



BEYOND THE SCORE®: SHOSTAKOVICH'S FOURTH – IS MUSIC DANGEROUS?

FRIDAY & SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 27 & 28, AT 8 PM

NASHVILLE SYMPHONY

GIANCARLO GUERRERO, *conductor*

Beyond the Score®

A multimedia exploration of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 4

– INTERMISSION –

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No. 4, in C major, Op. 43 - 60 minutes

- I. Allegretto poco moderato - Presto
- II. Moderato con moto
- III. Largo - Allegro

This presentation will last 2 hours and 15 minutes, including a 20-minute intermission.

*Beyond the Score® is a production of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra
Gerald McBurney, Creative Director for Beyond the Score®*

PROGRAM SUMMARY

It's no exaggeration to say that Dmitri Shostakovich's choices as a composer were a matter of life or death. Just when he was completing his Fourth Symphony, Stalin expressed his displeasure with the direction the composer's music was taking. The Fourth is one of his most daring and adventurous scores, drawing on inspiration from Mahler. Shostakovich realized that it could further endanger his already precarious situation, so he withdrew it at the last minute – even while it was under rehearsal. Cast in three movements – two enormous ones surrounding a shorter one – the Fourth still shocks today with its fierce power and bleak honesty, and is written for the largest orchestra Shostakovich used in any of his 15 symphonies.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No. 4 in C minor, Op. 43

Born on September 25, 1906,
in Saint Petersburg, Russia

Died on August 9, 1975,
in Moscow

Composed:
1935 - 36

**Estimated
length:**
60 minutes



First performance:

December 30, 1961, with
Kirill Kondrashin conducting
the Moscow Philharmonic

**First Nashville Symphony
performance:**

These are the orchestra's
first performances.

“**F**rom the start, the listener is shocked by deliberate dissonance, a confused wash of sound. Fragments of melody...are drowned out...and disappear in a grinding, squealing roar.” This put-down appeared in the January 28, 1936, edition of *Pravda*, the official Communist Party newspaper of the Soviet Union.

The target of the article’s attack was none other than Dmitri Shostakovich, a wildly gifted and decidedly self-assured composer, not quite 30, who had wowed the international scene with his First Symphony (written while he was still a teenager). His opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* had become a runaway hit in both Moscow and Leningrad. Something about Shostakovich’s treatment of this story of adulterous lust and murder — hardly novel for the opera stage — irked Stalin, who came to a performance some two years after its premiere and, ominously, left early.

The unsigned article against Shostakovich, titled “Muddle Instead of Music,” declared him to be an example of a “dangerous trend” in Soviet music, one “distorting” the ideals of true Socialism and “tickling the perverted taste of the bourgeois with the fidgety, neurotic” strains of his opera. But in reality, what was endangered was Shostakovich’s

own career — and, had he been less lucky, even his life.

This was the era of the Stalinist purges, when artists and intellectuals were among the prime victims of the effort to police what Orwell would famously dub thoughtcrime. Shostakovich might well have suffered the fate of many a fellow artist by being sent off to the gulag. Even music critics found themselves in trouble. As noted by the biographer Laurel Fay, the circle of opinion makers “who had praised and encouraged [Shostakovich] to pursue his incorrect path” also faced grave consequences with the crackdown.

To survive this crisis, Shostakovich had to reevaluate how he was presenting himself to the public. He succeeded in winning a dramatic reprieve from the official tastemakers with the triumphant premiere of his Fifth Symphony in November 1937. But the danger of making a false step remained throughout his career, and after being lionized as a public hero, Shostakovich once again faced condemnation in the late 1940s.

Arguably the most ambitiously experimental of his symphonies, the Fourth had been “disappeared” before the historic premiere of the Fifth — like one of those airbrushed photos erasing an objectionable figure and documenting the approved Soviet version

of history. By the time the *Pravda* attack was launched, Shostakovich had already written the bulk of the Fourth Symphony. He pressed on, not yet fully aware of the implications of this official criticism, though, as Fay reports, the composer soon saw one practical result in the sharp decline of his income — commissions dried up rapidly.

After completing the score in the spring of 1936, Shostakovich played the Fourth Symphony at home on the piano for a group of distinguished musical guests (on the day his first child — daughter Galina — was born). The new piece was scheduled to be unveiled in December 1936, but by that point Shostakovich had grown nervous about the reception it would receive; the music, he realized, dangerously pushed the envelope. The musicians had already been rehearsing this challenging score, but at the last minute an official press release announced that the composer opted to withdraw the piece “on the grounds that it in no way corresponds to his current creative convictions and represents a long-outdated phase.”

Varying accounts of what really happened have been put forward, but Fay concludes that “given the political and aesthetic climate of the time, there seems very little doubt that even in a flawless performance the massive...work would have been construed as...an act in arrogant defiance of the Party’s benevolent guidance.”

Although a two-piano version was introduced in 1945, the world premiere of the Fourth Symphony was delayed until well after Stalin’s death and took place on December 30, 1961, in Moscow. Still far less frequently heard than the Fifth, which has become a concert hall staple, the Fourth thus fills a troubling gap in the complete cycle of Shostakovich’s 15 symphonies.

Indeed, the Fourth Symphony is a contender for Shostakovich’s most original — perhaps even his most profound — symphony. One

of his longest (surpassed only by the popular “Leningrad” Seventh Symphony), it calls for the most expanded orchestra of the Shostakovich symphonies, including 20 woodwinds alone. The Fourth is cast in three movements, with a relatively brief middle movement that functions as a combination of interlude and scherzo between the furious energy and invention of the far vaster outer movements.

In his breakthrough First Symphony, Shostakovich had already shown a powerful attraction to the then-unfashionable music of Gustav Mahler. He described the Fourth as a “credo” and “a monumental, programmatic piece of great ideas and great passions.” One of these “great ideas” involves the inclusive perspective of Mahler, who opened up the discourse of the symphony to include marches, grotesque soundscapes and relics of the “everyday world” — a Shakespearean spectrum of humanity. And all of this can be found not only in the Fourth Symphony, but across Shostakovich’s body of symphonic works.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The enormous first movement follows a uniquely reoriented, loose version of classical sonata form, with a good deal of “space” devoted to passages that freely develop the main ideas and link them together. Listening to the result can resemble a trip through a maze, where the path we think we’ve been following leads somewhere unexpected.

A starkly compressed reprise reintroduces the main themes in reverse order, after a sprawling exposition and development of these themes. The latter section includes a thrilling, cyclone-like passage for the strings and a massing of brass and percussion sonorities that drives forward with furious momentum, culminating in a savagely

dissonant climax. Shostakovich asks the musicians to dial the volume up to an extreme level.

The much briefer second movement deals in a basic contrast of ideas — one of which, ironically, would morph into a key idea of the Fifth Symphony. It comes to a close with enigmatically ticking gestures that also occur in later Shostakovich scores.

The third and last movement moves from a slow funeral march of the sort familiar from Mahler's symphonies into a fast-paced section that plays off shockingly abrupt contrasts. A brutal kind of humor results — and totalitarianism in any form maintains an unyieldingly hostile attitude towards

humor. Shostakovich's irony reaches its peak in the strange vanishing point of the Fourth's ending. It's no wonder he decided to withdraw the score: it challenged the official Soviet narrative of optimistic progress.

The Symphony No. 4 is scored for 2 piccolos, 4 flutes, 4 oboes (4th doubling English horn), 4 clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 8 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, 2 tubas, 2 timpanists, percussion (xylophone, glockenspiel, triangle, castanets, gong, cymbals, snare drum, wood block, and bass drum), celesta, 2 harps and strings.

— *Thomas May is the Nashville Symphony's program annotator.*

ABOUT BEYOND THE SCORE®

A PRODUCTION OF THE CHICAGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Gerard McBurney, creative director

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time concertgoers as well as to encourage an active, more fulfilling way of listening for seasoned audiences. At its core is the live format of musical extracts, spoken clarification, theatrical narrative and hand-paced projections on large central surfaces, performed in close synchrony. After each program, audiences return from intermission to experience the resulting work performed in a regular concert setting, equipped with a new understanding of its style and genesis.

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