Dmitri Shostakovich, of heart attack, at 68

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MOSCOW — Composer Dmitri Shostakovich, whose fortunes and music rose and fell with the whims of Soviet power, died Saturday of a heart attack at the age of 68, his family announced Sunday.

First public news of his death came at the Tanglewood Music Festival in Massachusetts, where Mr. Shostakovich's friend, cellist and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich, learned about it in a telephone call from Moscow.

The Tass news agency first announced the death in a two-line item 18 hours after it occurred but in a later expanded story called him "the outstanding Soviet composer." The Globe published his obituary in its late Sunday editions.

Mr. Shostakovich wrote music the world admired. He also wrote Soviet propaganda pieces, which Western critics panned.

"When Shostakovich is good, he is very good; and when he is poor he is awful," the late critic Milton Cross wrote.

Some of his most admired music brought Mr. Shostakovich into conflict with the Communist state. After every such crisis, he trimmed his sails, wrote an "approved" opus and restored himself to favor.

His 1932 opera "Lady Macbeth of Mzensk" enjoyed enormous success for two years until dictator Josef Stalin saw it and Pravda killed it by calling it "crude, primitive and vulgar." The revised version, "Katerina Izmailova," has been restored to the Bolshoi Theater repertory.

Mr. Shostakovich redeemed himself by writing his simple fifth symphony which became known as "The Symphony of Socialism."

He stirred patriotic feelings with his 1942 seventh symphony dedicated to his native Leningrad. A firefighter in that city, Mr. Shostakovich wrote it while German shells were falling around him. Arturo Toscanini gave it its premiere in the United States.

In 1948 Stalin's cultural watchdog Andrei Zhdanov panned Mr. Shostakovich and several other composers as "alien to the Soviet people."

After Stalin's death in 1953 Mr. Shostakovich published another internationally acclaimed work, his 10th symphony, then fell into disfavor again with his 13th symphony, based on a poem by Yevgeny Yevtushenko about the slaughter of the Jews at Babi Yar. Nikita Khrushchev banned it for hinting at anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union.

He had heart attack in 1966 but Mr. Shostakovich went on working on two more symphonies and several chamber pieces.

He had a precocious genius, writing his first work at the age of nine and his first symphony as a graduation exercise at the age of 18. Bruno Walter introduced this symphony in Berlin in 1927, starting Mr. Shostakovich's international reputation.

Mr. Shostakovich was one of this century's musical giants. He was the last of an age of truly great Russian composers — the heir of Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, the contemporary of composers, Russians called him "the new Beethoven."

American composer Leonard Bernstein, learning of Mr. Shostakovich's death, said: "I feel as if I have lost a dear friend."

Bernstein, rehearsing in Vienna to conduct at the Salzburg festival, said he experienced Mr. Shostakovich's music for more than three decades and knew "his loss is great indeed to the world."

British composer Sir Lennox Berkeley hailed Mr. Shostakovich as "one of the great creative artists of this century."

"He was one of the most gifted and perhaps the most prolific composers of our time," said Sir Lennox. "Painfully shy, he found it difficult to make contact with others in ordinary circumstances. Music was his natural language."

Galina Vishnevskaya, the soprano who is the wife of Mstislav Rostropovich, conductor in residence at Tanglewood, and the conductor issued a statement at Tanglewood.

"Mr. Shostakovich belonged to the entire world and today the whole world is mourning this great loss. In his music he gave not only the sense of great beauty but also the feelings of the great contradictions of the epoch in which he lived. He lived a saturated and difficult life and until the last minute continued to create."

His creative genius overcame everything which stood in his path. Death carried him away at the very pinnacle of his creativeness and fame. For a human being who left so much to the world, one cannot say that he is really dead. But for close friends the knowledge is terribly hard to live through."
Friends recall Shostakovich

LENNOX — Beforehand, all the attention at Tanglewood this weekend had been focused on Galina Vishnevskaya and Mstislav Rostropovich in the final days of their extended stay in the Berkshires. Vishnevskaya was to sing the music with which she is most closely identified, the "Letter Scene" from Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin," and Rostropovich after accompanying Vishnevskaya at the piano and conducting two concerts was finally to do what he is most famous for, play the cello.

But in the event, attention centered on Dmitri Shostakovich, the leading Soviet composer who died Saturday evening at the age of 69, Shostakovich's connections with the Rostropoviches were very close.

Both of the cello concertos were written for and dedicated to Rostropovich, and Shostakovich first heard some of his song cycles, and the crucial soprano solo in the 14th Symphony, in the voice of Vishnevskaya.

And Tanglewood was the first place in America to know of Shostakovich's death. Shortly before leaving for the concert Saturday evening, the Rostropoviches were telephoned by members of the Shostakovich family, who told them that the great composer had died at 7 p.m. Moscow time.

Nothing was announced to the public in the first half of the concert, though after the "Letter Scene" Vishnevskaya returned to the stage and sang Luba's unaccompanied aria from Rimsky-Korsakov's "The Tsar's Bride" with the deepest intensity, her arms folded at her breast like a child.

Then, after an encore by Seiji Ozawa on 21, director of the orchestra, came on stage with Rostropovich and made a brief announcement about the death of the composer of the symphony that was about to be played and asked the audience to rise with the orchestra for a moment of silence.

Not everything in the performance of Shostakovich's 5th Symphony that followed was cogently led or well-played, but the emotional passages took on great urgency, and the flute solo in the first movement, gorgeously intoned by Dorothy Anthony Dwyer over the pulsing strings, sounded as high requiem.

Afterwards, before acknowledging the applause of the audience, Rostropovich impulsively bent to kiss the pages of the score he had just conducted. Someone seated in front handed up a small spray of roses which Rostropovich gently placed on the music stand. And despite the continuing ovation, Rostropovich remained standing amid the members of the orchestra; he did not mount the podium again.

Obviously Rostropovich and Vishnevskaya were working under great emotional strain, so it is not proper to enumerate the faults of the performance of Tchaikovsky's "Francesca da Rimini" that had opened the program or of the tough-sounding and mature, though artful, Tatiana that Vishnevskaya presented.

The featured work on yesterday afternoon's program — after a slack and perfunctory Beethoven's 4th Symphony by Ozawa and the orchestra, was the second of Shostakovich's cello concertos, which has apparently not been heard in America since its first performances at Carnegie Hall nine years ago.

The greatest of Shostakovich's works point to the reconciliation of opposites — in the words of the Rostropoviches' statement about their friend, "he gave not only the sense of great beauty but also the feelings of the great contradictions of the epoch in which he lived."

This work, though, seems only to juxtapose the disparate elements of Shostakovich's musical personality, elements stated quite blatantly here — not unite them. There is something almost desperate about the way the end of the concerto lists nearly everything that has happened before, rather than gathering it all up into coherence and reconciliation.

In the circumstances of his own performance and in playing of Rostropovich, noble in its beauty and fervent advocacy, that had a poignancy of its own — curiously similar, in fact, to the poignancy of the end of Keats's where he too desperately tries to resolve issues that he was wise and human enough to perceive, weak enough to retreat before. Fortunately Shostakovich wrote his Greater Odes too.

Afterwards Rostropovich offered his own encore, the Chant du Menestral of Gliere. It was big, generous, personal, old-fashioned music-making, like most of what he and his wife, had offered in the last weeks. What they do is so committed that it is more than ordinarily oblivious to its inevitably attendant faults; at its best it is capacious enough in its commitments and in its statements to make those who hear it willingly oblivious too.