



Dmitri Shostakovich

“Festive Overture,” Opus 96

DMITRI DMITRIEVICH SHOSTAKOVICH was born in St. Petersburg on September 25, 1906, and died in Moscow on August 9, 1975. He composed his “Festive Overture” (“Prazdnichnaya uvertiura”) in November 1954, and the premiere took place at the Bolshoi Theatre on November 6, 1954, by the State Academic Orchestra of the Bolshoi Theater Orchestra, Alexander Melik-Pashayev conducting, in a gala concert celebrating the 37th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

THE SCORE OF THE “FESTIVE OVERTURE” calls for piccolo, two flutes, three oboes, three clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, extra brass ensemble (three trumpets, four horns, three trombones), and strings.



Extroverted, flashy, and cheerful, the *Festive Overture* has over the years become one of Shostakovich’s most popular “crossover” symphonic works. Frequently found on the programs of pops ensembles, and recorded by countless orchestras, it displays the lighter side of the composer’s complex personality, which is more often associated in the popular imagination with tragedy, gloom, suffering—and with lengthy compositions. Aficionados of brass instruments feel a special fondness for this splashy curtain-raiser, rippling with stirring fanfares, fortified at the rousing climax by a double brass ensemble featuring a grand (and it really is grand) total of six trumpets, six trombones, and eight horns.

Shostakovich first announced that he was working on the overture in the newspaper *Evening Leningrad* in late August, 1947. His statement there resounds with the ideological platitudes that dominated Soviet culture during this final—and in many ways, most frightening—stage of Stalin’s rule. At the time, a new campaign was raging against the “formalism” and “errors” of prominent Soviet creative artists, initially focused on the writers Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko. Shostakovich was already far too familiar with such attacks, having himself been the target in 1936 for his daring opera



Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk, a turning point in his career. So his caution is more than understandable.

"In this work," Shostakovich wrote (though it is likely someone else authored this statement, since the composer disliked such clichéd pronouncements),

I want to convey the mood of those who survived the difficult trials of the war years, those who defeated the enemies of the Motherland and who are now rebuilding their country. I want to embody in musical images the pathos of the peaceful work going on at the construction site of our new Five Year Plan. The overture does not have sharp dramatic conflicts. Its themes are song-like, and the orchestration is varied. Full of anticipation, I will offer this new work to the judgment of the sophisticated Leningrad listener during the upcoming great celebration [of the 30th anniversary of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution].

But Shostakovich never completed the overture in 1947. If he began work and then abandoned it, he left no traces. One can speculate that in the ominous—and rapidly worsening—cultural/ideological climate, Shostakovich feared that the work would incur the disapproval of Stalin and his primary henchman in the field of the arts, Andrei Zhdanov. In January 1948, the Central Committee of the Communist Party convened an extraordinary conference of Soviet composers at which Shostakovich's music (along with Sergei Prokofiev's) was singled out for scathing criticism in his presence. One of his



Wikipedia

*Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre
in an 1883 photograph*

friends later wrote that Shostakovich was “very traumatized by the course of events and was walking around with a bloodied soul.”

For the next five years, until Stalin’s death on March 5, 1953, Shostakovich feared for his very life. Hoping to stay out of trouble, he tried to keep a low profile and turned his attention to “applied” music with broad appeal, producing scores for seven films, including the infamous *Fall of Berlin* (1949), a one-dimensional paean to Stalin’s leadership during the war. During this period he wrote no symphonies, and, fearing an adverse reception, withheld from performance a new violin concerto completed in 1948 but first heard only in 1955.

Almost immediately after Stalin’s death, Shostakovich’s situation improved dramatically. (Sadly, Prokofiev did not see this new era, since he died the very same day as Stalin.) Within months, Shostakovich produced a brilliant new symphony, his Tenth, a personal statement of liberation. In autumn 1954, the composer received a lucrative last-minute commission from the Bolshoi Theatre to produce an occasional piece to be performed there as part of the celebration of the 37th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution (which fell on November 7). So Shostakovich now returned to the *Festive Overture* project abandoned in 1947. He completed the piece within a matter of hours. Couriers carried pages of the score, the ink still wet, to the Bolshoi to be copied for the orchestral parts. Shostakovich’s friend, the musicologist Lev Lebedinsky, later described the scene:

The speed with which he wrote was truly astounding. Moreover, when he wrote light music he was able to talk, make jokes, and compose simultaneously, like the legendary Mozart. He laughed and chuckled, and in the meantime work was under way and the music was being written down.... Two days later the dress rehearsal took place. I hurried down to the Theatre and I heard this brilliant effervescent work, with its vivacious energy spilling over like uncorked champagne.



Set in the bright key of A major, the *Festive Overture* opens with an extended introductory section, a brass fanfare; its theme strongly resembles the opening theme of the piano piece “Birthday,” composed in 1945 for the cycle *Children’s Notebook*, Opus 69. With a change of meter from 3/4 to 2/2, the main theme enters in the clarinets, later joined by flutes and piccolos, a sprightly and playfully propulsive scampering of scales set against ingenious syncopated accompaniment in the strings. A central section offers another theme, announced by the horn, a serene and confident song-like motif then taken up by the strings. Now morsels of the main theme begin to reappear, gradually engulfing the entire orchestra. The second theme then intertwines with the main theme, until the dramatic entrance of the extra brass ensemble. The fanfare motif now returns, fortified and amplified, and the overture marches to a cathartic, exuberant, and optimistic conclusion—no trace here of the irony or sarcasm found in so many of the composer’s other works.

The *Festive Overture* also enjoys the distinction of having been included in the only symphonic concert that Shostakovich—who never much enjoyed making public appearances—ever conducted. This event took place as part of a festival devoted to his music in the city of Gorky (known now by its original name of Nizhny Novgorod) on November 12, 1962. Besides the overture, the program included the First Cello Concerto, with Mstislav Rostropovich as soloist. As he told his colleague and later biographer Krzysztof Meyer, “It was no big deal to conduct the overture, but with the concerto it was much worse.” Because he was having pain in his right hand, he had to conduct mostly with his left. At one point in the performance he got lost completely. After the concert someone asked him if he got pleasure from conducting his own music, and Shostakovich replied, “Not in the slightest.”

Harlow Robinson

HARLOW ROBINSON is an author, lecturer, and Matthews Distinguished University Professor at Northeastern University. The author of *“Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography”* and *“Russians In Hollywood, Hollywood’s Russians,”* he is a frequent lecturer and annotator for the Boston Symphony, New York Philharmonic, Metropolitan Opera, Aspen Music Festival, and Rotterdam Philharmonic, among others.

THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE of Shostakovich’s “Festive Overture” was given by the Utah Symphony Orchestra, Maurice Abravanel conducting, on November 16, 1955.

THE BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA has performed the “Festive Overture” on just two previous occasions prior to this season, both times at Tanglewood: on July 13, 2002, with Mstislav Rostropovich conducting it as part of the gala concert entitled “Celebrating Seiji”; and on August 5, 2014, with Andris Poga conducting as part of that summer’s gala Tanglewood on Parade concert. It has had numerous performances by the Boston Pops, and has been recorded by the Boston Pops Orchestra with John Williams conducting.

