

Dmitri Shostakovich

Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 102

October 6 & 7, 2007

I consider that every artist who isolates himself from the world is doomed. I find it incredible that an artist should want to shut himself away from the people, who, in the end, form his audience. I think an artist should serve the greatest possible number of people. I always try to make myself as widely understood as possible, and, if I don't succeed, I consider it my own fault. —Shostakovich

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) was taught initially by his mother, but his first major musical influence came from Glazunov, who encouraged the boy when he entered Petrograd Conservatory in 1919. In 1926, his diploma work, the Symphony No. 1, was performed in Moscow and Leningrad (then renamed Petrograd), earning the composer international fame before his 21st birthday. His mission was to produce work that was accessible without being regressive, and it would bring him into a lifelong conflict with the musical critics within the government. In best times, Shostakovich enjoyed widespread recognition and a comfortable teaching post at the Moscow Conservatory. At the worst of times, Shostakovich had no choice but to write film scores to survive and routinely slept by the door with a packed suitcase, waiting for a “knock at the door” that he considered inevitable. After Stalin’s death in 1953, Shostakovich’s life improved greatly, and his music found its long awaited success beyond the Iron Curtain, with Leonard Bernstein one of its chief proponents.

The death of Stalin, who had tormented Shostakovich for most of his career, ushered in a burst of creativity for Shostakovich. After his Tenth Symphony, in which he firmly crushed the memory of Stalin and pronounced himself the victor, Shostakovich sought to move in new directions but also found, in his new comfort and safety, an opportunity to write soulful music that proved very popular with audiences. His Piano Concerto No. 2 in F Major, op. 102 is dedicated to his son, Maxim, though Shostakovich himself later performed and recorded it. Discarding the additional solo trumpet of the First Concerto and placing the pianist firmly at the center of the action, the overall tone is much lighter. Most striking is the devastatingly beautiful middle movement—Romanticism on par with Rachmaninov that has become one of Shostakovich’s most enduring audience favorites. He doesn’t overlook the opportunity, however, for a flippant, sparkling, humorous rondo finale in the spirit of Mozart or Beethoven.