

# “Symphony” and *Simfonizm* in Shostakovich’s Thirteenth Symphony: Unusual Genesis as Key to Shostakovich’s Concept of Symphony

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In a July 1, 1962 letter to Vissarion Shebalin, Shostakovich noted the following about the progress of his work on his Thirteenth Symphony: “...more likely, it will be a vocal-symphonic suite in five movements...”<sup>1</sup> Shostakovich had completed the piano score for “Babi Yar,” with text by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, on March 27, 1962, and had originally intended the work to stand on its own as a short symphonic poem. When he received the new collection of Yevtushenko’s poetry, *Vzmakh Ruki*, as a gift from the poet, he then considered setting three additional texts and forming a “symphony.” Finally, at Shostakovich’s request, and with his personal involvement, a fifth poem, *Fears*, was drafted specifically for the vocal-orchestral composition that was only now approaching its final state.<sup>2</sup>

His statements regarding the “vocal-symphonic suite” show that even in the last few weeks of composition (he completed the work on July 20), he was unsure of the appropriate classification for the work. With regards to his Fourteenth Symphony he later admitted that “for the first time in his life, he was in a quandary about what to call a composition,”<sup>3</sup> implying that the choice of the title “symphony” for his Thirteenth Symphony was ultimately apt, and also that the titling of compositions in general was of some importance to him. In this light, the titling of the Thirteenth Symphony not only tells us something about what Shostakovich considers symphonic, but also, when coupled with the odd retrospective nature of the composition of movements 2 through 5, will allow us to consider some compositional aspects of

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<sup>1</sup>A. Shebalina, *Vissarion Yakovlevich Shebalin: literaturnoye naslediyе* (Moscow, 1975), 166 as translated by Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 228–229. A brief mention of the letter is made in A. Shebalina, V. A. Shebalin: *Godi zhizni i tvorchestvo* (Moscow: Sovyetski’ Kompozitor, 1990), 235.

<sup>2</sup>Fay, 228.

<sup>3</sup>The original letter is found on p. 205 of *Pis’ma k Drugu: Dmitriy Shostakovich – Isaaku Glikmanu* (Moscow, 1993) which was translated by Anthony Phillips on p. 159–160 of *Story of a Friendship: The Letters of Dimtry Shostakovich to Isaak Glikman 1941–1975* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001). Fay also quotes from the letter on p. 259, though she dates it from Feb. 16, 1969, whereas Phillips dates it from Feb. 17, 1969. Fay’s translation is quoted above.

both “symphony” and *simfonizm* with regards to Shostakovich’s aesthetic. In other words, the fact that he had created a symphony out of something that was not intended to be a symphony suggests that the methods he employed to unify the elements of the work might reveal some of the thought process involved for Shostakovich in writing a symphony. To that end, this study examines the ways in which the Thirteenth Symphony is a “symphony” in the traditional sense, and also how the work incorporates some of Asaf’yev’s notion of *simfonizm* in its construction.

## Shostakovich’s Thirteenth as “Symphony”

The scoring of the Thirteenth Symphony is in keeping with other symphonies in the canon, with the notable exception of the pairing of bass solo and bass-only chorus. The only other piece in the literature with a similar scoring is Maurice Duruflé’s *Messe ‘Cum Jubilo’* (1966) for orchestra with baritone solo and baritone-only chorus, but as it post-dates the Shostakovich it can hardly be imagined as an influence. Other works by Shostakovich with unison chorus include Symphonies Two and Three, but the scoring of the voices in the Thirteenth shows a marked concern for the audibility, both literal and psychological, of Yevtushenko’s texts. The care with which the voices are set is evident from the first vocal entrance and “bears no relation to the overtly proletarian message blazed forth with little regard for taste and subtlety in the Second and Third Symphonies.”<sup>4</sup> A possible influence from outside the classical realm is hinted at by the choice of the distinctly Slavic timbre of all-bass choir, which, when combined with the interplay of choir and soloist, and the vocal lines themselves, sometimes evoke a sense of the Russian Orthodox tradition.

By 1962, it would be unfair to expect a composer to start a symphony with a movement in sonata-allegro form, but the lack of that form can be at least partially explained by the movement’s initial conception as a stand-alone vocal work. In terms of large-scale form, the linking of movements in the Thirteenth Symphony is similar to Shostakovich’s own Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, Eleventh, and Twelfth Symphonies; however it is in many ways more similar to Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony. Both works share a five movement plan in which the last three movements are elided. In addition, the two works’ fourth movements are both full of tonal instability, low string passages, trills, tremolos, loud outbursts, and figurations that are at times remarkably similar (see Example 1).

In addition, the fifth movement of each work offers a reprieve from an unsettled fourth movement. Both final movements are marked *Allegretto* and set in a lilting triple-meter employing dotted rhythms. Shostakovich’s orchestration from the beginning of “Career” up to rehearsal 126 is essentially Beethovenian in both makeup (paired winds and strings) and color (though the musical language is clearly that of Shostakovich). The closeness of the keys (F major and B $\flat$  major) is unremarkable given Shostakovich’s penchant for reference at exact pitch, but perhaps understandable given the fact that the choice of B $\flat$  was linked to the preex-

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<sup>4</sup>Roy Blokker, *The Music of Dmitri Shostakovich: The Symphonies* (Rutherford, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson Press, 1979), 134.

Ex. 1 a.



Ex. 1 b.



Ex. 1: a.) Beethoven: Sym. 6, IV, mm. 49–50; b.) Shostakovich: Sym. 13, IV, reh. 112

isting first movement.

If indeed Beethoven's Sixth Symphony is a model for Shostakovich's Thirteenth, then there is a level of sarcasm and irony introduced by comparing the characters of the movements, particularly the striking contrast of the first movements ("*Erwachen heiterer Gefühle bei der Ankunft auf dem Lande*" [Cheerful impressions awakened by arriving in the country] and "Babi Yar") and the third movements ("*Lustiges Zusammensein der Landleute*" [Peasants' merrymaking] and "V Magazinye"). The dark humor this presents would not have been lost on Shostakovich. A comparison of the last movements ("*Hirtengesang: Frohe, danbare Gefühle nach dem Sturm*" [Shepherds song, happiness and thanksgiving after the storm] and "Career") is less darkly contrasting, but rather reinforces the possibility of hope.

The tonal plan of Shostakovich's symphony, with its move from B $\flat$  minor to B $\flat$  major, is reminiscent of what is perhaps the best known choral-orchestral work in the canon, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, with its move from D minor to D major. In stark contrast, though, are the closing bars of the two works, one of which ecstatically proclaims the triumph of D major, while the other quietly casts doubt on B $\flat$  major by introducing figures of minor or ambiguous modality.

Many sources are quick to point out similarities with Mahler's pioneering *Das Lied von der Erde* (1908), a work that is neither symphony nor song-cycle, but is best described with hybrid phrases such as *symphonic song-cycle*, or, as Shostakovich described his own nascent Thirteenth, as a *vocal-symphonic suite*. There are also similarities with the Mussorgsky song-cycle *Songs and Dances of Death*, which Shostakovich orchestrated either during or shortly after the writing of the Thirteenth Symphony, and which Fay notes as the impetus for the composition of his Fourteenth Symphony.<sup>5</sup>

Another song influence on the Thirteenth Symphony is revealed by Shostakovich's quo-

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<sup>5</sup>Letter to Glikman as translated in Fay 259–260.

tation of his own setting of *Macpherson's Farewell*, from *Six Romances to Verses by English Poets*, Op. 62. There are also topical connections between the two works. In the original, a political prisoner is being taken to the gallows, whereas in the Thirteenth Symphony's second movement entitled "Humor", humor itself is the prisoner going to the gallows, only to slip off unscathed.<sup>6</sup>

Voice

Piano

pp >

Vdrug

3

8vb

Ex. 2: Shostakovich: *Four Monologues on Texts by A. Pushkin*, Op. 91, No. 1. Otrivok, m. 58

Tpt. and hrn. (8vb) con sord.

Campane

Low Strings (pizz.) & Winds

Ex. 3: Shostakovich: *Sym. 13, I*, mm. 1–3

Dorothea Redepenning claims that the chromatic theme in the brass that opens "Babi Yar" is a reference to Shostakovich's own 1952 song-cycle *Four Monologues on Texts by A. Pushkin*. (see Examples 2 & 3). Other possible connections between the two works include

<sup>6</sup>Ottaway 60.

the shared Jewish subject matter and a dramatic knock on the door (though in the *Monologue* it is a positive event). It is also interesting to note that the title, *Four Monologues*, implies speech, rather than song, which connects nicely with Shostakovich's declamatory approach to his setting of the voice in the Thirteenth Symphony.<sup>7</sup> Despite these features, the musical connection seems tenuous, but is at least illustrative of another possible tie to a song-cycle.

If movements 2 through 5 were written to 'make a symphony' out of something that was not, then we can conclude that the latter movements reflect this intention and say something about Shostakovich's sense of what constitutes a symphony. Clearly the tie to earlier symphonies such as Beethoven's Sixth shows an interest in placing the work within the canon. The elements from song-cycle sources seem to be at odds with the symphonic impetus, but in fact suggest that Shostakovich was thinking in terms of stretching the notion of 'symphony.'<sup>8</sup> The elements of *simfonizm* explored below broaden the view of the Thirteenth Symphony and give a better sense of the interactions of the elements in the work with regards to Shostakovich's symphonic aesthetic.

### Shostakovich's Thirteenth as *simfonizm*

In the article "Boris Asaf'yev and Soviet Symphonic Theory," David Haas explores Asaf'yev's notion of *simfonizm* and its relevance to the Russian symphonic aesthetic. Heavily influenced by the writings of French intuitivist Henri Bergson (1859–1941), Asaf'yev's theories revolve around the central idea that musical drama arises out of conflicts within a developing organic stream of consciousness. Haas reduces the theory of *simfonizm* (never fully defined by Asaf'yev himself) to four distinctive characteristics:

... first, a pervasive quality of enormous, suppressed tension, capable of producing sudden explosions of great force; second, relentless development of musical motifs presented early in the work; third, the denial of full cadences and the occasional bypassing of sectional boundaries so as to avoid closure and deny repose; and fourth, the construction of reprises that are perceived as outcomes of long-range motion and not merely variations of expositions.<sup>9</sup>

Examples of the 'enormous, suppressed tension, capable of producing sudden explosions' are found most strikingly in the first and fourth movements. In the first movement, beginning at rehearsal 16, Shostakovich presents a scene of terror through the dialogue between the choir, who express concern about noises outside of their hiding place, and the soloist, who, in an act of denial, reassures them that it is simply the sounds of spring. The tension swells with

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<sup>7</sup>Dorothea Redepenning, "And art made tongue-tied by authority: Shostakovich's song-cycles," in *Shostakovich Studies*, ed. David Fanning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 207–208.

<sup>8</sup>Shostakovich's 'quandary' regarding the Fourteenth Symphony, and the fact that the main differences between the Thirteenth and the Fourteenth are the lack of a choir and a smaller orchestra, implies a potential boundary for how far he was willing to stretch the form.

<sup>9</sup>David Haas, "Boris Asaf'yev and Soviet Symphonic Theory," *The Musical Quarterly* 76:3 (Autumn 1992) 417.

tremendous tutti's leading to the return of the opening fanfare material, this time elaborated and marked *fff*.

A similar passage is found in the climax of the fourth movement, *Fears*. The beginning of the movement enumerates and discusses all the fears that have “died out” in Russia, moves to an introduction of new fears, and closes with a confessional statement of the poet's own personal fears. The intent of the movement is somewhat ambiguous, and though Henry Orlov seems to take the text and music at face value,<sup>10</sup> the underlying message of new-found trust, and especially the notion that the old fears are “dead” (as undoubtedly, the censors would have smiled on), is heavily undercut by Shostakovich's music.

The opening tuba solo hardly evokes confidence or fearlessness, and the repeated *col legno* figures in the strings are reminiscent more of Berlioz and his phantasmagoric *Symphonie Fantastique* than of a reassuring mass song. The climactic explosion that occurs between rehearsal 112 (where the *Storm*-like figuration begins [example 1b.]) and rehearsal 115, could be representative of the ‘new’ fears that the soloist introduces during this section, but it seems more accurately to represent the apotheosis of underlying fears and distrust present throughout the movement. This sense is bolstered by the choral entrance following the climax. The words “Fears are dying out in Russia” are reprised on a piano low *g*♯ and colored darkly by the unison rolled timpani and low strings. The choral line is marked *maestoso*, but given the range, dynamic, and scoring, it is quite difficult to convincingly perform in a majestic manner, and their statement comes off seeming as if the words have been beaten out of them.

The organicism found in the ‘relentless development’ of germinal ideas presented early in the work is apparent in two main ideas. Firstly, there is interval-class 3 (henceforth i.c. 3), which serves as a basic building block for much of the motivic material in the piece; and secondly, there is the tonal scheme, spelled out in the first movement and echoed by the work as a whole.

Hugh Ottaway remarks that the minor third is “nothing if not pervasive” in the work as a whole.<sup>11</sup> He provides some examples to support this claim, but is in no way thorough in his analysis. The minor third (i.c. 3) is indeed central to the work, but there is also the relationship of i.c. 3 to i.c. 4 (minor third to major third) that represents the development of this seed idea.<sup>12</sup>

The prominence of i.c. 3 is evident from the first bars (see Example 3). The low strings and low winds outline i.c. 3 while the trumpets and horns outline their own i.c. 3's, both descending and ascending chromatically. In m. 3, the horns and trumpets move in parallel sixths, each voice spanning i.c. 3, thus thwarting a traditional diatonic voice-exchange. At rehearsal 1, the

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<sup>10</sup>Henry Orlov, “A Link in the Chain: Reflections on Shostakovich and His Times,” in *A Shostakovich Case-book*, ed. Malcolm Hamrick Brown (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 208. The article was itself written in 1976.

<sup>11</sup>Hugh Ottaway, *Shostakovich Symphonies*, BBC Music Guides (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978), 58–59.

<sup>12</sup>I am reticent to talk about this relationship being about that of (for instance) Bb minor to Bb major due to the overwhelming modality of the piece, as well as to the fact that the pitch relationships are not always chromatically spelled in a consistent manner.



II, between D and B $\natural$  vs. A $\sharp$ . The conflict seems to be resolved at rehearsal 160 (see Example 6) by the violin I's, who present an inversion of the opening melody of the movement, but the celeste and harp throw the matter into doubt by reintroducing D $\flat$  and approaching the final B $\flat$  by way of a protracted F, G $\flat$ , A $\flat$  movement which highlights i.c. 3.<sup>15</sup>

An harmonic example of the development of small ideas presented early in the work into larger overarching ideas are seen in the tonal areas. The tonal scheme of the first movement moves from B $\flat$  minor to E minor and back to B $\flat$  minor. This tonal move is expanded to encompass the entire symphony as Shostakovich casts the middle movement in E minor and the final movement in a B $\flat$  major which, in the final bars is darkly transformed to something more closely resembling the elements and modality of the first movement.

The 'bypassing of sectional breaks' is most clearly seen in the elision of the third, fourth and fifth movements, which, altogether, account for more than half of the duration of the total work. At the close of the third movement, the sense of repose provided by the plagal cadence that closes the vocal writing is undercut by the following quiet solo castanet and woodblock and subsequent low unison string line which slowly relents and blurs into the fourth movement. Similarly, at the close of the fourth movement low unison strings (this time accompanied by harp and horns) slowly relent and blur into the final movement. The presence of the rhythmic figure shown in Example 7 which bookends each of the movement breaks further blurs the sense of sectional break.

In reference to the fourth element of *simfonizm*, the most striking 'reprise' in the work is the timbral link between the first and final movements. The opening bars of the symphony are heavily colored by a recurring B $\flat$  chime which reappears in the last movement to close the work. The texture of static strings and celeste at rehearsal 161 calls back to the memorable music that accompanies the discussion of Anne Frank at rehearsal 14 (see Example 8). These compositional choices display *simfonizm* through their development of musical motif (here a tonal plan) and by the use of reprises of timbre that are outcomes of long-range thought. It is interesting to note once again that Shostakovich was unaware of the ending of the work when he penned its first bars.

## **Shostakovich 13 as key to other Shostakovich Symphonies**

Hugh Ottaway remarked that 'all was clear, emotionally and spiritually, before the notes were set down,'<sup>16</sup> but as Shostakovich's letters reveal, this was not the case. On the other hand, it is precisely the curious compositional history of the Thirteenth Symphony that provides insight into the techniques that Shostakovich employed to integrate a "symphonic" and *simfonistic* whole out of the seeds of the first movement.

In light of the insights provided by this study, a reconsideration of other Shostakovich symphonies seems appropriate. Are there other Shostakovich symphonies with an atypical

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<sup>15</sup>The melodic line here, as well, seems based in the main melodic material of movement 2, although presented in a perverted form.

<sup>16</sup>Ottaway 60.

The musical score is written for a string ensemble in 3/4 time. It consists of five systems of music.

- System 1:** Features two violin staves (vl. 1, vl. 2) and a viola staff (vlna). The dynamics are marked *pp*. The bottom staff is labeled with *vc.* and *ch.* and includes the instruction *(+8vb)*.
- System 2:** Includes a *rit.* (ritardando) marking and a box containing the number **160** with *a tempo* written above it. The dynamics remain *pp*.
- System 3:** Shows a change in texture with more complex rhythmic patterns in the upper staves.
- System 4:** Marked *Celeste*, it features a complex rhythmic pattern in the upper staves and sustained chords in the lower staves.
- System 5:** Includes markings for *+ Arpe* and *Campane solo* (bells solo).

Ex. 6: Shostakovich: Sym. 13, V

Ex. 7 a. Vc. and Cb.

Ex. 7 b. Vc. and Cb.

Ex. 7 c. Vc. and Cb.

Ex. 7 d. Allegretto ♩=184  
2 Flauti *pp*

Ex. 7: a.) III, reh. 91; b.) IV, reh. 93; c.) IV, reh. 118 - m. 1; d.) V, mm. 1–5

compositional history? Is there a substantive difference between Symphony Thirteen and previous Shostakovich symphonies? Can any differences be explained in terms of their respective compositional histories? Do Symphonies Fourteen and Fifteen share any characteristics with Symphony Thirteen as compared to Symphonies One through Twelve? Even if the all of these questions are answered in the negative, the case of Symphony Thirteen still speaks to Shostakovich’s abilities as “symphonist” and *simfonist*.

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Celeste

Basso solo

Arpe+  
Vc  
Cb  
div

Ma - - - lo mozh - no

vi - dyet', o - bo - nyat! \_\_\_\_\_

Ex. 8: Shostakovich: Sym. 13, I, reh. 14

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