

Beethoven 7 – February 14, 2015

Enter, Light

Joel Schekman
b. 1978

Enter, Light premiered in November 2013 with the Grand Rapids Symphony, for whom California-born musician Joel Schekman serves as clarinetist. Schekman writes: “*Enter, Light* tells the story of light through the seasons ... Although there are four sections of the piece, each corresponding to one of the seasons, the piece is in one movement and is a continuous progression through the year, starting with autumn and ending with summer. This corresponds pretty accurately to when I was writing as well.”

Violin Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 77

Dmitry Shostakovich
1906-1975

Volumes have been written about Dmitry Shostakovich and his fraught relationship with the Soviet regime. Much of this writing is based on after-the-fact statements whose authenticity and veracity is often difficult to verify. What is clear is that the composer was a true son of the Russian Revolution and, as teenager, a true believer. But in his late 20s he became caught up in the Stalinist nightmare and apparently only survived the purges because Stalin liked his music for propaganda films.

His first – and worst – brush with the authorities came in January 1936. An article appeared in the official soviet newspaper, *Pravda*, severely criticizing his highly successful new opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mzensk District*. The result was that, upon the order of the government, the opera – as well as the rest of the composer’s music – was withdrawn from the stage and the concert hall. For the first of many times Shostakovich was cast into Soviet limbo, his music unperformed, his livelihood taken away and his life put in jeopardy. In later years he recalled that he was so certain of being arrested that he used to sleep with his suitcase packed near the front door so that if the secret police were to pick him up they would not disturb the rest of the family. He redeemed himself in the eyes of the authorities in 1937 with the Symphony No. 5, which gave him a conditional reprieve. The opera, however, was not performed again for 25 years.

World War II brought a breather and an upsurge of patriotism, with the horrors of the '30s temporarily forgotten. But in 1946 came a resurgence of purges, suppression and disappearances, orchestrated by the cultural commissar Andrey Zhdanov, whose decrees stipulated only cheerful, uplifting, folksy art.

Shostakovich responded by splitting his creative personality in two: composing works for public consumption, mainly film music, cantatas on revolutionary themes and the like; and works “for the drawer.” Some of his greatest and most personal compositions, including the Violin Concerto (1947-48), did not see the light of day until after Stalin's death in 1953. In many of these latter pieces, Shostakovich incorporated an acronym of his name, made out of the sequence D E-flat C B, which in German would be written D E S C H. Using the German transliteration of his name, "D. Schostakowitsch," the motive spells out his initials in musical notation, D S C H.

Creative subterfuge was a wise move. In addition to their somber mood, definitely not in the spirit decreed by Zhdanov, many of these works incorporated Jewish folk melodies and dance rhythms that were in part a protest against resurgent Soviet anti-Semitism.

The Violin Concerto is a “Symphonic Concerto,” showing greater kinship with Brahms's concertos rather than the usual Russian virtuosic showpieces – although it certainly contains its share of fiery writing. Shostakovich demands a soloist with stamina and musicianship, rather than mere showmanship and technique.

The opening movement, Nocturne, *Moderato*, creates a gloomy landscape in a seamless, ever intensifying soliloquy with no rest for the soloist. In the middle, a celesta tries to interject a dreamlike mood but is drowned out by rumbling from the netherworld. The unrelieved sadness soon returns, accompanied at the end by the harp and celesta to close the movement.

The second movement Scherzo is frenzied and grotesque, a devil's dialogue between the violin and winds with muted strings in the background. Its sarcasm is reminiscent of the “satanic style” in works by Giuseppe Tartini, Camille Saint-Saëns, Igor Stravinsky and others. The movement has two trios, the second a Jewish *danse macabre*, introduced by the “rattling bones” of the xylophone.

The third movement is a passacaglia, a form dating back to the Renaissance and Baroque with a tradition associated with lamentation. Traditionally, it consists of a repeating bass line over which other instruments – or even voices – weave variations. It is the heart of the Concerto, a dirge for the war dead and/or Soviet repression, opening with a fanfare for brass and timpani recalling the funeral marches of Mahler. With the entrance of the soloist, the music becomes more personal and triumphant, with the soaring spirit of the violin overcoming the overall melancholy of the work. A long cadenza, at first accompanied by the timpani, gradually evolves from a simple chant into frenetic bravura, containing the DSCH motive that ties this movement to the fourth.

The finale, marked *Burlesca*, is a rondo, apparently a parody of the wild drinking parties and heel-kicking *gopak* folk dancing thrown by Stalin and his henchmen. The dance, introduced (symbolically?) by the xylophone again, evolves into a mad rush reintroducing the themes from the previous movements.

At some point between the composition of the third and fourth movements, in January 1948, the ideological ax fell on Shostakovich and his colleagues. It is possible that the grotesque nature of the fourth movement was the composer's way of maintaining his sanity and expressing his feelings at the outrage. The coda is an example of what some have dubbed Shostakovich's signature “rat music.”

Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92

Ludwig van Beethoven
1770-1827

There is little information about Beethoven's activities during 1812, the year of the composition of the Seventh Symphony. He was in poor health and while he produced little else that year, the Symphony makes up for in quality what was lacking in quantity. The year itself was momentous; the Russian winter had finally halted Napoleon in his eastward march of conquest, a fact that must have lightened Beethoven's heart. Napoleon had been the composer's hero, the intended dedicatee of his Third Symphony, but his insatiable lust for

conquest and power was so disillusioning that Beethoven rescinded the dedication and harbored a lifelong grudge. The hardship resulting from Napoleon's occupation of Vienna in 1809-10 added to his bitterness. The Seventh Symphony premiered on December 8, 1813 at a gala benefit concert of primarily Beethoven's own works to aid the wounded of the latest battles against Napoleon.

Also on the program were *Wellington's Victory* (the "Battle Symphony"), celebrating another Napoleonic defeat, the Eighth Symphony and numerous smaller works. Beethoven – although profoundly deaf – directed an orchestra made up of Vienna's most important musical celebrities: Louis Spohr, Domenico Dragonetti, Mauro Giuliani and Ignaz Schuppanzigh played in the strings; Giacomo Meyerbeer and Johann Nepomuk Hummel played timpani; Ignaz Moscheles played the cymbals, and even old Antonio Salieri was there, heading the percussion section.*

Each movement of the Seventh Symphony is dominated by persistent rhythmic motive that – especially in the second movement – is equal in importance to the melodic content of the themes. Richard Wagner described the Seventh Symphony as "the apotheosis of dance in its loftiest aspects." The story goes that he once attempted to demonstrate this dance to the accompaniment of Liszt's piano playing.

The lengthy slow introduction, featuring some of the repertory's loveliest oboe solos, contrasts in mood with the *Allegro*, which follows in lively 6/8 meter. The opening movement actually consists of a single complex theme held together by an underlying dotted rhythm in the accompaniment. The pulse extends throughout the entire movement and is only occasionally interrupted.

The theme of the second movement is minimal, a 4/4 ostinato consisting primarily of repeated pitches over which Beethoven adds counter-melodies and a buildup of the orchestration to create emotional tension. Beethoven's innovative use of the rhythmic pulse in this movement influenced the romantic composers who followed and served as a model for Schubert in his Symphony No. 9 in C major, "the Great."

The Scherzo, in 3/4, is defined by driving quarter notes, dynamic contrasts and shifting rhythms. The trio, with its legato melody for the winds, provides the expected contrast, breaking away from the rhythmic pulse of the Scherzo.

The nineteenth-century musicologist Sir Donald Tovey described the finale as "A triumph of Bacchic fury." The rondo theme, with its emphatic timpani part, resembles a stomping peasant dance – admittedly refined for the occasion.