ANDRIS NELSONS AND BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA TO RELEASE LATEST IN GRAMMY-WINNING SHOSTAKOVICH SYMPHONY CYCLE

Boston Symphony Orchestra violinist Vyacheslav Uritsky, who took part in the world premiere of the composer’s Fourth Symphony in Moscow in 1961 and who performed with the BSO as part of these recordings, describes his memories of the premiere in the CD booklet.
June 15, 2018 (New York, NY) – The Boston Symphony Orchestra and its Music Director Andris Nelsons will release the latest instalment in their Grammy Award-winning cycle of Shostakovich’s symphonies on Deutsche Grammophon – Symphonies Nos. 4 & 11, two works that highlight the composer’s life-threatening relationship with Stalin and the Soviet régime. The album is set for international release on Friday, July 6.

Raised in Latvia during the Soviet Union’s dying years, Andris Nelsons acknowledges that the political conditions under which Shostakovich worked inevitably influenced his compositions – yet his music transcends the circumstances of its creation.

“I want to distance myself from the political situation,” the conductor comments. “Yes, I would say that the Fourth Symphony shows a big protest against what the Soviet Composers Union expected as a style of music. At the same time, Shostakovich was very interested in music from other countries. He was looking behind the political curtain, which is what music should do. His friends and colleagues advised him not to perform the work, because it would risk his life, which is why he put it away for over twenty years. The Fourth Symphony shows the direction he would have taken if he had not been accused of being an anti-communist composer. Performing it now, we see how it stands apart from politics. It’s a masterpiece by a genius that speaks about universal things.”

The Boston Symphony Orchestra’s feeling for Shostakovich rests on deep foundations. It began performing the composer’s music in the 1930s and developed powerful interpretations of his wartime symphonies under Serge Koussevitzky during the following decade.

“They play these symphonies with such fantastic inspiration and dedication,” Andris Nelsons says of his players. He points to a living link to Shostakovich history through the BSO’s violinist Vyacheslav Uritsky, who took part in the world premiere of the composer’s Fourth Symphony in Moscow in 1961. “There’s a very special connection with this piece through him.”

Those who reviewed the first two releases in Deutsche Grammophon’s Shostakovich symphony cycle with Nelsons and the BSO praised their high drama and emotional intensity. The first album (featuring Symphony No.10), won the 2015 Grammy for best orchestral performance. That feat was repeated by its successor, a double-disc set of the composer’s Fifth, Eighth, and Ninth Symphonies. On this third album, the combination of the Fourth and Eleventh frames the beginning and end of those symphonies written in the shadow of Stalin’s dictatorship.

Shostakovich was working on his Fourth Symphony when Pravda ran its denunciation of Lady Macbeth, an editorial authorized if not written by Stalin. Although the composer completed his innovative new score, he had little choice but to accept official pressure to cancel its premiere – to do otherwise during Stalin’s campaign of political repression, would have been madness.

“The Eleventh is the first symphony he wrote after Stalin’s death, which means the Fourth opened and the Eleventh closed this cycle of pieces related to Stalin,” explains Andris Nelsons. “The interesting thing is that after Stalin’s death, things were not better. The Eleventh Symphony reflects on the disastrous events of the 1905 Revolution, but there’s so much darkness and despair beyond that. I would say there’s no hope in the Eleventh Symphony. It’s dramatic to see that Stalin is dead but evil still exists in the world. This is the constant fight with negativities, which Shostakovich fought through his symphonies. It’s the Devil and God, always in conflict. We always want the positive to take over from the negative. I think
Shostakovich’s way of protesting was through his symphonies. It was not political; it was an artistic protest. I think these works can change people’s lives and mobilize them to recognize the importance of expressing their opinions. But Shostakovich goes far beyond the political to a world of very deep, rich expression.”

Shostakovich’s mature symphonies capture the tension between the composer’s physical frailty and profound psychological strength. The battle between the material and spiritual, part of everyday life under Stalin, rages in the ambiguities and complexity of his Mahler-influenced Fourth Symphony.

“Shostakovich was shocked by the Pravda article,” notes Nelsons. “From one day to the next, people were afraid to talk to him because he was suddenly an enemy of the state. That was heart-breaking for him as an artist. Living through these difficult times, he went on to compose so many fantastic pieces. It shows his strength of personality. Yes, he was physically frail. But his symphonies bring out his strength and vision, hope and love. It’s easy to read Shostakovich in so many ways. But for us musicians, we need to catch his great strength and energy. The Fourth is one of his strongest and most uplifting symphonies, even though it is so dramatic.”

The breadth of expression, adds Andris Nelsons, demands that no emotion be spared, that nothing be left in reserve in performance. “These symphonies express the full amplitude of human nature. I’m so happy that we have the chance to record these works with our wonderful Deutsche Grammophon partners and delighted to hear people say they experience such emotional fulfilment after listening to them. The music speaks so deeply to people living now in turbulent times that, in a certain sense, recall the times in which Shostakovich lived. Perhaps people’s nerves are more open today to the sensitivity and to the calming feeling that his music gives. There is always something, even at the end of the Fourth Symphony, which suggests there’s more to life than tragedy and despair, a higher spirit. That is why we still perform and talk about this music!”

To request a review copy of this new recording, contact Joseph Oerke, joseph.oerke@umusic.com, or Samantha Sklar, Samantha.sklar@umusic.com, at Universal Music Classics

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