

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor
(1901)
by Sergei Rachmaninoff
(Semyonovo, Russia, 1873 – Beverly Hills, California, 1943)

Moderato
Adagio sostenuto
Allegro scherzando

Sergei Rachmaninoff once described himself as a man chasing three hares, and not sure of having captured even one of them. The "three hares" were the three sides of Rachmaninoff's musical career: **composing**, **piano-playing**, and **conducting**. During his life, he indeed had periods when he had to give up one of these activities for another. But in the end, his gifts as a creative artist and a performer reinforced one another. This synergy is particularly apparent in his piano music–the four concertos and the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, not to mention a vast body of solo works which he wrote with himself as a performer in mind. A piano work by Rachmaninoff is therefore a personal communication from an artist who summed up his artistic creed in the words: "A composer's music should express the country of his birth, his love affairs, his religion, the books that have influenced him, the pictures he loves. It should be the sum total of his experiences."

Rachmaninoff wrote his Second Piano Concerto in 1900-01, shortly after the greatest trauma he had suffered up to that point. Three years earlier, he had composed a symphony–his first–that met with a disastrous reception at the St. Petersburg premiere. The fiasco was caused largely by the poor performance and the prejudices prevalent in St. Petersburg towards young composers from Moscow, and was therefore in no way Rachmaninoff's fault. Yet the composer fell into a severe depression that left him unable to write any music for years. In his despair, he turned to a psychiatrist by the name of Dr. Dahl, who used hypnosis to restore Rachmaninoff's faith in his own creative powers. When the composer was finally cured, he expressed his gratitude by dedicating his new concerto to Dr. Dahl.

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As so often with Rachmaninoff, the principal vehicle to convey his personal communication is his highly individual melodic writing. He makes the piano sing with the passion of an operatic hero, while having it perform some dazzling musical acrobatics with fiendish arpeggios and other types of virtuoso passagework. The piano is the protagonist throughout, but the orchestra is equally important, as there are many prominent orchestral solos. There are times when the pianistic fireworks merely serve as an accompaniment to the melody presented in the orchestra.

Each of the Second Concerto's three movements contains numerous tempo changes in accordance with the evolution of the musical characters, while the unity of the work is ensured by the thematic recapitulations prescribed by Classical rules. Rachmaninoff counterbalanced his effusive, hyper-Romantic melodic writing by an almost academic adherence to traditional musical craft with regard to matters of form, allowing himself even fewer liberties than some of his Classical and Romantic predecessors. He scored the second-movement "Adagio sostenuto" in E major, a tonality far removed from C minor, the concerto's home key; but he bridged the gap between those two keys by modulating passages that open both the second and third movements. Both Beethoven in his Third Piano Concerto and Brahms in his First Symphony had used this C minor/E major relationship between their respective first and second movements. In both cases, one may hear the jump between the two unrelated tonalities. Not so in Rachmaninoff. His "bridges" between movements exemplify something he strove to do throughout the concerto, namely to eliminate all "rough edges" and create a flow of great melodies unimpeded by breaks or jolts in the continuous unfolding of the musical events.



Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, op. 47

(1937)

by Dmitri Shostakovich

(St. Petersburg, 1906 – Moscow, 1975)

Moderato
Allegretto
Largo
Allegro ma non troppo

Shostakovich wrote his Fifth Symphony at a particularly difficult moment in his life. On January 28, 1936, an unsigned editorial in the Pravda, the daily paper of the Communist Party, brutally attacked his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, denouncing it as "muddle instead of music." There was no doubt that this vicious article was written at the behest of Stalin himself. At the time of the "Great Terror" that claimed the lives of millions of Soviet citizens, including many artists whose work was found to be not regime-compatible enough, this article was nothing less than a mortal threat. It was rumored that Shostakovich, whose first child was born in May 1936, kept a suitcase with a change of clothes under his bed, in case they came for him in the middle of the night. Yet in the end, the composer was spared: the Party realized that the country couldn't afford to lose its greatest–and internationally famous–young composer, and Shostakovich was granted a comeback. Less than a year after being forced to withdraw his Fourth Symphony, he heard his Fifth premiered with resounding success in Leningrad on November 21, 1937.

Could it be that the qualities in the Fifth Symphony that are so admired today were the same ones that saved the composer's career, and perhaps his life, then? Shostakovich made a major effort to write a "classical" piece here, one that would be acceptable to the authorities and was as far removed from the avant-garde Fourth as possible. Whether that makes it "A Soviet Artist's Creative Response to Just Criticism," as it was officially labeled at the time, is another question.

In the Soviet Union, the Communist Party–and Stalin personally–kept a very close watch on what was going on in the arts, and went to great lengths trying to control even instrumental music, which, by its very nature, resisted verbal interpretations.

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It was vitally important for the regime that such interpretations–which naturally had to be along political lines–be offered, in order to confirm that a piece followed the poorly defined but strictly enforced dictates of "social realism." Shostakovich, though, made the commentators' job very difficult indeed. Ever since the day of the premiere, there have been intense debates about the "message" of the symphony: was it an optimistic or a tragic work? The ending of the last movement was subjected to particular scrutiny, and to this day, there is no consensus on the matter.[1] By all appearances, Shostakovich utterly relished this ambiguity and was always several steps ahead of his critics.

There is no question that the symphony has plenty of engaging melodies and rousing climaxes; in addition, it re-enacts the darkness-to-light scenario of many Classical and Romantic symphonies, and Beethoven's and Tchaikovsky's Fifths in particular, so it would seem to have everything the Party could wish for. Yet at the same time, Shostakovich frequently subverts this narrative; there are many moments in the work that strongly suggest dark clouds on the horizon.

On top of it all, it could well be that there were other ideas underlying the work that weren't political at all. It has been revealed that, at the time he was working on the symphony, Shostakovich was in love with a young woman named Elena Konstantinovskaya who served in Spain as an interpreter during the Civil War and married a certain Roman Karmen–and the symphony is filled with several veiled allusions to Bizet's *Carmen*. It has even been asserted that the obsessive repeats of the note A ("la") at the end refer to Elena's nickname Lala… There is certainly more in this symphony than meets the ear!

At the end of the day, if the symphony isn't exactly "A Soviet Artist's Creative Response to Just Criticism," it is definitely a response to *something*, though certainly not in the sense of a chastised schoolboy mending his ways. It is, instead, a great composer reacting to a great deal of external and internal turmoil, and giving voice to both the public and the private sides of his complex artistic personality.

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[1] Marina Frolova-Walker and Jonathan Walker's book Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 (Oxford Keynote Series, 2024) contains a great deal of previously unavailable information. It is a work of meticulous scholarship, yet written in a language accessible to a lay readership. It is highly recommended to anyone who would like to find out more about this masterpiece.



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A closer look

The first movement opens with a dramatic and ominous opening motif in a dotted rhythm and continues with a second theme that is warm and lyrical but at the same time eerie and distant. The music seems oddly hesitant until the horns begin a march theme–not a funeral march, but not exactly triumphant either–it is reminiscent of some of Mahler's march melodies but even grimmer. The constant key changes give the march an oddly sarcastic character. In the recapitulation, the dotted rhythms from the opening sound even more powerful than before, but the second lyrical theme, now played by the flute and the horn to the soothing harmonies of the harp, has lost the edge it previously had and brings the movement to a peaceful, almost otherworldly close.

The brief second-movement Scherzo brings some relief after the preceding drama. Its Ländler-like melodies once again bespeak Mahler's influence, both in the Scherzo proper and the Trio, whose theme, reminiscent of popular music, is played by a solo violin and then by the flute.

The third movement is an expansive Largo in which the brass is silent and the violins are divided not into two sections as usual but into three. After an *espressivo* melody, scored for strings only, two flutes and harp transform the first movement's march rhythm into a lament. The music finally reaches a climactic moment when the opening melody returns, played with great passion by the cellos in a high register. At the end, the music falls back into the lament mode of the earlier section.

The unquestionable emotional high point of the symphony, the Largo was widely understood as a lament for the Soviet Army marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, who fell victim to the Stalinist purges in 1937. Tukhachevsky had been a benefactor and a personal friend of the composer. At the first performance, many people wept openly during the Largo, perhaps thinking of their own loved ones who had disappeared.

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The last movement introduces a march tune emphatically in the darker minor mode, raising questions, as mentioned above, about the true character of this finale. Is it really as triumphant as has been officially claimed, or does the jubilation have something forced, something ambivalent to it? What is certain is that, after an intense development, the music stops on a set of harsh fortissimo chords, and a slower, more introspective section begins with a haunting horn solo. This section quotes from a song for voice and piano titled “Rebirth” (Op. 46, No. 1) on a poem by Alexander Pushkin, composed by Shostakovich just before the Fifth Symphony. In the poem, an “artist-barbarian” tries to destroy a work of genius, but can do so only for a while. Similarly, the “delusions” of the poet’s “anguished soul” are only temporary; they will soon disappear, giving way to new purity.

This quiet intermezzo ends abruptly with the entrance of the timpani and snare drum, ushering in the recapitulation of the march tune, played much more slowly than before. Merely a shadow of its former self, the melody is elaborated contrapuntally. For a while, it remains uncertain if the music will be able to reclaim any of its former jubilant (or pseudo-jubilant) character. Then just before the end, the tonality suddenly changes to a bright D major, and the symphony ends with a solemn fanfare which, if it doesn’t resolve all the ambiguities, provides at least the appearance of an optimistic conclusion.

Notes by Peter Laki