About the Music

by Dr. Richard E. Rodda

***Music for a Scene from Shelley*, Op. 7 (1933)** **— Samuel Barber**

Born March 9, 1910 in West Chester, Pennsylvania.
Died January 23, 1981 in New York City.

In 1928, when he was just eighteen and still a new student at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, Barber began the practice of regular travel to Europe for music study and general cultural education. He usually spent the summers with his classmate Gian Carlo Menotti and the Menotti family in the village of Cadegliano on the Italian side of Lake Lugano, which Barber described in a letter to his parents: "Hidden away in mountains of extreme natural beauty, almost unpastured, and overlooking a magnificent valley with parts of three lakes, dividing new mountain-ranges which in turn form a background for the vistas of Switzerland — hidden away here, little known, not caring to be known, is this little settlement of quaint villas, of all styles, of diverse degrees of luxury.... There are exquisite formal gardens, immaculately kept...." It was in that halcyon setting that Barber conceived his *Music for a Scene from Shelley*. "In the summer of 1933," he wrote in the preface to the published score, "I was reading Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. The lines in Act II, Scene 5, where Shelley indicates music, suggested this composition. It is really incidental music to this particular scene, and has nothing at all to do with the figure of Prometheus." From this scene of Shelley's poetic drama, set "within a Cloud on the Top of a snowy Mountain," Barber quoted the lines spoken by Panthea to Asia:

> ... nor is it I alone,
> Thy sister, thy companion, thine own chosen one,
> But the whole world which seeks thy sympathy.
> Hearst thou not sounds i' the air which speak the love
> Of all articulate things? Feelest thou not
> The inanimate winds enamoured of thee? — List! [*Music.*

Barber wrote that he intended in this work "to describe the 'voices in the air' *imploring* Asia (goddess of love) to bring back sympathy and love to mankind through Prometheus' release." (The Titan Prometheus was chained to a mountain by Zeus for stealing fire from the gods to enlighten mankind.) The music is constructed in the form of a large arch, beginning and ending quietly, and reaching its climax in the central portion. Mysterious murmurs from the strings preface the main theme, a slow-moving, descending motive intoned by the horn quartet. This theme is repeated by the strings, becomes more animated and leads to a contrasting violin melody of wide range whose beginning is marked by the work's only cymbal crash. The music grows inexorably to a climax of vehement intensity. After a breathless silence, the full orchestra hurls forth the main theme, but its force is quickly spent, and the *Music for a Scene from Shelley* ends, as it began, in a state of hushed mystery.

Piano Concerto in G (1929-1931) **— Maurice Ravel**

Born March 7, 1875 in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France.
Died December 28, 1937 in Paris.

Ravel's tour of the United States in 1928 was such a success that he began to plan for a second one as soon as he returned home to France. With a view toward having a vehicle for himself as a pianist on the return visit, he started work on a concerto in 1929, perhaps encouraged by the good fortune that Stravinsky had enjoyed concertizing with his *Concerto for Piano and Winds* and *Piano Capriccio* earlier in the decade. However, many other projects pressed upon him, not the least of which was a commission from the pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who had lost his right arm in the First World War, to compose a piano concerto for left hand alone, and the Concerto in G was not completed until 1931.

The sparkling first movement of the Concerto in G opens with a bright melody in the piccolo that may derive from an old folk dance of the Basque region of southern France, where Ravel was born. There are several themes in this exposition: the lively opening group is balanced by another set that is more nostalgic and bluesy in character. The development section is an elaboration of the lively opening themes, ending with a brief cadenza in octaves as a link to the recapitulation. The lively themes are passed over quickly, but the nostalgic melodies are treated at some length. The jaunty vivacity of the beginning returns for a dazzling coda.

When Ravel first showed the manuscript of the *Adagio* to Marguerite Long, the soloist at the premiere, she commented on the music's effortless grace. The composer sighed, and told her that he had struggled to write the movement "bar by bar," that it had cost him more anxiety than any of his other scores. The movement begins with a long-breathed melody for solo piano over a rocking accompaniment. The central section does not differ from the opening as much in melody as it does in texture — a gradual thickening occurs as the music proceeds. The texture then becomes again translucent, and the opening melody is heard on its return in the plaintive tones of the English horn.

The finale is a whirling showpiece for soloist and orchestra that evokes the energetic world of jazz. Trombone slides, muted trumpet interjections, shrieking exclamations from the woodwinds abound. The episodes of the form tumble continuously one after another on their way to the abrupt conclusion of the work.

Symphony No. 10 in E minor, Op. 93 (1953) **— Dmitri Shostakovich**

Born September 25, 1906 in St. Petersburg.
Died August 9, 1975 in Moscow.

The resilience of Dmitri Shostakovich was astounding. Twice during his life he was the subject of the most scathing denunciations that Soviet officialdom could muster, and he not only endured both but found in them a spark to renew his creativity. The first attack, in 1936, condemned him for writing "muddle instead of music," and stemmed from his admittedly modernistic opera *Lady Macbeth of Mzensk*. The

other censure came after the Second World War, in 1948, and it was part of a general purge of "formalistic" music by Soviet authorities. Through Andrei Zhdanov, head of the Soviet Composers' Union and the official mouthpiece for the government, it was made known that any experimental or modern or abstract or difficult music was no longer acceptable for consumption by the Russian peoples. Only simplistic music glorifying the state, the land and the people would be performed. In other words, symphonies, operas, chamber music — any forms involving too much mental or emotional stimulation — were out; movie music, folk song settings and patriotic cantatas were in.

Shostakovich saw the iron figure of Joseph Stalin behind the condemnations of both 1936 and 1948. After the 1936 debacle, Shostakovich responded with his Fifth Symphony, and kept composing through the war years, even becoming a world figure representing the courage of the Russian people with the lightning success of his Seventh Symphony ("Leningrad") in 1942. The 1948 censure was, however, almost more than Shostakovich could bear. He determined that he would go along with the Party prerogative for pap, and withhold all of his substantial works until the time when they would be given a fair hearing — when Stalin was dead. About the only music that Shostakovich made public between 1948 and 1953 was that for films, most of which had to do with episodes in Soviet history (*The Fall of Berlin*, *The Memorable Year 1919*) and some jingoistic vocal works (*The Sun Shines Over Our Motherland*).

With the death of Stalin on March 5, 1953 (ironically, Prokofiev died on the same day), Shostakovich and all Russia felt an oppressive burden lift. The thaw came gradually, but there did return to Soviet life a more amenable attitude toward works of art, one that allowed significant compositions again to be produced and performed. Shostakovich, whose genius had been shackled by Stalin's repressive artistic policies, set to work almost immediately on a large, bold symphony, a composition that was to prove the greatest he had written to that time in the form — the Symphony No. 10.

The Tenth Symphony is among the greatest works of its type written during the twentieth century. It can be favorably compared not only with the music of Sibelius, Prokofiev and Vaughan Williams, but, even more impressively, with that of Brahms and Beethoven. Besides the technical mastery the Symphony displays, it, like all of Shostakovich's works in this form, also seems to bear some profound underlying message, some implicit struggle between philosophical forces. When the Symphony was new, Shostakovich would give no hint as to the "meaning" of the work. At a conference of Soviet composers in 1954, he stated, "Authors like to say of themselves, 'I tried, I wanted to, etc.' But I think I'll refrain from any such remarks. It would be much more interesting for me to know what the listener thinks and to hear his remarks. One thing I will say: in this composition I wanted to portray human emotions and passions." Asked sometime later if he would provide a written program for the Tenth Symphony, he laughed and said, "No. Let them listen and guess for themselves."

The Symphony's first movement grows through a grand arch form whose central portions carry its greatest emotional intensity. The music is built from three themes, each of which undergoes a certain amount of development upon its initial presentation. The first is a darkly brooding melody that rises from the depths of the low strings immediately at the beginning. As this sinuous theme unwinds in the cellos and basses, the other string instruments enter to provide a surrounding halo of sound. The second theme appears in the clarinet, the first entry by the winds in the movement. The ensuing treatment of this theme generates the movement's first climax before this section is rounded out by the re-appearance of the solo clarinet. The third theme emerges in the breathy low register of the solo flute as a sort of diabolical waltz. These three elements — low string, clarinet and flute melodies — provide the material for the rest of the movement.

The menacing second movement, a musical portrait of Stalin, is, in the words of Ray Blokker, "a fireball of a movement, filled with malevolent fury." Its thunderous tread leaves little doubt of Shostakovich's feeling about the murderous Stalin.

The opening gesture of the third movement, three rising notes, is related in shape to the themes of the first two movements and provides a strong link in the overall unity of the Tenth Symphony. As a tag to this first theme, Shostakovich included his musical "signature" — DSCH, the notes D–E-flat–C–B. (The note D represents his initial. In German transliteration, the composer's name begins "Sch": S [ess] in German notation equals E-flat, C is C, and H equals B-natural.) This "signature" and its variants are given prominence, and there is no doubt that Shostakovich saw himself as a direct participant in the program of the Symphony. The movement's center section is dominated by an unchanging horn call that resembles the awesome riddle of existence posed by the solo trumpet in Ives' *The Unanswered Question*. The opening section returns in a heightened presentation. The movement closes with Shostakovich's musical signature, played haltingly by flute and piccolo, hanging in the air.

The last movement begins with an extended introduction in slow tempo, a perfect psychological buffer between the unsettled nature of the third movement and the exuberance of the finale proper. The finale is both festive and thoughtful. During its course, it recalls thematic material from earlier movements to serve as a summary of the entire work. Concerning the ending of the work, the British writer on music Hugh Ottaway wrote, "The impact is affirmative but provisional: anti-pessimistic rather than optimistic."

Shostakovich left the final interpretation of the Tenth Symphony up to each listener. It is no doubt heroic, filled with struggle and a deep awareness of life's pains. But it is also uplifting in its dedication to the human spirit and the continuity of life against the greatest obstacles. In the words of Ray Blokker, in his book on the composer's symphonies, "Here is the heart of Shostakovich. In this work he opens his soul to the world, revealing its tragedy and profundity, but also its resilience and strength."

HARRISBURG SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Saturday, March 17, 2018 at 8:00 p.m.
Sunday, March 18, 2018 at 3:00 p.m.

STUART MALINA, Conducting
MARK MARKHAM, Piano

***Music for a Scene from Shelley*, Op. 7** — Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Piano Concerto in G — Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Allegramente
Adagio assai
Presto

— INTERMISSION—

Symphony No. 10 in E minor, Op. 93 — Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Moderato
Allegro
Allegretto
Andante — Allegro