Dmitri Shostakovich

Symphony No. 2, Opus 14, “To October”

DMITRI DMITRIEVICH SHOSTAKOVICH was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, on September 25, 1906, and died in Moscow on August 9, 1975. He composed his Symphony No. 2 in the spring and summer of 1927. Nikolai Malko conducted the premiere on November 5, 1927, in Leningrad, with the Leningrad Philharmonic and State Academic Capella in the Great Hall of the Leningrad Philharmonic.

THE SCORE OF SHOSTAKOVICH’S SYMPHONY NO. 2 calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, chimes, factory siren (can be replaced by horns, trombones, and tuba), strings, and mixed chorus.

November 7, the anniversary of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, ranked as the most important holiday on the official Soviet calendar—supplanting Christmas, Easter, and even beloved New Year’s Eve. As long as the USSR existed, the Soviet government celebrated this often cold and inclement day with pomp, military parades, endless droning speeches, and mammoth outdoor pageants that took place (especially during the country’s more freewheeling pre-Stalin years) in a carnivalesque atmosphere combining ideological agitation with spectacles of mass entertainment. Every year, Soviet creative artists in all fields were expected to produce highly public work commemorating this world-shaking event.

In 1927, the tenth anniversary of Vladimir Lenin’s establishment of Soviet socialist power, the pressure on composers, writers, and filmmakers to create something memorable and appropriate was particularly intense. Sergei Eisenstein, for example, made his seminal film October (also known as Ten Days That Shook the World), a historical “re-creation” of Lenin’s rise and the demise of the doomed Russian bourgeoisie. (According to the Julian calendar still in use in Russia in 1917, the Revolution fell on October 25, which became November 7 when the Soviet government adopted the Western Gregorian calendar in 1918).

That Dmitri Shostakovich, already regarded as a rising star of Soviet music at the age of twenty on the strength of his acclaimed First Symphony, would also be asked to contribute is hardly surprising. In March 1927, he received a commission for a major symphonic work from the Propaganda Department of the Music Section of the state publishers. The assignment included setting verses by the popular proletarian writer Alexander Bezymensky (1898-1973), an ardent Party member and activist in literary organizations. By June, Shostakovich wrote to Lev Shulgin, a composer and head of the Propaganda Department, that he had already completed more than half of the score. “The composition is going smoothly.... Altogether it will be from eighteen to twenty minutes long. Now I have come to the most difficult part. The chorus enters. And if you remember Bezymensky’s verses, they are not very singable.” (In a letter to a friend, Shostakovich was less cautious, calling the poetry “very bad.”) By summer, Shostakovich had completed the commission, but remained uncertain about what to call it. Finally he decided upon “Posvyashchhenie Oktyabryu”—“A Dedication to October,” under which title it was initially performed and published. Sometime after the premiere, Shostakovich began using the title Symphony No. 2—although this bold, naive, rabble-rousing, two-movement avant-garde experiment has nothing in common with conventional symphonic (sonata) form or intent.

In the 1920s, numerous European composers (e.g., Arthur Honegger, George Antheil) sought to inject the sounds and rhythms of modern industrial life into their music. In the USSR, a society based upon a glorification of socialist industrial development, this trend towards “ultra-realism”
found fertile ground. In 1927, Soviet modernist composer Nikolai Mosolov created his eccentric masterpiece of “machine music,” *Iron Foundry*—with a clanging iron sheet in the orchestra. The same year in Paris, Serge Diaghilev and his Ballets Russes staged Sergei Prokofiev’s constructivist ballet *Le Pas d’acier (The Steel Leap)*, a romanticized depiction of proletarian life complete with banging hammers, revolving transmissions, flywheels, and flashing lights. Not to be outdone, Shostakovich inserted a real industrial sound effect into his Second Symphony: a factory siren or hooter (*gudok*), which erupts at the end of the first part and again in the symphony’s finale. Shulgin suggested this novelty, and the composer enthusiastically complied:

I recently made a visit to a factory and listened to the tessitura of the hooters. They have a rather low sound. I need the hooter to be in the key of F-sharp. And it is absolutely necessary that it should make a crescendo from *ppp* to *fff*. Of course the sound should not be as loud as the ones in a real factory, and should have a precise pitch. In case they are not available, the hooters can be replaced by the brass instruments. Altogether there should be probably three or a maximum of four hooters.

Constructed in two parts, the Symphony No. 2 (Shostakovich’s shortest) opens with an extended instrumental section followed by one for chorus and orchestra. As Marina Sabinina has observed, the Second employs a programmatic scheme familiar from the mass theatrical “meeting-spectacles” popular during the early 1920s: “First we hear dark chaos, symbolizing the gloomy past of the workers, and then—an awakening of protest, the maturation of revolutionary consciousness, and finally the triumph of October’s victory.”

To convey the “dark chaos,” Shostakovich uses a gradually thickening orchestral texture that grows from near inaudibility in the muted low strings into a remarkably complex multi-layered monolith. The quarter-notes of the opening pages are joined by a riot of conflicting rhythmic patterns in eighth-notes, eighth-note triplets, and sixteenth-notes that further subdivide into smaller units, building to a cacophonic din. Finally a trumpet breaks through the murky soundscape, playing random notes in search of a theme. A grotesque march-like episode starts up, reminiscent of the ironic spirit of the Symphony No. 1. But the mood soon changes, leading into a wild thirteen-voice fugue in “ultra-polyphonic” style that prefigures the atonal, athematic world of the opera *The Nose*—begun in the summer of 1927 while Shostakovich was completing the Second Symphony. A dramatic blast on the factory hooter concludes Part I. Part II’s simpler musical language reflects the frankly propagandistic character of Bezymensky’s poster-like verses, exalting Lenin’s legacy and the coming of the “new age” of “labor, joy, and song.” Here, the major mode emerges, centering around the bright key of B major. In the final measures, the chorus abandons singing for shouting: “October, Commune, Lenin.”

The symphony’s premiere took place as part of the festivities surrounding the November 7 holiday. During rehearsals, Shostakovich (still only twenty-one years old!) had to overcome resistance from the string players, who called some of the *pizzicato* passages in Part I nearly unplayable. The long evening began at 9 p.m. with a two-hour meeting attended by Communist Party luminaries including Politburo member Mikhail Kalinin. Only at 11:45 did the orchestra start playing. Despite the late hour, the symphony received an enthusiastic reception. The official reviews were positive, and even Sergei Kirov, the fearsome Leningrad Party boss, took an interest in this rising new talent of Soviet music.

In later years, however, the Second Symphony disappeared from the repertoire and, owing to its political nature, found few admirers outside the USSR. By the 1930s, in the conservative
cultural climate of Stalinism, it was criticized as an “anti-artistic” work of “extreme formalism.” By the 1950s, even Shostakovich listed the Symphony No. 2 among his “creative failures.” He did not object, however, when it returned to the Soviet concert hall in 1966, with performances in Leningrad, Moscow, and Riga.

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THESE ARE THE BSO’S FIRST SUBSCRIPTION PERFORMANCES OF SHOSTAKOVICH’S SYMPHONY NO. 2, the only previous BSO performance having been given by Andris Nelsons at Tanglewood on July 26, 2019, last summer, with the Tanglewood Festival Chorus, James Burton, conductor.
SHOSTAKOVICH Symphony No. 2, “To October”
Text by Alexander Bezymensky

My shli, my prosily raboty i khlyeba,
Syerdtsa byli szhaty tiskami toski.
Zavodskiy truby tyanulisya k nyebu,
Kak ruki, bessil’nyye szhat’ kulaki.
Strashno bylo imya nashikh tyenyet:
Molchan’ye, stradan’ye, gnyot.
No gromchye orudii vorvalis’
v molchan’ye
Slova nashei skorbi, slova nashikh muk.
O Lenin! Ty vykoval volyu stradan’ya,
Ty vykoval volyu mozolistykh ruk.

We marched, we asked for work and bread.
Our hearts were gripped in a vice of anguish.
Factory chimneys towered up toward the sky
Like hands, powerless to clench a fist.
Terrible were the names of our shackles:
Silence, suffering, oppression.
But louder than gunfire there burst into
the silence
Words of our torment, words of our suffering.
Oh, Lenin! You forged freedom through
suffering,
You forged freedom from our toil-hardened
hands.
We knew, Lenin, that our fate
Bears a name: Struggle.
Struggle! You led us to the final battle.
Struggle! You gave us the victory of Labor.
And this victory over oppression and darkness
None can ever take away from us!
Let all in the struggle be young and bold:

The name of this victory is October!
October! The messenger of the awaited
dawn.
October! The freedom of rebellious ages.
October! Labor, joy, and song.

October! Happiness in the fields and at
the work benches,
This is the slogan and this is the name
of living generations:
October, the Commune, and Lenin.