

MARIINSKY ORCHESTRA AND SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY
A Jacobs Masterworks Classical Special Concert
Valery Gergiev, conductor

October 24, 2018

MIKHAIL GLINKA

Overture to *Ruslan and Ludmilla*
Mariinsky Orchestra

ALEXANDER BORODIN

In the Steppes of Central Asia
San Diego Symphony

INTERMISSION

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No. 7 in C Major, Op. 60: *Leningrad*
Allegretto
Moderato – Poco allegretto
Adagio
Allegro non troppo
Mariinsky Orchestra + San Diego Symphony

Overture to *Ruslan and Ludmilla*

MIKHAIL GLINKA

Born June 1, 1804, Novospasskoye

Died February 15, 1857, Berlin

This dazzling overture is all that lives on from Glinka's opera *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, first produced in St. Petersburg in 1842, when the composer was 38. *Ruslan and Ludmilla* was inspired by the fairy-tale poem of the same name by Alexander Pushkin. Intrigued by Glinka's plan to write an opera based on his poem, Pushkin had planned to supply the libretto but was killed in a duel before he could, and Glinka had to turn to others for help. The scenario was supplied by Glinka's friend Konstantin Bakhturin "in a quarter of an hour while drunk," and many others – the composer among them – had a hand in shaping the libretto. The result was not a unified and focused story but a loosely-connected sequence of fantastic episodes in which the heroic Ruslan must continually rescue the beautiful Ludmilla, who is constantly being abducted and put under spells. All finally ends well for Ruslan and Ludmilla, but the opera has never enjoyed much success.

Its overture, however, has always been a favorite in concert halls. The exciting opening – with its virtuoso writing for violins – is drawn from the opera's festive finale, while the lyrical second subject, first heard in the lower strings, is based on Ruslan's aria in the second act in which he dreams of Ludmilla. The compact (five-minute) overture is in sonata form, and in its closing pages Glinka briefly introduces – in the trombones – music associated with the evil dwarf Chernomor before the overture ends triumphantly.

In the Steppes of Central Asia

ALEXANDER BORODIN

Born November 12, 1833, St. Petersburg

Died February 27, 1887, St. Petersburg

In 1880 Czar Alexander II celebrated his Silver Jubilee, and 12 Russian composers were commissioned to write pieces for *tableaux vivants* depicting important events in his reign. Always interested in Russian subjects, Borodin composed what he called "an orchestral sketch" depicting a caravan of Asian merchants and Russian soldiers crossing the remote wilderness of central Russia. *In the Steppes of Central Asia* was a phenomenal success at its premiere on April

20, 1880, a performance conducted by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. Over a century later it remains one of Borodin's most popular works and one of the finest examples of musical scene-painting ever written.

In the Steppes of Central Asia opens very quietly – the violins' harmonic E's suggest the vast and lonely spaces of the steppes – and soon a quiet pizzicato ostinato depicts the steady plod of the hooves of the caravan in the distance. Borodin builds this piece on two themes: a Russian folk tune first heard in clarinet and horn and what Borodin called an "Oriental melody" first announced by english horn. Musically, *In the Steppes* takes the form of a long crescendo as the caravan approaches and passes and then a long decrescendo as it moves into the distance. The two themes are announced quietly, but as the caravan approaches, they grow louder and grander, and soon the caravan thunders past, merchants leading camels laden with goods and soldiers of the military escort riding on horseback. In an ingenious stroke – and in some very graceful counterpoint – Borodin now combines his two themes and presents them simultaneously. Gradually the caravan disappears over the horizon, and as the silvery sound of flute offers the Asian melody one final time, we are left alone in the vast spaces of Central Asia.

The year after he wrote *In the Steppes of Central Asia*, Borodin visited Weimar and showed the score of this music to the aging Franz Liszt, who liked the piece so much that he persuaded Borodin to make a piano arrangement of it. In gratitude for that enthusiasm, Borodin dedicated *In the Steppes of Central Asia* to Liszt.

Symphony No. 7 in C Major, Op. 60: *Leningrad*

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg

Died August 9, 1975, Moscow

On June 21, 1941, Hitler unleashed Operation Barbarossa – the invasion of Russia – and specified to his generals that it would "have to be conducted with unprecedented, unmerciful and unrelenting harshness." In this he was as good as his word: over the next four years 20 million Russians would be killed. Shostakovich heard the news that Saturday afternoon while on his way to a soccer double-header, and his life was transformed along with his nation's. When his attempt to enlist in the army was rejected, he contributed to the war effort by writing patriotic

songs and marches and joining the firefighting brigade at the Leningrad Conservatory. They did not have long to wait – the Germans began shelling Leningrad on September 1, and that siege, one of the most horrifying in history, would last almost three years and kill nearly a million residents of the city.

Even before Nazi shells began to fall on the city, Shostakovich had set out on a vast musical project – on July 19 he began a symphony written in response to the invasion. It would be the longest of his 15 symphonies, the most famous...and the most notorious. He completed the huge first movement on August 29 as the German army approached, had the second done on September 17, and completed the third 12 days later, on the 29th. By this time, Leningrad had been completely cut off, and Shostakovich and his wife and children were flown over enemy lines to Moscow on October 1. Along with many other Soviet artists, they were then evacuated to Kyubishev, 600 miles east of Moscow, and it was there that he completed his Seventh Symphony on December 27. A few weeks after the premiere, which took place in Kyubishev on March 5, 1942, Shostakovich called the war the struggle “between culture and barbarity, between light and darkness” and dedicated the Seventh Symphony “to our struggle with fascism, to our coming victory over the enemy, and to my native city, Leningrad.”

The *Leningrad* Symphony, as the Seventh inevitably became known, spans nearly 80 minutes. The massive opening movement is what we automatically think of at the mention of the *Leningrad* Symphony – it gives the symphony its distinctive character, as well as its notoriety. Shostakovich described the opening of the movement as a depiction “of the happy, peaceful life of people sure of themselves and their future. This is the simple, peaceful life lived before the war...” The powerful opening in C Major establishes a heroic character, while the violins’ lyric second subject and the exposition’s closing theme – imaginatively assigned to a solitary piccolo – offer fleeting glimpses of a peaceful life now gone forever. It is into this almost pastoral world that war suddenly intrudes, and here Shostakovich makes a striking – and controversial – choice. In place of the expected development of his opening material, invaders arrive, not as cataclysmic horror but as a bare presence on the most distant horizon. Over a faint snare drum tattoo (marked triple *piano*), strings pluck out a jaunty little tune, almost banal in its simplicity. The sting comes in its tail: its closing phrase is from Danilo’s “Da geh’ ich zu Maxim’s,” from Franz Lehar’s *The Merry Widow*, one of Hitler’s favorites. (Shostakovich could not have known of that association and doubtless incorporated the tag-end of the melody simply to give his invader theme a German

flavor.) Over the incessant snare drum rhythm, this little tune repeats and repeats, growing louder as the enemy approaches and developing a swagger along the way. After 12 repetitions, this theme – now of steamroller-like proportions – is assaulted by a mighty “Russian”-sounding theme, and a noisy musical battle erupts.

The charge has always been that Shostakovich lifted the idea for this episode from Ravel’s *Bolero*, and while in a structural sense that may be accurate, the true musical father of this movement is Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*, where music associated with another invader from Western Europe – Napoleon’s France, almost 120 years prior – is confronted in a musical battle by Russian music...and defeated. At the climax of the first movement Shostakovich reintroduces his heroic opening theme, and there follows what might be described as a “battered” recapitulation. Solo bassoon sings a long threnody on the violins’ second subject; what had sounded so peaceful half an hour before is now spare and grim. The movement concludes in near-silence as fragments of the invader theme lie shattered in the ditch.

Like the opening movements of Gustav Mahler’s Ninth and Tenth Symphonies, the first movement of Shostakovich’s *Leningrad Symphony* is so complete a drama, so complete an emotional journey in itself, that it is difficult to know how to proceed in its aftermath. There is evidence that Shostakovich considered making this a one-movement symphony, but he settled for the traditional four-movement plan. The composer called the second movement “a lyrical respite” after the violence of the first and said that it recalls “pleasant events and past joys,” while the third “depicts the Joy of Life and the Worship of Nature.” The *Moderato (poco Allegretto)* is a scherzo in ternary form. Second violins announce a tart little dance, full of ironic turns, and the strident central episode, which moves into 3/8 time and C-sharp minor, rides along the piercing sound of solo woodwinds. Shostakovich accompanies the return of his opening dance with some wonderful sounds, generated by two flutes and alto flute, which pulse quietly behind the dance.

The spare wind chorale that opens the *Adagio* alternates with a cadenza-like recitative for violins, and this in turn is followed by a lyric idea for flute. This last offers some of the most appealing music in the symphony, but it is rudely shouldered aside as the music accelerates into a raucous, troubled central section. Shostakovich recalls his opening material briefly before proceeding directly into the finale.

Shostakovich had originally planned to call the last movement “Victory,” and while he

withdrew that title, he did establish the connection in a radio broadcast, calling the finale “the victory of light over darkness, wisdom over frenzy, lofty humanism over monstrous tyranny.” But while the first movement may have won a battle, final victory was by no means certain at this point in history. In fact, when Shostakovich began composing this finale – three days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor – the siege of Leningrad would continue for two more years, with untold misery still to come. The music begins in harmonic uncertainty and takes a firm direction only when the strings stride out purposefully with the movement’s main theme. This is another long movement – and a tense one. Shostakovich calls for ten extra brass players with parts of their own, and – despite a quiet central episode – the music often feels more tortured than triumphant. Even the heroic return of the symphony’s opening theme in the closing minutes does not dispel this tension, and Shostakovich wrenches the music into unequivocal C Major only for the final chord. Written from the depths of war, this is a finale that celebrates the expectation of victory rather than its finality.

No other symphony in history has had the immediate impact that the *Leningrad* Symphony had. Its premiere was broadcast throughout Russia, and the Leningrad premiere – on August 9, 1942, in the midst of the siege – was so important to the beleaguered city that its only surviving orchestra (a radio orchestra of barely 50 players) was augmented by players pulled from military units, with some players even called back from the trenches at the front to participate. The score was microfilmed, driven to Teheran, then flown to Cairo and on to the West. Sir Henry Wood led the British premiere on June 29, and Arturo Toscanini led the NBC Symphony in the American premiere on July 19, which was broadcast nationally. That same week, Shostakovich appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, improbably wearing the hat of the Leningrad Conservatory’s fire brigade. The symphony was performed over 60 times in its first season, unheard of for any symphony, before or since; this music had become *the* cultural symbol of the struggle against Hitler and the Nazis.

Inevitably, a reaction set in. English critic Ernest Newman contributed a memorable barb, saying that if one “wished to locate this symphony on the musical map, he should look along the seventieth degree of longitude and the last degree of platitude,” and Béla Bartók – perhaps unwisely – sneered at the invader theme in his Concerto for Orchestra. After its excessive popularity, the *Leningrad* Symphony virtually dropped out of sight in the years after the war.

What sense are we to make of the Shostakovich Seventh Symphony now, over 70 years

after its premiere? The conditions that gave rise to its creation have long since faded into history, and this symphony – perhaps too loud, too long and too obvious – might have been expected to vanish along with them. Yet the *Leningrad* Symphony has re-established itself to some degree over the last 20 years (there are, remarkably, 15 performances available on compact disc), and it continues to engage audiences. Perhaps some of this is simple nostalgia, with its power – like a faded snapshot or a uniform found in a closet – to evoke another era. But some of its endurance in the concert hall comes directly from the passion and heroism of the music itself. Carl Sandburg said that this symphony was “written in the heart’s blood,” and while the *Leningrad* Symphony’s rawness and immediacy may be the source of some of its problems, they are also the source of its strength. Sentiments that sound tinny and jingoistic during moments of ease can take on renewed meaning during times of national emergency. In its stark power, broad strokes and un-conflicted emotions, Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony speaks of a less complicated time, and it truly is music written “in the heart’s blood.”

-Program notes by Eric Bromberger

PERFORMANCE HISTORY by Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, San Diego Symphony

Archivist

The only familiar and often-played piece of music on this exceptional concert is Glinka’s Overture to his pioneering Russian opera, *Ruslan and Ludmilla*. That opera blazed a trail and stimulated the composition of more Russian operas by subsequent Russian composers, many more successful than this long-forgotten one. None, however, had an overture to equal the brilliance and popularity of Glinka’s. First played by the San Diego Symphony in its first post-WWII season after a seven year break, it was conducted then by Fabien Sevitsky. A familiar audience favorite, it has been played a dozen times by the San Diego Symphony since then, and even though this performance will be by a different orchestra on our stage, the subsequent unification with ours should make it count as one of our performances at one of our concerts.

The melodic and incredibly evocative tone poem, *In the Steppes of Central Asia*, has been, like so much of the music by Borodin, almost totally ignored at these concerts, except for occasional performances of the *Polovtzhian Dances* from his opera *Prince Igor*. It is, in fact, receiving its first San Diego Symphony performance here at these concerts – overdue but very welcome, and especially so when led by a great visiting Russian conductor whose love for the

music of Borodin is obviously heartfelt and meaningful.

Coincidentally, the Shostakovich Seventh Symphony, aka the *Leningrad*, had been scheduled for performance by the San Diego Symphony on an earlier occasion, during a dark time in the Orchestra's history. During the terrible financial crunch of the 1993-94 season, the work had been scheduled for its first San Diego performance, under Murry Sidlin, but like so much of that season it was cancelled, never to be performed here since then until today's very exceptional concert. This symphony, by the way, so often the subject of considerable carping by many prominent music critics (even some in Russia!), seems to be developing a new life among performers. One of Leonard Bernstein's last recordings was made with the Chicago Symphony performing the *Leningrad* a couple of years before his death, after they played a concert performance there, and it has generated considerable interest. Likewise, in San Francisco, Michael Tilson Thomas has completed a series of performances there of many of the Shostakovich symphonies, including this one.