

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born September 25, 1906 in St. Petersburg; died August 9, 1975 in Moscow

Concerto No. 2 for Cello and Orchestra, Opus 126 (1966)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Moscow, September 25, 1966 (a concert in honor of Shostakovich's 60th birthday)

Bolshoi Hall, Moscow Conservatory

USSR State Symphony Orchestra

Yevgeny Svetlanov, conductor

Mstislav Rostropovich, soloist

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 36 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, flute, two oboes, two clarinets, three bassoons, contrabassoon, two horns, timpani, percussion, two harps and strings

The Second Cello Concerto is a product of 1966, one of the busiest times of Dmitri Shostakovich's life. In addition to his faculty duties at the Leningrad Conservatory and his regular schedule of creative work, he also traveled around Russia almost constantly to oversee performances of his works and to attend to various matters for the Composers' Union, to whose board he had been appointed as First Secretary in 1960. He greeted the New Year with his family at his dacha near Leningrad, then journeyed to Kiev, Moscow, Novosibirsk, Moscow again and finally back to Leningrad, where his students were waiting for him, before the first month of 1966 had passed. In February he wrote the Eleventh Quartet and took part in a television broadcast. In March he returned to Moscow to attend the 28th Congress of the Communist Party as a delegate (he had been a member of the Party only since 1962), and then went back to Leningrad to spend some time at the Composers' Union and at home. He was again in Moscow in mid-April to attend meetings of the Lenin and State Prize Committees before he traveled south to admit himself to a sanatorium near Yalta, where he underwent some treatment for a nagging cough and breathing difficulties. Not unlike Prokofiev (who, forbidden by his doctors to work, stationed visiting friends at his hospital door to warn of approaching nurses), Shostakovich continued to compose during his treatment, and he wrote the Second Cello Concerto for his friend Mstislav Rostropovich during his stay. Though he followed the prescribed regimen meticulously, the cough got worse, as did other ailments plaguing him at the time. He left the sanatorium in mid-May, stopping in Moscow and Volgograd before returning to Leningrad. Though his medical problems persisted, he refused to lighten his hectic schedule, and on May 28th, following a concert of his works by the Leningrad Philharmonic, he was admitted to hospital. A heart attack was diagnosed. Though he lived for another nine years and stubbornly continued composing and attending to his many commitments, his health never returned. The Second Cello Concerto was the last work he completed before that crisis in his life.

In addition to its purely musical value, Shostakovich's Second Cello Concerto deserves a significant footnote in Russia's modern artistic history. The piece was written for Rostropovich, about whom the composer said in his purported memoirs, *Testimony*, "In general, Rostropovich is a real Russian; he knows everything and he can do everything. Anything at all. I'm not even talking about music here, I mean that Rostropovich can do almost any manual or physical work, and he understands technology." Shostakovich and Rostropovich were close friends during the composer's later years, and they lived as neighbors for some time in the Composers' House in Moscow. In 1974, Rostropovich and his wife, the soprano Galina Vishnevskaya, defected to live and work in the West; four years later they were deprived of their Russian citizenship and became "non-persons" in their native land. In 1979 Dmitri and Ludmilla Sollertinsky published their *Pages from the Life of Dmitri Shostakovich*, which was essentially the Soviet rebuttal to the scathing criticism leveled in *Testimony*, issued several months earlier. Though Rostropovich was one of Shostakovich's best friends and most important artistic motivators, his name is not even mentioned in the Sollertinskys' *Pages* and the fine Second Cello Concerto is dismissed in the book with a mere, passing half-sentence.

The Concerto is in three movements: a spacious opening *Largo* followed by a compact scherzo and a summarizing finale. The work opens with a plaintive soliloquy for cello that both sets the somber tone for the movement and introduces the motivic germ cells that figure so prominently in the unfolding of the music. The low strings, in murmuring dialogue with the cello, enter with another important thematic fragment before other orchestral instruments are allowed to share the soloist's sorrowful emotion. The movement grows more animated in its central section, which is built from free elaborations of the earlier motives. (The staccato woodwind chords accompanied by the xylophone, for example, derive from the soloist's initial gesture at the beginning of the

movement.) The bleak, haunting music of the beginning returns to round out the form of this pensive and deeply touching movement.

At the center of the Concerto stands a cheeky scherzo in the sardonic and bitingly witty vein that marks many of Shostakovich's quick movements. There are no strong formal demarcations within the scherzo, though an insouciant little fragment first given by bassoon and contrabassoon (and distantly derived from the cello's opening motive in the first movement) recurs throughout as a sort of musical milepost. Joining the scherzo directly to the finale are a satirically cockeyed fanfare for the horns and a brief cadenza for the soloist (accompanied by tambourine — Shostakovich was one of the 20th century's most masterful orchestrators of percussion).

The finale is in two large sections. The first part uses three melodic ideas that are intertwined and elaborated as the movement progresses: a wistful, limpid motive in rocking 6/8 meter initiated by the harp; a martial theme in leaping intervals; and a hymnal cadential phrase in slower tempo. The finale's second portion serves as an epilogue to the entire Concerto by recalling earlier themes. The staccato woodwind chords from the opening movement return first; next, the horns noisily hurl forth a melody from the scherzo; then the finale themes are again heard; and, finally, the ghost of the cello's soliloquy from the beginning of the work appears. The closing page of the Concerto is an enthralling paragraph for ticking percussion, a sort of suspension of time seeming to indicate that this music goes on forever, somewhere, unheard, in infinite space.