

SHOSTAKOVICH Symphony No 7 (Payare)

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Shostakovich's Symphony No 7, the *Leningrad*, carries a huge historical burden. Although famed for its cinematic 'invasion episode', it is so much more than that – a sprawling panorama that is not always easy-going, but contains some challenging and cryptic moments. Still, even for Shostakovich devotees (like me), there are undoubtedly longueurs (according to my less sympathetic Soviet-era grandmother, it's *tyagomotina* – an interminable slog).

Rafael Payare, however, overcomes this problem. His recording clocks in at 75'22", which is much shorter than famous predecessors such as Bernstein's or Haitink's. Payare resists the

temptation to indulge in unscored dramatic pauses. He keeps the various mournful solo lines in check, instead of heightening the grief. Rubato is largely absent, the rhythms are crisp and the ensemble consistently perfect. There is undeniably a trade-off: recordings of the past that tolerated the longueurs could display more humanity, vulnerability and even find a paradoxical eloquence in artistic imperfection.

The players of the San Diego Symphony Orchestra produce marvellous sounds that drew my attention to some lesser-known episodes, such as the second-movement reprise, a bass clarinet solo accompanied by three flutes (from 7'56"), which is delightful in this rendition. The trumpet parts in the finale also sound particularly exhilarating. The sound engineering can be too heavy-handed, sometimes allowing a single woodwind soloist to outcompete a whole string section, or eccentrically giving the harps more prominence than the woodwinds (at the opening of the third movement). The attention to detail becomes downright myopic in the first few variations of the invasion episode, which are intimately close, whereas the drama crucially requires the opposite: the approaching army is still far away, at the border. As the variations proceed, there is an impression of a knob being turned to increase the volume rather than the natural orchestral crescendo speaking for itself.

The symphony's outset seems to call for a grander statement, and the beginning of the *Largo* needs greater intensity (the woodwind chorale is marked *fortissimo*, after all). But the more energetic episodes are genuinely exhilarating (such as the middle of the slow movement), and the finale, which so often drags, works as well as can be hoped for. I was grateful for Payare's rhetorical emphasis at the glorious moment when the desired C major is finally achieved (so many conductors miss this opportunity). The trade-off means that Payare cannot offer us all the possible virtues, but his taut, disciplined approach is a fresh view worthy to take its place among the essential recorded accounts of the symphony.

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