Dmitri Shostakovich

*Symphony No. 14, Opus 135*

**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. 14 for soprano, bass, and chamber orchestra in 1969, using texts by Federico García Lorca, Guillaume Apollinaire, Wilhelm Küchelbecker, and Rainer Maria Rilke (the Küchelbecker in its Russian original, the rest in Russian translation). The piano score was completed on February 16, 1969, the full score on March 2. The symphony is dedicated to Benjamin Britten. An early, closed performance for an invited audience was given on June 21, 1969, in the Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatory; Rudolf Barshai conducted the Moscow Chamber Orchestra, with soloists Margarita Miroshnikova, soprano, and Yevgeny Vladimirov, bass. The official Leningrad premiere took place on September 29, 1969, at the Hall of the Glinka Capella, with Barshai, the Moscow Chamber Orchestra, soprano Galina Vishnevskaya, and Yevgeny Vladimirov. The official Moscow premiere followed on October 6, with the same orchestra and conductor, Vishnevskaya, and bass Mark Reshetin. Benjamin Britten led the English Chamber Orchestra in the UK premiere on June 14, 1970, at the Aldeburgh Festival, also with Galina Vishnevskaya and Mark Reshetin.

*IN ADDITION TO THE SOPRANO AND BASS SOLOISTS*, Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 14 calls for a chamber orchestra of strings (ten violins, four violas, three cellos, and two double basses are specified) and percussion (castanets, wood block; soprano, alto, and tenor tom-toms; whip, chimes, vibraphone, xylophone, and celesta).

In his fourteenth, penultimate symphony, Dmitri Shostakovich confronts death in all its terror and majesty. Encompassing verses by four poets of different nationalities (Spanish, French, Russian, German), the music seethes, soars, and sighs as it lays bare the myriad emotions that death inspires: anger, love, regret, suffering, pain, forgiveness, resignation—even grotesque humor. Of the composer’s fifteen symphonies, the Fourteenth is the most unconventional and experimental in instrumental forces, form, and musical language. Constructed in eleven episodes of varying length, each a setting of a verse text, it disregards the sonata-form rules of the genre of the classical symphony and could more precisely be called a symphonic song cycle. Yet this masterful and intensely personal work follows a concise, complex course (proceeding mostly without pause) that pulses with a tense musical and dramatic unity from first measure to last.

For Shostakovich—who was gravely ill and increasingly aware of his own mortality toward the close of a life in which he had seen more than his share of death and suffering—the Symphony No. 14 held special significance. “Everything that I have written until now over these long years has merely served as a preparation for this work,” he wrote to his confidant Isaak Glikman. At the same time, Shostakovich found it necessary to justify the symphony’s somber mood to a Soviet audience used to a diet of unrelenting optimism and Socialist happy endings. He even resorted to quoting from one of the classics of Soviet Socialist Realism, *How the Steel Was Tempered* by Nikolai Ostrovsky, to defend his choice of material: “Man’s dearest possession is life. It is given to him but once, and he must live it so that dying, he might say: all my life, all my strength were given to the finest cause in the world—the fight for the Liberation of Mankind.”

As he began work, Shostakovich had three models in mind. One was his longtime idol Gustav Mahler (1860-1911), whose symphonies (specifically Nos. 2, 3, 4, and 8) and vocal works (song cycles including the *Songs of a Wayfarer* and *Kindertotenlieder*, and *Das Lied von der Erde* for two soloists and orchestra) so successfully incorporated vocal soloists and choruses. The second was his friend, the British composer Benjamin Britten (1913-1976). In 1962, Britten had completed his *War Requiem* for orchestra, soloists, and chorus combining excerpts from the Latin Requiem Mass with poems by World War I soldier/poet Wilfred Owen.

The third and most important model was Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881), revered by Shostakovich for his psychological insight, spiritual depth, and originality. Indeed, it was while preparing an orchestration in 1962 of Mussorgsky’s *Songs and Dances of Death*, a dark and searing setting of four poems for voice and piano, that Shostakovich first contemplated creating a similar work. That same year, he completed his Symphony No. 13, *Babi Yar*, for large orchestra, bass solo, and chorus to verses by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, including a poem about the slaughter of thousands of Jews during the Nazi Holocaust in Ukraine in 1941. In the following years, Shostakovich focused mainly on chamber works, completing his string quartets 9, 10, 11, and 12 between 1964 and 1968. His skill in writing for small string ensembles shows in the Symphony No. 14, with its many extended passages scored for string solos (especially cello), trio, and quartet, creating an atmosphere of intimacy and reflection. (The opening section, “De Profundis,” is a particularly good example, where the bass soloist is accompanied only by violins, violas, and double basses.)

Shostakovich spent January and February of 1969 in the elite Moscow Kremlin Hospital recovering from various serious ailments—a heart attack, a broken leg, and chronic muscle weakness. He passed the days reading poetry in Russian translation, eventually choosing eleven poems. “My choice of poems is probably quite random,” he wrote to
Glikman. “But it seems to me that they are given unity through the music.”

In fact, the four poets have a great deal in common. All four had immediate and crushing experience of war and the spectacle of death. Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca (1898–1936) was shot by a firing squad in Spain during the Spanish Civil War. French poet Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) was seriously wounded in combat in World War I, and died prematurely of influenza. German/Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) served briefly in the Austro-Hungarian army in World War I, experiencing profound psychological trauma. Russian poet Wilhelm Küchelbecker (1797–1846) was exiled for life to Siberia for participating in the unsuccessful 1825 Decembrist Uprising against the Tsarist government. In his Symphony No. 14, Shostakovich uses (in this order) two poems by Lorca (“De Profundis,” “Malagueña”), six by Apollinaire (“Loreley,” “The Suicide,” “On the Alert,” “Look Here, Madame!,” “In the Santé Jail,” “The Zaporozhye Cossacks’ Reply to the Sultan of Constantinople”), one by Küchelbecker (“O Delvig, Delvig!”), and two by Rilke (“The Poet’s Death,” “Conclusion”). The first, seventh, eighth, and ninth poems are sung by bass solo, the second, fourth, fifth, and tenth by the soprano. Both soloists sing in the third and sixth movements, but only in the final—and shortest—movement do they join in a duet. Shostakovich’s wife Irina helped him adapt and abridge the poems. In the original version, all ten non-Russian poems are sung in Russian in translations done by four different translators. In numerous cases, particular words or phrases are repeated for rhythmic, sonic, or thematic effect (e.g., the haunting repetition of the words “три лилии”/three lilies” in “The Suicide,” or the crazy laughter “ха-ха-ха-ха-чу” in “Look Here, Madame!”). Several of the Apollinaire settings are fragments taken from larger cycles of poems, as is the only poem written originally in Russian, Küchelbecker’s tribute to fellow poet Anton Delvig (1798–1831) and the immortality of art. The symphony’s musical language is highly varied, dissonant, multi-layered, and dense. Shostakovich largely disregards conventional structure, although the key of G minor dominates. The most recognizable “theme” is the keening phrase that opens the first movement and reappears elsewhere in modified form, notably in movements 9 (“О Delvig, Delvig!”) and 10 (“The Poet’s Death”) and in the final measures. Several movements (“Loreley,” “On the Alert”) employ twelve-tone rows as structural elements, one of the few instances in Shostakovich’s music of serialist technique, long banned in Soviet music as a decadent Western import. Unusual instrumental combinations abound: castanets with strings and soprano for Spanish flavor in “Malagueña”; wood block, whip, chimes, xylophone, vibraphone, and celesta to convey the dream world of “Loreley”; string players striking the wood of the bow (col legno) in “In the Santé Jail.” At several points the various stringed instruments divide into as many as ten different parts. A furious crescendo concludes the symphony, the strings pounding out a frantic dissonant chord that holds out little hope for the afterlife.

Some listeners, including author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, found Shostakovich’s view of mortality excessively bleak and uncompromising. And yet overall the Fourteenth Symphony enjoyed a positive critical and popular reception. An odd incident at the first, closed performance in June 1969 at the Moscow Conservatory contributed to the work’s fame. In attendance among the packed crowd was Pavel Apostolov, a musicologist and Communist Party apparatchik known for his repeated attacks on Shostakovich in 1948 and afterwards. As the fifth section, “On the Alert,” was being performed, Apostolov suddenly got up and left the hall, causing a disruption. When the audience filed out after the performance, Apostolov was seen being tended to by medical personnel in the hallway, having suffered an apparent heart attack or stroke. Many of those in attendance, including Shostakovich, believed he had died on the spot, and this story became part of the symphony’s legend. In fact, however, Apostolov passed away a few weeks later. In any case, that Apostolov was struck down during the performance of a symphony about death composed by the man he had so long persecuted seemed to many a divine act of retribution.

The first public performances of the Fourteenth Symphony in Leningrad and Moscow attracted large audiences that included many members of the Soviet and diplomatic cultural elite. Surprisingly, perhaps deferring to Shostakovich’s ill health and enormous international stature, Soviet cultural officials refrained from attacking him for addressing such a difficult topic in such an uncompromising manner. Numerous performances followed soon after across the USSR, in Soviet satellite countries, and in the West.

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THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE OF SHOSTAKOVICH’S SYMPHONY NO. 14 was given by Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra on January 1, 1971, with soloists Phyllis Curtin and Simon Estes. The same forces gave the first New York performance four days later, on January 5, in Philharmonic Hall (now David Geffen Hall) at Lincoln Center.