



Stokowski

conducts Shostakovich Symphony 7



Few symphonies have ever had such a dramatic impact on American musical life as Shostakovich's 7th. Already well-known internationally as a composer of the first rank, Shostakovich could reasonably have expected his new symphony to gain a wide airing, but the storm of media and public interest was unprecedented. First there was the wartime setting, with much of the music being composed in besieged Leningrad in 1941. Then there was the tortuous process of getting a copy of the score to the USA which involved a microfilm being flown from Moscow to Tehran, then driven overland to Cairo, and then again transported by plane to the USA. All of these dramas were relayed to public via newspaper and radio reports that helped to fire the public's imagination.

The man responsible for getting the score to America was Leopold Stokowski, newly installed as the joint director of the NBC symphony together with Toscanini. He persuaded NBC to purchase the rights to the US premiere, and had a not unreasonable expectation that he would conduct the broadcast premiere, having premiered several other Shostakovich symphonies with the Philadelphia Orchestra. NBC, however, was urged by Toscanini to have the work performed by him, and despite Stokowski's pleas to his illustrious colleague, it was Toscanini who conducted the premiere on 19 July 1942.

The critics didn't particularly like the new symphony, thinking it lacked the creative power of the 5th. Olin Downes, writing in the New York Times, thought it was 'far from a work of sustained greatness.' Audiences, on the other hand, loved it, with performances being received with sustained applause and even cheering. Part of the appeal of the symphony was that it depicted the suffering of war (in the first movement especially) but also the ultimate victory of the allies. The long first movement, with its repeated battle theme that starts pianissimo and grows slowly to the loudest of fortés before fading away, readily grabs the imagination. As Life magazine noted 'it is almost unpatriotic not to like Dimitri Shostakovich's seventh symphony' and during the second half of 1942 the world's attention came to be concentrated on a vital sector of the Russian front. The Battle of Stalingrad, even at the time, was perceived as one of the pivotal moments of the war: a victory for Germany could mean the end of the Soviet Union, and quite possibly an end to the European war, while a Soviet victory would mark a fundamental shift in the tide of the war in the east. Performing or attending this symphony thus became an act that showed support for the allied cause, and especially embattled Russians.

Following the American premiere in July the symphony was performed by the Boston Symphony under Serge Koussevitzky in Boston and later in New York; by Toscanini again but this time with the New York Philharmonic; by Artur Rodzinski in Cleveland and New York; by Frederick Stock in Chicago; by Eugene Ormandy in Philadelphia; by Hans Kindler in Washington D.C.; and by Stokowski in Los Angeles and San Francisco. By the time Stokowski performed the work in December with the NBC symphony New York audiences had been able to compare the interpretations of no less than five different conductors.

There was some discussion in the press about the correct tempi for the symphony. Toscanini's premiere had come in at about 73 minutes, but when he returned to the work in October with the New York Philharmonic he had trimmed it to 69 minutes. Olin Downes much preferred the faster pace, thinking it added a fresh urgency to the symphony. When Koussevitzky opted for the more moderate tempo, after consulting with the composer, Downes thought that 'Shostakovich's metronome doesn't work as a good, brisk, lively American metronome does, hence misleading tempo marks in the score.'

Stokowski's performance, as we can hear, tended to be more like Toscanini's first take, and was a triumph according to one reviewer: 'The rich colors, the many passages for singing string choirs, the surging pulse of the music, the enormous climaxes all seemed made for Mr Stokowski's particular genius and he made the most of them. The performance was gorgeous.' This broadcast preserves the interpretation of a conductor who had a particular affinity with Shostakovich's music. Stokowski recorded several of Shostakovich's symphonies commercially and continued to programme his works for the concert hall for the rest of his career. This broadcast, however, is the only recording of Stokowski conducting the 7th symphony.

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symphony no. 7

"Leningrad"

nbc symphony orchestra, 1942



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SHOSTAKOVICH SYMPHONY NO. 7 'LENINGRAD'
STOKOWSKI, NBC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

stokowski

conducts shostakovich

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XR remastering by Andrew Rose

Cover artwork based on a
photograph of Stokowski and
Shostakovich, taken in 1958

Shostakovich 7th Symphony
Live concert broadcast
13 December 1942
Carnegie Hall, New York

Total duration: 79:34

SHOSTAKOVICH Symphony No. 7 in C, Op. 60 "Leningrad"

- 1 1st mvt. - Allegretto (28:17)
- 2 2nd mvt. - Moderato (poco allegretto) (10:50)
- 3 3rd mvt. - Adagio (17:51)
- 4 4th mvt. - Allegro non troppo (15:55)
- 5 Bonus track: Radio Introductory Commentary (6:41)

NBC Symphony Orchestra

conducted by *Leopold Stokowski*

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