

Shostakovich

Concerto No. 1 for Violoncello in E-flat major, Op. 107

Allegretto
Moderato
Cadenza
Allegro con moto

Concerto No. 1 for Violoncello in E-flat major, Op. 107 (1959)

Dmitri Shostakovich (*Di-mee-tree Shos-teh-ko-vich*)

Born September 25, 1906 in St. Petersburg, Russia

Died August 9, 1975 in St. Petersburg

Shostakovich wrote the First Cello Concerto in the summer of 1959 for cellist Mstislav Rostropovich. Rostropovich gave the premiere performance on October 4, 1959 with the Leningrad Philharmonic, conducted by Yevgeny Mravinsky.

Shostakovich wrote two concertos for his friend, the great Russian cello virtuoso Mstislav Rostropovich. After Stalin's death in 1953 a "Great Thaw" in relations with the West eased travel restrictions for Soviet artists and Rostropovich began to lay the foundations of a brilliant international career. He had played frequent chamber music concerts with Shostakovich, and was eager to commission a major concerto that he could perform on his travels overseas. Rostropovich writes: "Once, when talking with Nina Vasilyevna, Dmitri Dmitriyevich's [Shostakovich's] late wife, I raised the question of a commission: 'Nina Vasilyevna, what should I do to make Dmitri Dmitriyevich write me a cello concerto?' She answered, 'Slava, if you want Dmitri Dmitriyevich to write something for you, the only recipe I can give you is this—never ask him or talk to him about it.'" So Rostropovich managed to bite his tongue and never spoke of a concerto to Shostakovich, but the composer knew that he was dreaming of it and his admiration for the cellist's artistry eventually prompted the creation of the First Concerto, composed in July of 1959.

Shostakovich stated that his inspiration while working on the concerto was Sergei Prokofiev's *Symphony-Concertante* for cello and orchestra. He loved this work and told Rostropovich that he had played his recording of it so many times it was completely worn out and only emitted a kind of hiss when he put it on his gramophone. Many details of the *Symphony-Concertante* found their way into the First Concerto, the most obvious being a prominent part for the timpani. Rostropovich had played the Prokofiev work with the Moscow Philharmonic, whose timpanist was a war veteran with only one leg. At the end of the Finale, the solo cello spirals madly up to its highest register only to be silenced by a single bang of the timpani. After the concert Shostakovich exclaimed to Rostropovich, "Slavka, how that one-legged guy thumped his drum! He called a halt to everything with that final blow!" Undoubtedly Shostakovich borrowed the several rhetorical bangs on the timpani that erupt in the First Concerto from the *Symphony-Concertante*. When the concerto was finished, Rostropovich rushed to Leningrad with his accompanist and received the score from Shostakovich. Four days later he went to the composer's dacha in Komarovo to play the concerto for him. Shostakovich rummaged around for a music stand, but Rostropovich told him he didn't need one—he had completely memorized the piece in four days.

Shostakovich said of this work, "I took a simple little theme and tried to develop it." This quizzical little four-note motive, stated brusquely by the solo cello in the opening bars of the concerto, is certainly related to the composer's personal musical monogram—D, E-flat, C, B (or D-S-C-H in German notation)—and appears again in the tragic Eighth String Quartet. Shostakovich called the first

movement "a jocular march," but its humor is darkly grotesque and acerbic, rudely punctuated by four loud blows from the timpani. The elegiac *Moderato* and extended solo *Cadenza* that follow are the emotional center of the concerto. The heart-felt second movement is imbued with the searching melancholy and tenderness so characteristic of Shostakovich's finest music. It ends bleakly with a ghostly dialogue between celesta and the solo cello in its highest, most eerie register. A long, unaccompanied cadenza follows in which the solo cello muses over previous themes and moves gradually from the lyrical mood of the second movement through virtuosic reminiscences of the first movement to the fierce rhythmic impetuosity of the Finale. Shostakovich, who had a dryly satiric sense of humor, loved to hide craftily disguised musical puns and quotations in his music. While they were rehearsing the concerto, Shostakovich hummed the opening theme of the Finale to Rostropovich, laughed and said, "Slava, have you noticed?" The mystified cellist hadn't noticed anything. The composer then sang the words to Stalin's favorite song, *Suliko*. The first five notes of the opening theme, introduced by the strings, are a direct quote from the song. Again the mood is grotesque and dark with savage interruptions from the timpani adding a maniacal tinge to the primitive humor of screeching clarinets and piccolo. Finally the quirky four-note theme of the first movement returns in woodwinds and solo horn and the work ends with a grimly exuberant flurry of virtuosic scales and octaves by the soloist.

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