

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)



Born: 1906 (St. Petersburg, Russian Empire)
Died: 1975 (Moscow, USSR [Russia])

FAST FACTS

- Studied piano and composition
- Completed his first symphony at age 19
- Russian (Soviet) government used his music for propaganda and social control
- Wrote 15 powerful and emotional symphonies

“...He seemed like a trapped man, whose only wish was to be left alone, to the peace of his own art and to the tragic destiny to which he, like most of his countrymen, has been forced to resign himself,” said Nicholas Nabokov (Russian composer) of Dmitri Shostakovich when they met in 1949 in New York. Throughout his life, Shostakovich was affected by the Russian government’s control over the arts, which led him to express his frustrations through his powerful music, though his musical voice was often silenced.

Shostakovich was a child prodigy. He attended the music conservatory in Petrograd (now called St. Petersburg), where he studied piano and composition. His first Symphony, which he completed at age 19, was hugely successful and made him very popular throughout the world and with the government. Six years later, his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was also very popular throughout the Soviet Union (Russia), but Joseph Stalin, the leader of the communist party in the Soviet Union, became angry over the opera’s improper themes. Even though the public loved it, the newspaper (which was controlled by the government) heavily criticized Shostakovich’s opera.

The Soviet communist party used Shostakovich’s music and fame as propaganda, which means that when they attached a popular public figure to their cause, they hoped to gain more of the public’s support, because the public already happily supported that public figure. Stalin and his followers used Shostakovich’s music and other Russian composers’ music to promote a picture of the ideal Soviet life, which was in fact not ideal at all. They also forced him to write patriotic music for Soviet films. Shostakovich, however, was *not* pleased with being used as a tool for the corrupt government’s success and control over the people. While they publicly praised his work, they also threatened to take his life if he did not produce the exact kind of music they wanted.

Shostakovich’s approach to writing music was similar to Beethoven’s, in that it powerfully depicted his struggle under forceful opposition. The fifteen symphonies he wrote, among other pieces, are deeply emotional and show his frustration in trying to save his life while trying to stay true to his musical voice. Much of his music has subliminal themes in which he tried to express his true emotions. By the end of his life, his music was being performed by symphonies and on radio stations all over the world, and he received many awards for his service to music.



Let’s Listen!

- Watch Leonard Bernstein conduct the 4th movement from Shostakovich’s *Symphony No. 5*: [click here](#).
- Watch Mr. Shostakovich himself perform part of his 1st Piano Concerto: [click here](#).