on the 'anti-people' 'modernist distortions' of *Lady Macbeth*. His next major project, the Fifth Symphony, must be seen to be positive, to affirm the brave new realities of Stalin's Communist Utopia, and in an accessible musical language. But Shostakovich had too much integrity simply to sell his soul. Was there some way he could speak the truth to those with ears to hear, while managing to force enough of a smile to convince the Soviet powers that he had learned his lesson?

What he did was daring. Far from hymning 'the ultimate rightness of reality' (the writer Maxim Gorky's definition of 'Socialist Realist' art), Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony begins in darkness and desolation, growing violent in its climactic central section. Despite the cathartic humour of the scherzo-like second movement — tart, grotesque and at times slyly affectionate — the first movement's anguish intensifies in the magnificent Largo, at whose heart lonely wind solos alternate with solemn choral strains on strings: individual and collective pain stand eloquently side by side. Strife breaks out again the finale, which at the end heaves itself up into a loudly, even brutally triumphant ending, with ringing fanfares and pounding drumbeats. Minor key darkness has apparently yielded to major key light, as in another Soviet-approved 'Fifth', that of Ludwig van Beethoven.

In fact, Shostakovich's ending can be held to represent ambiguity raised to the level of genius. If it was a conscious gamble on Shostakovich's part, it paid off. The Soviet authorities gave the Fifth Symphony an unequivocal thumbs-up, and the audience at the Leningrad premiere roared their approval for over half an hour. But while Stalin's cultural henchman Aleksey Tolstoy lauded Shostakovich for depicting the



emergence of a politically reconstructed artist from 'psychological crisis', others felt that the Fifth Symphony's tragic tensions remained unresolved — that the expressions of sorrow and pain were simply too strong to be edged out by the seeming emphatic triumphalism of the ending. That is the view that tends to prevail today — a view endorsed by the book *Testimony*, which claims, controversially, to be Shostakovich's own dictated memoirs. Yet in an important sense there is a real triumph here: the triumph of individual's will to endure, to confront suffering courageously, and to engage authentically with his people.

That visceral engagement, expressed with at times cinematic immediacy, is very much evident in the Seventh Symphony. Few works of art have been born under more dramatic conditions than Shostakovich's 'Leningrad' Symphony. At first Hitler's invasion of Russia looked like a walkover. Within two months the Nazi troops had encircled the city of Leningrad (now St Petersburg). With Leningrad totally cut off Hitler naturally expected that the city would soon capitulate. He was wrong. Despite desperately dwindling food supplies and the dire effects of the worst winter for over a century (at one point temperatures reached minus 45), Leningrad held out for two and a half years, by which time the tide of the war had turned irreversibly in Russia's favour.

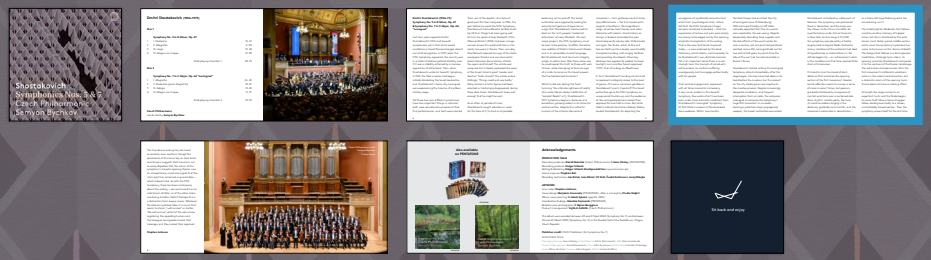
Shostakovich started writing the Leningrad Symphony almost immediately after the siege began. He may have had ideas in his head before the invasion, but the assault on the city clearly gave new impetus to the creative process. Despite increasingly desperate conditions, and frequent interruption from air raids, the composer managed to compose the Symphony's huge first movement in six weeks. Sensing a potential major propaganda weapon, the Soviet authorities evacuated

Shostakovich to Kuibyshev, safely east of Moscow. The symphony was premiered there in December, and the score was then flown to the US on microfilm for a performance under Arturo Toscanini in New York. And on August 13, 1942, the symphony was played by a freshly augmented Leningrad Radio Orchestra (many members of the orchestra had died of hypothermia or malnutrition) in the still-besieged city — an achievement which in the conditions at that time seemed little short of miraculous.

It's hard to miss the mood of stern defiance that animates the opening section of the first movement. Quieter lyrical reflection seems to convey a sense of more innocent times, but peace is gradually shattered by a sequence of martial variations over a sustained side-drum rhythm. Initially perky, the tune (it could be soldiers singing in the distance) gradually turns horrific, and the movement culminates in devastation — or is there still hope flickering amid the smouldering ruins?

The initially lighter Moderato that follows could be another memory of happier times, but this is shattered by the acid-toned, much faster-paced middle section, which since the symphony's premiere has come to be known as the 'dance of death'. The Adagio that follows is a dark spacious meditation, strikingly hymn-like in its opening: privately Shostakovich compared it to the vastness of the Russian landscape. The extra brass and percussion from the first movement's militaristic variations return in the violent central section, but a dramatic return of the opening hymn theme seems to have a calming effect.

At length the Largo comes to an expectant hush, and the finale begins to rouse itself. More intense struggles follow, leading eventually to a slower, unmistakably funeral section. Then the symphony rouses itself for the last time.

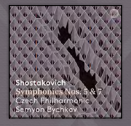


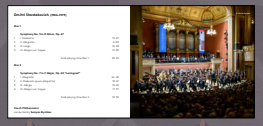
The thunderous ending may be heard as resolute, even exultant, though the persistence of the minor key on bass brass and timpani suggests that trauma is not so easily dispelled. Still, the return of the symphony's majestic opening theme, now on massed brass, could also signal that the city's spirit has remained unquenchable — which indeed it did. As with the Fifth Symphony, there has been controversy about this ending — are we to read it as an indictment of Hitler, or of the other mass-murdering dictator, Stalin? Perhaps this is a distraction from deeper issues. Whatever the listener's political take, it is music that seems to shout, 'I will survive!' or, better, 'We will survive!', whilst at the same time registering the appalling human cost. The besieged Leningraders heard that message, and they roared their approval.

Stephen Johnson



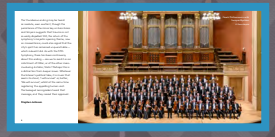
Czech Philharmonic with Semyon Bychkov
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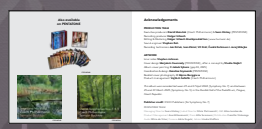














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Recording producer **Holger Urbach**
Editing & Mastering **Holger Urbach Musikproduktion** (www.humusic.de)
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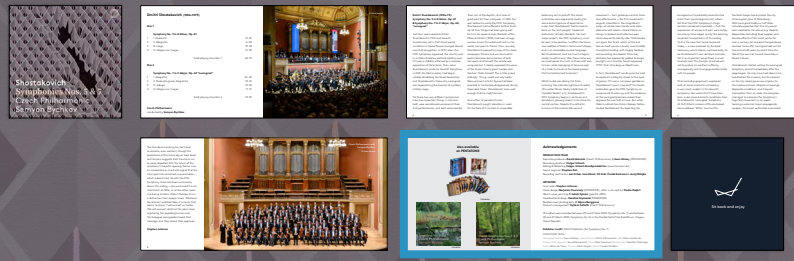
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Coordination & design **Karolina Szymanik** (PENTATONE)
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This album was recorded between 23 and 27 April 2024 (Symphony No. 7) and between 25 and 29 March 2025 (Symphony No. 5) in the Dvořák Hall of the Rudolfinum, Prague, Czech Republic.

Publisher credit: DSCH Publishers (for Symphony No. 7)

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