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## **DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH**

Dmitri Shostakovich is widely regarded as the greatest symphonist of the mid-20th century. Shostakovich also composed “official” works for the Soviet government, and although his relationship with Soviet political powers have come into question over the years, he clearly felt that Soviet composers had a very strong moral duty to fellow citizens.

As a composer, Shostakovich’s creative career can be divided into three periods: early (including the Fourth Symphony), mature (through Symphony No. 13 until 1966), and late (the last nine years of his life). His musical training began when he received his first piano instruction from his mother beginning at age nine. He continued his piano instruction at Petrograd Conservatory, where he also studied composition, and where he was befriended by Alexander Glazounov, who encouraged and helped support him. Shostakovich, although undecided at the time as to whether to pursue a career as a pianist or as a composer, earned great success in both fields. His First Symphony, written as a graduation piece, was acclaimed in Leningrad at its premiere and at later performances in Berlin and Philadelphia. He also received “honorable mention” when he competed as a pianist at the International Chopin Contest in Warsaw in 1927.

As Shostakovich continued his graduate studies at the Conservatory, his works already showed a new musical idiom that reflected modern trends in west European music. Many of Shostakovich’s early works were hailed as major achievements of socialist construction -- in particular, his second and third symphonies, the opera *Nos (The Nose)*, the ballet *Zolotoy vek (The Golden Age)*, a film score, incidental

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music to *Klop (The Flea)*, and the opera *Ledi Makbet Mtsenskovo uyezda (Lady McBeth of the Mtsensk District)*. When this last work -- with the Fourth Symphony considered the most ambitious of his early output -- was suddenly and inexplicably denounced by the Soviets in the newspaper *Pravda*, Shostakovich responded by composing his Fifth Symphony. This symphony, triumphantly received and to this day the most frequently performed, reinstated Shostakovich as the foremost Soviet composer of the younger generation, and his Piano Quintet (1940), composed soon afterward, was awarded the Stalin Prize.

Hitler's invasion in 1941 spurred Shostakovich into an important creative effort. It was during these war years that the composer wrote his seventh and eighth symphonies. The end of the war, however, brought tightened ideological and artistic controls, and many important artists, including Shostakovich and Prokofiev, were attacked and rebuked for their musical style. In an effort to comply with these controls, Shostakovich began working in two musical idioms -- one simple and accessible that conformed with Soviet wishes, and the other complex and abstract that satisfied his own artistic standards. Shostakovich withheld several works composed in the second style until after 1953, when Stalin's death brought about a relaxation of cultural regimentation.

After an eight-year hiatus, Shostakovich produced his Tenth Symphony, hailed at home and abroad as one of his great masterpieces. With Prokofiev's death in 1953, he had achieved the unofficial position as grand master of Soviet music. Surprisingly, the composer did not, however, take the lead in liberalization of the arts, even though there was a strong trend in that direction within the Soviet Union. Indeed, Shostakovich became more conservative, praising the government and speaking out against the musical avant garde, and his Eleventh and Twelfth Symphonies were prototypical of the Soviet realist style.

In 1966, he developed a serious heart ailment from which he never fully recovered. Although further disabled by severe arthritis, Shostakovich's creative output was never affected, and during this time he composed several important works, including the final two symphonies. While Shostakovich

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continued to speak out against the 12-note serial system of composition, he wrote in a much more advanced musical idiom in these late works.

Shostakovich belonged to the first generation of Russian composers educated entirely under the Soviet system. His loyalty to country and government were unquestioned, even during times when he was held in disfavor. Throughout most of his life, Shostakovich was a dedicated teacher, working mostly at the Leningrad Conservatory. His achievements were acknowledged by decades of unparalleled recognition, both national and international, yet none of those honors changed his personality. Shostakovich was shy, unassuming, self-critical, nervous, and high-strung, yet always encouraging towards younger colleagues with a high sense of fairness.

Shostakovich will be remembered primarily as a composer of symphonies, and with Stravinsky and Prokofiev, he represents the culmination of 20th century Russian music. But, unlike his two older contemporaries, Shostakovich is alone in having composed his entire output within the framework of Soviet aesthetics.