

BOOKS

'What can be considered human emotions? Surely not only lyricism, sadness, tragedy? Doesn't laughter also have a claim to that lof

The Strains of War

Leningrad: Siege and Symphony

By Brian Moynahan

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BY MICHAEL O'DONNELL

DURING THE NAZIS' siege of Leningrad, which lasted from September 1941 to January 1944, the city's radio station broadcast the sound of a metronome. Its steady tick-tock between programs reassured listeners that the booth was not empty—or, worse yet, in German hands. The metronome served a practical as well as a psychological function. Faster ticks indicated an imminent air raid and meant that residents should find shelter. The sound was both heartening and terrible, for it called to mind not just the Russian people's refusal to surrender but also the relentless German assault. One young diarist compared the incessant beating to "the pulse of a fatally ill patient in the silence of a ward."

Nearly 800,000 Russians died of cold and hunger before the siege ended. Corpses littered the city's streets and disappeared under the snow; no one had the strength to move them. As rations dwindled, residents began eating tree bark. The British journalist Brian Moynahan describes the way arctic temperatures combined with fierce combat to produce a situation of bleak exigency. "The oil in [Germans'] trucks became first a paste and then a glue which seized up the engines," he writes. "Infantry weapons froze. Only grenades and flamethrowers were reliable."

Leningrad residents continued to attend concerts during the siege, their applause muffled by mittens and gloves.

Mr. Moynahan has written a passionate and moving book focusing on the role music played in this catastrophe. "Leningrad: Siege and Symphony" is filled with vivid details. German soldiers defiled Russia's cultural heritage by occupying Tchaikovsky's rural dacha, where they parked their motorcycles inside and burned a lovely gazebo for warmth. In the city, bombs and artillery shells—as many as 12,000 in a single day—destroyed not just homes and families but also priceless musical instruments. Although Leningrad residents continued to attend concerts, they shivered in winter attire rather than evening wear. Mittens and gloves muted their applause.

No musical work embodied the siege of Leningrad—indeed, no piece of music embodies any war—like Dmitri Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony. Its Leningrad premiere, on Aug. 9, 1942, was performed by starving musicians and broadcast over loudspeakers at the front to defy the Nazis and hearten Russian troops. Abroad, it provided "a moral

PLAYING HIS PART

Dmitri Shostakovich in his uniform as a member of the Leningrad fire brigade, 1941.



Getty Images

redemption for Stalin and the Soviet regime," writes Mr. Moynahan—especially for the Western allies, who "wanted badly to believe in the Russians, in their survival, and in their decency." Shostakovich's private irony was that his music was not merely a cry against the Nazis but also against Stalinism. Mr. Moynahan calls the Seventh a "requiem for a noble city beset by the twin monsters of the century."

As Shostakovich's biographer Elizabeth Wilson has shown, Stalin terrorized the composer in a far more immediate way than Hitler. The purges of the 1930s eliminated artists as well as other bourgeois, and Shostakovich's modern, inaccessible music made him an easy target. Recognizing his talent, the Communist Party commissioned his Second Symphony for the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution but harshly criticized his early forays into opera and ballet. Shostakovich received his first official denunciation in 1936, after Stalin walked out of a performance of his opera "Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District." The next day's review in Pravda attacked Shostakovich for "formalism" and warned that he was "playing a game" that "may end very badly." The composer withdrew his Fourth Symphony as a result and curried favor by writing the patriotic Fifth, as well as the Sixth, which he dedicated to Lenin.

These episodes from Shostakovich's life are mostly outside the scope of Mr. Moynahan's book, which focuses on the siege years. So too is Shostakovich's second denunciation in 1948 and his tense accommodation with the party after Stalin's death in 1953. But his full life story reveals a weakness in "Leningrad: Siege and Symphony," which portrays the nervous, sarcastic and deeply ambiv-

alent composer in a light that is too unequivocal and that at times borders on the heroic. Dmitri Shostakovich—who twitched and fiddled so anxiously that he was painful to watch—knew only one thing for certain: his need to write music. Politics were an intrusion; so was state terror, which he would avoid in any way possible, including miserable cooperation. He once told a friend: "I'd sign anything even if they hand it to me upside-down. All I want is to be left alone."

The Seventh Symphony must be understood in this context. Shostakovich wrote it during a time of wartime mobilization, when the party needed cultural propaganda and briskly stamped out dissent. He was still trying to rehabilitate himself after the disaster of 1936. His progress on the new symphony was a very public undertaking, with Pravda regularly updating readers on his work. In media appearances, Shostakovich asserted a love for his native city and a willingness to do his bit for Russia. He dutifully attacked fascism. But while Mr. Moynahan ably presents the composer's wartime years, he elides a critical question: whether the Seventh was propaganda that Shostakovich willingly produced in order to get Stalin off his back.

He had done so before. Today the Fifth Symphony is widely viewed as a conciliatory gesture toward the party. It digests easily, contains passages that are militaristic and upbeat, and ends resolutely in a major key. The Seventh has some of the same characteristics. It is tuneful, repetitive and accessible. With the first movement's droning snare drum signifying the German onslaught, the hummable melody and the pep-rally finale, the Seventh appears far too programmatic and one-dimensional for a man who would go on to write the

anguished and complex Eighth and 10th symphonies, not to mention the deeply unsettled string quartets.

The Seventh was a suitable offering for a fighting nation in need of a boost—the Russian equivalent of a war-bonds poster. On some level it probably represented Shostakovich's genuine response to seeing his city dying—especially the adagio movement. But given what we know about the composer's difficulties with the regime, questions about the Seventh Symphony's purpose and provenance do affect our understanding of the music's role in the Leningrad siege. They inject a measure of doubt and uncertainty into a situation where moral clarity was enforced at the point of a gun.

Whatever the symphony meant, the people of Leningrad received it as an anthem of survival. Mr. Moynahan's rendition of the Seventh's Leningrad premiere, the highlight of the book, is nothing short of masterly. Russian troops flew in the score, completed in Kuibyshev, at low altitudes over German lines and launched a pre-emptive artillery barrage to prevent the concert's interruption by a German advance. The depleted Leningrad Radio Orchestra filled out its ranks with musician-soldiers given special permission to leave the front. There was a real question whether the emaciated symphonists had the endurance to complete the piece. The concert proved cathartic for a Russian people too numbed by deprivation to mourn its own suffering. It was, writes Mr. Moynahan, "perhaps the most magnificent, and certainly the most moving, moment ever to be found in music."

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