



**DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH:
SYMPHONY NO. 11 IN G MINOR, OP. 103, “THE YEAR 1905”**

**SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Rafael Payare, conductor**

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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

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

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