

TRANSLATION

LE DEVOIR

Review

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A Great *Shostakovich Seventh* from Rafael Payare on Record

This surprise release will be of great interest to the many music lovers who attended the Montreal Symphony Orchestra's concerts on April 15 and 16. Rafael Payare has recorded Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7, the "Leningrad," with the San Diego Symphony.

The recording will be released on Sept. 11 by Delos, the American label that has risen from the ashes and is now part of the Belgian Outhere Music group, owned by Charles Adriaenssen, which also owns Analekta. Before then, it will be available on all streaming platforms beginning Aug. 28.

We're writing about it now because it is one of those select recordings that enrich Apple's curated classical catalog. Apple Music Classical reserves certain releases as exclusives, and this recording has been available there since June 26.

There may be a connection to the fact that Payare and the San Diego Symphony recorded their first album—Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 11*—for Platoon, Apple's incubator for emerging musical talent. Released in May 2022, it was both Payare's first commercial recording and Platoon's first classical project. One hopes Delos will also issue that Eleventh on physical media following this Seventh.

And listeners familiar with Payare's Shostakovich performances will not be surprised to learn that this *Leningrad* is remarkable in many respects.

The first ovation belongs to recording engineers Joel Watts, Ryan Nelson, and Jason Chaney. This live recording, captured in May 2025 at the Jacobs Music Center, is quite simply a hi-fi demonstration disc—a magnificent achievement recalling the finest releases from Reference Recordings in the precision of its engineering, its dynamic range, and the richness of its sonic spectrum—especially the bass.

That technical achievement is essential because, as we are beginning to understand, Payare's Shostakovich is not one that shouts or tears at the listener—it crushes. Everything rests on a true sonic tsunami, meticulously organized through an inexorable and masterfully controlled expansion of dynamic power, beginning with astonishing clarity and maintaining that transparency throughout.

In this respect—even though Kurt Sanderling never recorded the Seventh—Payare is far closer to Sanderling than to Gennady Rozhdestvensky. Like Sanderling, he unsettles the listener through patience and method rather than by twisting the music into cries of anguish and agony. If there is one reservation, it is that the great bassoon solo near the end of the first movement could embody a deeper sense of utter desolation. Yet that fleeting regret is quickly swept away by the extraordinary weight of the movement's final pizzicatos.

The first movement's inexorable crescendo—and above all its final apotheosis—are moments that pierce the soul. The ending, often understood as a premonition of victory over fascism, also stands as a quiet tribute to all those crushed beneath totalitarian regimes of every kind. For that message to resonate, its emotional weight must feel almost unbearable—and Rafael Payare conveys that burden with extraordinary conviction in a performance distinguished by both its clarity and its power.

In a 2023 essay, *The "Leningrad" Symphony: A Mirror of Our World?*, we explored the work and its historical context. It is worth remembering that the symphony was first performed in Leningrad on Aug. 9, 1942—the 335th day of a siege that would last 872 days and claim nearly one million civilian lives. To reach the West, the score traveled on microfilm through Iran, Iraq, and Egypt, crossed Africa, and ultimately sailed to the United States, where several leading conductors competed for the honor of its American premiere. Serge Koussevitzky, Eugene Ormandy, Leopold Stokowski, and Artur Rodziński all sought the distinction, but the premiere was ultimately entrusted to Arturo Toscanini and broadcast nationwide by NBC.

This recording is the first fruit of the integrated recording system installed in San Diego's new Jacobs Music Center, inaugurated in October 2024. The system allows every concert to be captured, making it possible to release particularly exceptional performances. And for those who might understandably be concerned, the conductor contributes very little in the way of audible distractions—groans or other vocalizations. We detected only one isolated instance in the third movement, insignificant in the context of such a remarkable achievement.