SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
“PAYARE CONDUCTS BEETHOVEN & SHOSTAKOVICH”
A JACOBS MASTERWORKS CONCERT
Rafael Payare, conductor

February 21 and 23, 2020

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN       Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 61
                             Allegro ma non troppo
                             Larghetto
                             Rondo: Allegro
                             Stefan Jackiw, violin

                             INTERMISSION

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH       Symphony No. 11 in G minor, Op. 103: The Year 1905
                             1. The Palace Square
                             2. The 9th of January
                             3. In Memoriam
                             4. The Tocsin
Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 61
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Born December 16, 1770, Bonn
Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

In the spring of 1806 Beethoven finally found time for new projects. For the previous three years, his energies had been consumed by two huge works – the *Eroica* and the opera *Leonore* (later re-named *Fidelio*). Now with the opera done (for the moment), the floodgates opened. Working at white heat over the rest of 1806, Beethoven turned out a rush of works: the Fourth Piano Concerto, the Fourth Symphony, the three Razumovsky Quartets and the Thirty-Two Variations in C minor. He also accepted a commission from violinist Franz Clement for a concerto, and – as was his habit with commissions – put off work on the concerto for as long as possible. Clement had scheduled his concert for December 23, 1806, and Beethoven apparently worked on the music until the last possible instant – legend has it that at the premiere Clement sight-read some of the concerto from Beethoven’s manuscript.

Beethoven’s orchestral music from the interval between the powerful *Eroica* and the violent Fifth Symphony relaxed a little, and the Fourth Piano Concerto, Fourth Symphony and Violin Concerto are marked by a serenity absent from those symphonies. The Violin Concerto is one of Beethoven’s most regal works, full of easy majesty and spacious in conception. (The first movement alone lasts 24 minutes – his longest symphonic movement.) Yet mere length does not explain the majestic character of this music, which unfolds with a sort of relaxed nobility. Part – but not all – of the reason for this lies in the unusually lyric nature of the music. We do not normally think of Beethoven as a melodist, but in this concerto he makes full use of the violin’s lyric capabilities. Another reason lies in the concerto’s generally broad tempos: the first movement is marked *Allegro*, but Beethoven specifies *ma non troppo*, and even the finale is relaxed rather than brilliant. In fact, at no point in this concerto does Beethoven set out to dazzle his listeners – there are no passages here designed to leave an audience gasping, nor any that allow the soloist consciously to show off. This is an extremely difficult concerto, but a non-violinist might never know that, for the difficulties of this noblest of violin concertos are purely at the service of the music itself.

The concerto has a remarkable beginning: Beethoven breaks the silence with five quiet timpani strokes. By itself, this is an extraordinary opening, but those five pulses also perform a
variety of roles through the first movement – sometimes they function as accompaniment, sometimes as harsh contrast with the soloist, sometimes as a way of modulating to new keys. The movement is built on two ideas: the dignified chordal melody announced by the woodwinds immediately after the opening timpani strokes and a rising-and-falling second idea, also first stated by the woodwinds (this theme is quietly accompanied by the five-note pulse in the strings). Beethoven delays the appearance of the soloist, and this long movement is based exclusively on the two main themes. Beethoven wrote no cadenza for the Violin Concerto, preferring to leave that to Clement at the premiere, and many subsequent musicians have supplied cadenzas of their own. The most famous of these was by Fritz Kreisler, who wrote a majestic, idiomatic cadenza fully worthy of this concerto, while others – including Leopold Auer, Ferruccio Busoni and Alfred Schnittke – have offered quite different cadenzas.

The Larghetto, in G Major, is a theme-and-variation movement. Muted strings present the theme, and the soloist begins to embellish that simple melody, which grows more and more ornate as the movement proceeds. A brief cadenza leads directly into the finale, a rondo based on the sturdy rhythmic idea announced immediately by the violinist. But this is an unusual rondo: its various episodes begin to develop and take on lives of their own. (For this reason, the movement is sometimes classified as a sonata-rondo.) One of these episodes, in G minor and marked dolce, is exceptionally haunting – Beethoven develops this theme briefly and then it vanishes, never to return. The movement drives to a huge climax, with the violin soaring high above the turbulent orchestra, and the music subsides and comes to its close when Beethoven – almost as an afterthought, it seems – turns the rondo theme into the graceful concluding gesture.

**Symphony No. 11 in G minor, Op. 103: The Year 1905**

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH
Born September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg
Died August 9, 1975, Moscow

Shostakovich composed his Eleventh Symphony in 1957 to help observe the fortieth anniversary of the Communist Revolution that fall. It was premiered on October 30, 1957, by Nathan Rachlin and the USSR State Symphony Orchestra, during a heady moment in Soviet history: the launch of the first Sputnik four weeks earlier had stood the West on its head with what seemed evidence of Russian technological superiority. Shostakovich’s three previous
symphonies had all been abstract, but the Eleventh had a title – “The Year 1905” – and a subject: it depicts one of the central events leading to the Communist Revolution, the “Bloody Sunday” massacre of January 9, 1905. On that date, a group of unarmed workers led by a priest gathered in the square of the winter palace in St. Petersburg to ask Czar Nicholas II for redress of their poverty and miserable working conditions. Unwilling even to accept their right to demonstrate, the czar had already left the palace, and his troops opened fire on the petitioners. Over 500 were killed.

These events took place the year before Shostakovich was born in St. Petersburg, but memories of that atrocity were still fresh during his youth, and they were doubtless vivid to the composer: as an 11-year-old, he had seen a boy hacked to death by a sabre-wielding Cossack during the street riots of 1917. To commemorate this key moment in Russian history, Shostakovich filled a wide canvas: the Eleventh is a big symphony, lasting over an hour and requiring a huge orchestra. It is also programmatic music, and its four movements depict the events of that day. To give his symphony historical color, Shostakovich incorporated nine revolutionary songs as themes. This was an unusual step for this composer, and the year after the premiere he published an essay, “Closer to the People,” explaining how folksongs may become a musical source for composers: “What a wealth of wonderful songs we have, often undeservedly forgotten, songs composed by unknown poets and musicians. These songs inspired people to the performance of great deeds, they led whole generations of fighters into battle. It is quite natural that composers should frequently include the melodies of these songs in their works…It will, however, become a necessary element of an opera or symphony only when the author has sensed the material deeply, has come to it through suffering and torment. Only then will the song become organic and kin to the general structure of his music.”

It comes as no surprise that a symphony with such charged content should have had a mixed reputation, and the Eleventh Symphony in particular was caught between the political winds that blew through the last century. Ideological communist critics were ecstatic, hailing it as Shostakovich’s finest symphony since his wartime Leningrad Symphony. Ideological Western critics, uncomfortable with the subject, attacked the symphony for its popular idiom, sneering that it was mere “movie music.”

Actually, the Eleventh is quite impressive as a piece of symphonic music, and in the debate over content it has been easy to overlook the sureness of Shostakovich’s technique. This
is not a matter of using revolutionary songs or the vivid pictorial element, but rather of Shostakovich’s ability to unify this hour-long symphony around one seminal motto-theme, which is announced in the first moments (in a striking touch) by solo timpani and which then reappears in various ways throughout the symphony. The Eleventh is rarely performed today, but it is a much more skillfully made symphony than many Western critics have been able – or willing – to understand.

Shostakovich’s ability to generate atmosphere is evident in the first instants of the opening movement, *The Palace Square*, a description of the square where the massacre took place. This portrait of a frozen, misty winter morning is done perfectly with the icy sound of harp and muted strings – Shostakovich achieves here a sense of space and quiet, but also tension. Very quietly, the timpani taps out the motto-theme that will shape so much of the symphony, and trumpet and horn treat this in turn. Solo flute announces the first revolutionary song, a prison song whose title has been translated variously as “Listen” and “Awake.” This is developed briefly, but the end of the movement returns to the frozen stillness of the beginning.

The second movement, *The 9th of January*, depicts the actual massacre. Ominous lower strings sound a transformation of the motto theme. It feels properly threatening here, and it may be easy to miss Shostakovich’s subtle treatment of this theme, particularly in his fluid metrical transformation of it. The theme is heard in both augmentation and diminution (speeded-up and slowed-down), and Shostakovich combines the theme at these different speeds in some impressive counterpoint; later he transforms it into a lovely, haunting melody for violins. A return of the icy music from the very beginning sets the stage for the massacre, and a taut snare drum plunges us into the violence, where the motto is treated fugally. Its violence spent, the movement concludes with a return of the music from the very beginning, now presented in unsettling trills.

*In Memoriam* offers the funeral for the victims. Pizzicato strings precede the entrance of the violas, which sing the revolutionary song “You Fell as Victims.” This grows to a soaring climax, is combined with the motto theme and falls away to a quiet close. The final movement, *The Tocsin (Alarm)*, snaps to life on martial dotted rhythms – the title is a warning to the czar that forces have been unleashed that he will be unable to contain. At the climax of this movement, the motto theme is shouted out triumphantly, and listeners will hear other themes from earlier movements. The long English horn solo reprises “Bare Your Head,” first heard in
the second movement, and the movement drives to its powerful close as percussion hammers out the motto-theme rhythm one final time.

How are we to evaluate the Eleventh Symphony, over half a century after it was composed and three decades after the ignominious collapse of the ideology it celebrates? With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, revisionist Western critics have been quick to pounce on every note Shostakovich wrote, and one of the most extreme of these has suggested that the Eleventh Symphony should be understood not as a depiction of the czar’s slaughter of innocent Russians in 1905 but as a satirical comment on the Russian government’s crushing of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Perhaps the safest course is to divorce this symphony from our awareness of what the Soviet government became and to understand it instead as a portrait of a horrifying moment when innocent citizens were murdered by their own repressive government. Shostakovich’s response to that memory was personal and direct, and the symphony he wrote to commemorate it is better than many have been willing to admit.

-Program notes by Eric Bromberger

**Program History** by Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, San Diego Symphony Archivist

Beethoven's very great Violin Concerto was played for its first San Diego hearing when the original pre-World War I San Diego Symphony Orchestra performed it under the direction of Buren Schryock in 1914. The soloist was Arnold Kraus, then-concertmaster of the then-Los Angeles Symphony. Always an audience favorite, at these concerts it has been programmed frequently in the Symphony’s “modern” era, beginning with the performance by Werner Torkanowsky, under Robert Shaw's direction in 1958. Its most recent hearing here was its fifteenth, when James Ehnes was soloist under the baton of Edo de Waart in the 2015-16.

The Shostakovich Eleventh Symphony: *The Year 1905*, has been performed here once before, when Gerard Schwarz guest-conducted it during the 2005-06 season.