Program Notes

by April L. Racana

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Alexander Borodin (1833-1887)
Polovtsian Dances from Opera "Prince Igor"

Borodin's main vocation in life was dedicated to research in the sciences. He had studied medicine in school with continuing studies in both chemistry and pathology, becoming a professor at the St. Petersburg Medico-Surgical Academy at the age of 31. Consequently, his work as a composer was a side-job in many ways, and he himself commented: "I do not seek recognition as a composer for I am somehow ashamed of admitting to my compositional activities.... For me this is a relaxation, a pastime, an indulgence that distracts me from my principal work."

The composer began to work on this project in the fall of 1869, based on the 12th century poem "The Epic of Igor's Army", which was sent to him by the critic Vladimir Stasov as a suggestion for a subject for an opera. Working on and off over the years, Borodin would leave the work unfinished by the time of his sudden death in 1887, though the Polovtsian Dances had been completed and presented at a concert in 1879, conducted by Rimsky-Korsakov. The full opera was completed by Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov with the world premiere given in 1890 in St. Petersburg at the Mariinsky Theatre.

The Polovtsian Dances are presented during a ballet sequence at the end of Act II of the opera, which tells the story of a heroic 12-century Russian prince as he defends against invading nomadic tribes. Prince Igor is taken prisoner by the Polovtsian leader Khan Konchak who presents his slaves to dance for their entertainment. The dances have become well-known outside of the opera, especially when some of the themes were adapted for the 1953 Broadway musical "Kismet". Most noteworthy is the tune from 'Gliding Dance of the Maidens'

which was given lyrics and adapted to become the song "Stranger in Paradise."

Work composed: 1869～1870, 1874～1887
World premiere: 23rd October, 1890, Petersburg, Mariinsky Theatre
Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes (2nd doubling on English horn), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (tambourine, snare drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, glockenspiel), harp, strings

Dmitry Dmitrievich Shostakovich (1906-1975) Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No.1 in A minor, Op.77

It is known that Shostakovich encountered a great deal of pressure from the Stalinist regime during his lifetime as an artist in the former Soviet Union. He was criticized early in his professional life, which caused him to delay performance of his Fourth Symphony and begin work on a more 'appropriate' Fifth Symphony (1937). In like kind, his first concerto for violin was kept 'in the drawer' after it was composed in 1948, until the political climate made it safe for him to present this work to the public, after Stalin's death in 1953.

As had previously occurred in 1936, Shostakovich together with many other artists and writers of the time, fell victim to the latest politburo policy in 1948 which accused them of 'formalism' in their works as well as 'leading Soviet music astray'. And although the composer was obliged to create music for a publicly acceptable face in order to survive this latest purge, he continued to compose music privately that perhaps expressed more of his deeper heartfelt emotions. At the same time that he was composing this concerto, for example, he was also working on the song-cycle "From Jewish Folk Poetry", which has been said to represent his support for a group that was greatly oppressed.

Inspired by renowned violinist David Oistrakh, Shostakovich began composing his first concerto for violin in 1947, and has been quoted as saying both the concerto and the song-cycle were inspired by Yiddish fiddle music.

So it is not surprising that the composer was hesitant to unveil these works due to fear of reprisal for using such references to Jewish themes and styles.

The *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No. 1* was created utilizing a more symphonic form — that of four movements rather than the traditional three usually used for concertos. It seems that although he was exploring his compositional techniques more in the chamber genres, Shostakovich still felt pulled towards this four-movement frame of the symphony. Each movement in this case, however, was given its own title: Nocturne, Scherzo, Passacaglia and Burlesque. These not only represented a contrast in styles and tempos — slow, fast, slow, fast — but also allowed for an extreme range of emotions, typical of his compositions.

The work was dedicated to David Oistrakh who apparently suggested to the composer, following the extremely demanding cadenza of the third movement, (which leads without pause into the fourth), that it might be nice for the soloist to have a bit of a break before continuing into the final movement. Hence the two opuses (77 and 99) that are associated with this work, the former with no break and the latter rearranged by Shostakovich with the orchestra opening the fourth movement's Burlesque theme.

The dedicatee premiered the concerto two years after the death of Stalin in 1955 and commented on the demands he felt this work put on the soloist: "The performer plays a pithy 'Shakespearean' role which demands complete emotional and intellectual involvement." And although the public had to wait for the cultural climate to thaw before Shostakovich felt it was safe to present this work, it is a testament to the creative genius of the composer that he was able to continue creating such works in private through such immensely repressive times.

Work composed: 1947~1948 **World premiere:** 29th October, 1955, Leningrad
Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo), 3 oboes (3rd doubling on English horn), 3 clarinets (3rd doubling on bass clarinet), 3 bassoons

(3rd doubling on contrabassoon), 4 horns, tuba, timpani, percussion (tambourine, tam-tam, xylophone), 2 harps, celesta, strings

Dmitry Dmitrievich Shostakovich (1906-1975)
Symphony No.5 in D minor, Op.47

"I saw man with all his experiences in the center of the composition… In the finale, the tragically tense impulses of the earlier movements are resolved in optimism and joy of living." Such were the words of Shostakovich in describing his Fifth Symphony, shortly after it was composed. Under the Stalinist regime of the time, however, it seems Shostakovich may have been creating the music (and the description thereof) in order to meet both the political and artistic expectations of those in power in the Soviet Union.

Just the year prior, in 1936, Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, as well as his ballet, *The Limpid Stream*, had both been censured by the Soviet politburo. And although the Fourth Symphony was already in rehearsals, the composer determined it was in his best interest to withdraw it before it was to make its debut, since he felt it might also offend officials. Both the stage works and the symphony apparently did not convey the tone of 'optimism' that was expected of artists of the time.

Clearly the decision to delay the introduction of his Fourth Symphony was not one of an artistic nature. In fact, it may well have been for his own as well as his family's well-being, as Shostakovich had been witness to losing friends and relatives who chose not to follow the party line and were not heard from again. Such was the atmosphere under which the composer created his Fifth Symphony in the summer of 1937.

The work was premiered on November 21st of the same year, amidst celebrations for the 20th anniversary of the Revolution. It was a great success, apparently pleasing not only those of the regime, but audiences

alike both within and outside his native country, as it made its way into concert halls first in Paris and then worldwide. Shostakovich had regained his position of respect in Soviet political circles and established a growing reputation as a composer of international stature.

In spite of the adjustments he made to fit the appropriate mold deemed by those in authority, Shostakovich still infiltrated this work with his unusual melodic and harmonic effects, as well as his tendency to extend the ranges of all the instruments to their extremes. So although many of the elements have been simplified, limiting use of dissonances more than he had previously and staying within the traditional frame of a four-movement structure, the heart and soul of Shostakovich can't help but to be heard throughout.

And although the composer referred to a quote by a Soviet critic following the Moscow premiere in January of 1937, stating that this work was "the practical creative answer of a Soviet artist to just criticism", it became clear after the fall of the Stalinist regime, that perhaps some of Shostakovich's satire did manage to be secreted past watchful eyes. Towards the end of his life he has been quoted as saying: "I think that it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth… it's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying 'Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing', and you rise shakily, and go off muttering 'Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing.'

Work composed: 1937 **World premiere:** 21st November, 1937, Leningrad
Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, E-flat clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, glockenspiel, xylophone), 2 harps, piano, celesta, strings

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