

– How Shostakovich Changed My Mind –

There are moments when I can still feel that grip – that sudden heart-stopping clasp on my left forearm. It was June 15, 2006, in the tiny St Petersburg apartment of the clarinetist Viktor Kozlov. I had come to Russia with producer Jeremy Evans and our invaluable interpreter and general ‘fixer’ Misha, to make a radio documentary about Shostakovich for the centenary of the composer’s birth. Jeremy was particularly keen that I interview Kozlov, one of the few surviving members of the orchestra that had performed, famously, Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony in 1942 in the besieged city of Leningrad. As we approached Kozlov’s gaunt apartment block in the city’s suburbs I began to realise that maintaining professional objectivity was going to be harder than usual. Earlier that morning we had visited the Museum of the Siege of Leningrad. The city’s original name, St Petersburg, had recently been restored, but when it came to the Siege, it was still *Leningrad*: evidently the association was just too potent. I’d heard and read plenty of stories about the Siege, many of them accounts of barely imaginable determination and endurance. During the first

winter, 1941–2, when the city was encircled by the Nazi forces and food supplies were completely cut off, the temperature dropped to minus thirty degrees centigrade, and civilian deaths peaked at around 100,000 per month, some from hypothermia, most from starvation. Photographs and paintings in the museum show people queuing for soup made from boot leather and glue from the spines of books, huddling together in the streets (it was no warmer in the houses) listening to Radio Leningrad broadcasts on hastily improvised PA systems. The daughter of one survivor told me how, when the employees at the radio station became too weak to make programmes, they broadcast the sound of a metronome ticking: ‘It was the city’s heartbeat. It was still there.’ At one point, even that stopped; then, after forty-five agonising minutes, it started again. Press footage from the period shows the emaciated faces of the city’s inhabitants transfigured with joy, hugging one another, weeping. If that frail, tinny heartbeat could come back from the dead, perhaps the city itself could too?

By that stage, Shostakovich had been taken out of Leningrad. Today we might not put a classical composer top of the list of VIPs to be rescued from a war-battered, starving city, but the Soviet authorities had seen an opportunity for a tremendous propaganda coup. News had reached them that the composer was working on a symphony, his Seventh,

soon to be known as the ‘Leningrad’ Symphony. If the symphony could be performed, in Russia, and then perhaps in the allied countries, it would be a colossal gesture of defiance. Peter the Great’s old imperial capital, now renamed in honour of the revolutionary titan Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, was not only surviving the monstrous onslaught of Hitler’s armies, it was making music. Shostakovich was flown east of the battle lines to the city of Kubyshev, present-day Samara, where he soon finished the score – Shostakovich normally worked quickly. Performances followed in Kubyshev and in Moscow, where the Symphony was received ecstatically. Huge popular successes like these could easily fuel Stalin’s terrifying paranoia, but on this occasion he seems to have realised just how valuable the new Symphony could be. A microfilm of the score was flown to the USA – a very risky venture at the time – and performances followed in New York and London. The Western press were, on the whole, as enthusiastic as their Soviet colleagues. *Time* magazine capped it all with a picture of a heroically determined-looking Shostakovich in his fireman’s helmet (he’d been on fire-fighting duty at the Conservatoire), surrounded by flames and devastation, a four-note fragment of the Symphony’s opening theme rising in ghostly splendour from his forehead.

Then the Soviet authorities had an even more audacious idea: the *Leningrad* Symphony must be

performed in the city itself. The logistics involved in making this happen were awe-inspiring, in fact the whole crazed project was the kind of thing that would probably only be executable under a sophisticated dictatorship. For a start, there was only one orchestra left in the city, the Leningrad Radio Orchestra, and of this only fifteen players were still alive. Shostakovich had inconveniently scored his *Leningrad* Symphony for around one hundred musicians. The Seventh is also his longest symphony, normally lasting approximately seventy-five minutes, and the demands in stamina made on most of the performers are enormous. Extra musicians, mostly from military bands, had to be brought in under armed convoy, and there had to be special rations for the orchestra's surviving members. The first rehearsal put every last hope to the test. According to one eyewitness, the conductor, Karl Eliasberg, looked like 'a wounded bird with wings that are going to drop at any moment'. As for the musicians, the very fact of having a project to work towards, however implausible, seems to have galvanized them.

As Viktor Kozlov began to talk about those first rehearsals, it was clear he desperately wanted to tell this story – to me, to Jeremy, to the microphone, to anyone who would hear it. In the corner of Kozlov's modest flat, his wife – a tiny, birdlike woman, the lines on her face testifying to the dreadful privations

she too had endured – leaned forward keenly, visibly urging her husband on. His words sounded well prepared. ‘We began our rehearsals. It was during the worst of the hunger. Everybody was starving. We were sitting there playing, not having had any food. The first rehearsals were only between fifteen and twenty minutes long. Those of us playing wind instruments couldn’t play properly. We were unable to hold our lips. We couldn’t strain and our lips became weak.’ Shostakovich usually works his clarinets hard, and the *Leningrad* Symphony is no exception. But this was also difficult music to grasp: complex, challenging technically and emotionally, and very ‘modern’ even to a clarinettist like Kozlov, familiar with established Russian greats like Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, but more used to playing march and dance music in a Red Army band.

In the end, the orchestra only managed one complete rehearsal of the Symphony. Then came the performance itself, in the Great Hall of the Leningrad Philharmonic, on August 9 1942. Significantly, this was the date Hitler had chosen to celebrate the fall of the city with a suitably extravagant banquet at Leningrad’s famous Astoria Hotel: he’d even had the tickets printed long in advance. Now, instead, his troops were having to listen to the city’s still unvanquished citizens, unbelievably performing a gigantic symphony. The commander of the Soviet troops attacking the Germans, Lieutenant-General Govorov,

ordered that the performance be broadcast at the German lines through giant loudspeakers. Apparently, Govorov had an adjutant with a score of the Symphony beside him to tell him when the quiet passages were coming. There must be no shelling or artillery fire during Shostakovich's long, intense pianissimos: the enemy must hear everything. There is a story that during this breathtakingly unlikely broadcast, one German officer blurted out, 'We'll never beat these people!' – apocryphal perhaps, but there must have been many who shared that thought.

Of course, it was a sensation in the hall, and throughout the city. According to several accounts, the standing ovation lasted over an hour – all the more impressive when one considers how weak some of those audience members must have been. 'Oh yes, the audience received it very, very, very well.' Kozlov is leaning forward now, almost touching me, his eyes moist but radiant. 'There was a lot of applause, people standing. One woman even gave the conductor flowers – imagine, there was *nothing* in the city! And yet this one woman found flowers somewhere. It was *wonderful!*' Then followed something crucial: this wasn't escapism, false hope or desperate wish-fulfilment – quite the opposite in fact. 'The music touched people because it reflected the Siege. This was wartime, and everybody felt they shared and understood this music. People were

thrilled and astounded that such music was played, even during the Siege of Leningrad.’ There was the note of defiance, the colossal collective cry of ‘We’re still standing!’ But here was something else too: that puzzling conundrum I had noted so often when pondering the appeal of Shostakovich’s music, but which now struck me with heightened force. In the *Leningrad* Symphony, Shostakovich had held a mirror up to horror, and reflected that horror back to those whom it had all but destroyed – and in response they had roared their approval, their delight, their gratitude to the composer for giving form to their feelings.

At this point, Viktor Kozlov paused, triumphantly. In telling his story, he had made it present, made it real all over again. He was back in the Philharmonic Hall – we all were – struck speechless by this elemental manifestation of the human will to survive, to defy, to exult in the face of savage destructiveness and appalling suffering. But the voice of my BBC education told me I had to ask something else. What I came up with, I’m ashamed to admit, was a not very inventive variant on the old ‘How does that make you feel?’ formula. ‘When you hear this music today,’ I asked hesitantly, ‘does it still have the same effect?’ Despite all I had heard, nothing prepared me for what happened next. It was as though a huge wave of emotion struck that apartment, and instantly both Kozlov and his wife

were sobbing convulsively. He grasped my forearm tightly – I can feel it again as I'm writing – and just about managed to speak: – 'It's not possible to say. It's not possible to say.'
