SPOTLIGHT ON THE MUSIC

# Order or Chaos?

## Thoughts on Shostakovich's Second Symphony

By Daniel Elphick

In a crude "Classic FM" clickbait-style ranking of Shostakovich's symphonies, the Second often trails along towards the end, neglected by performers and academics alike. The "Premier League" includes perennial warhorses, the Fifth, Seventh, and Tenth (and perhaps the First). These works command a constant place in the repertoire, and also in the academic teaching canon. A much larger "Championship" exists, containing the Fourth, Sixth, Eighth and Ninth, Eleventh, and Thirteenth through Fifteenth. These works still appear regularly in concert programmes, though more infrequently than the first group. Finally, a much-derided "League One" or even "League Two" exists, where the more obscure symphonies are condemned to languish. This includes the Second and Third symphonies, as well as the Twelfth.

This always strikes me as unfair. I consider it a vital stepping-stone to see how Shostakovich went from the nineteen-year-old prodigy who composed the First Symphony, to the sophisticated symphonist in the Fourth. There are many complex passages in the Second Symphony, but for this 'Spotlight' feature, I will draw mostly upon the opening three minutes or so (up to about rehearsal mark 11 in the score).

The work was a result of Shostakovich's first commission, given by the propaganda division of the State Publisher's Music Section, specifically to write a symphonic work in honour of the tenth anniversary of the revolution. The publisher had apparently been particularly excited to hear of Shostakovich's suggestion of including a factory whistle in the score.[1] In letters to friends, Shostakovich confessed a lacklustre enthusiasm for the work. In particular, he found Alexander Zimensky's poetry, pre-selected by the propaganda division, to be "repulsive."[2] The resulting piece is more a symphonic poem with chorus, taking the form of a single movement with three broad sections. The opening is more like an introduction, while the central section includes an intricate atonal fugue in the high register, which Shostakovich later stated was a depiction of his own experiences in revolutionary Petrograd.[3] Soon after the fugue (and after a low Siren—pitched at F-sharp), the chorus enters with Zimensky's words:

> "We marched, we asked for work and bread
> Our hearts were gripped by pain and grief
> The factory chimneys were stretched to the sky
> Like hands too weak to clench a fist."

Several words and phrases are to be spoken in a declarative recitation. The chorus concludes with the words: 'This is the slogan and the banner for living generations: October, the commune, and Lenin!'. Musically, the score is an unusual combination of the opposing forces of Soviet Music in the 1920s; aspects of modernism can be found in the fugue and central section, while the rousing chorus and factory siren smack of proletarianism. The musical texture is particularly dense, with very few points of repose. There is little-to-no repetition of themes or melodic development, itself an experiment developed from the First Symphony. Nowhere is this lack of thematic unity more obvious than in the symphony's opening pages.

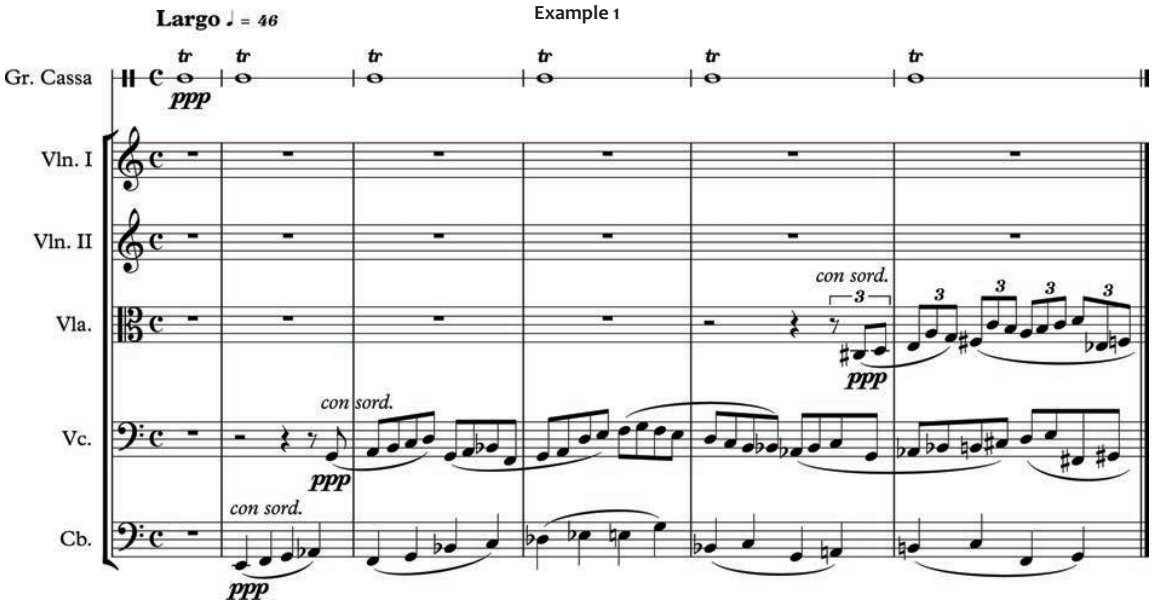
It starts with an extremely quiet purr of the bass drum (marked *ppp*—one of the quietest dynamics possible). Double-basses enter with an equally quiet winding line, one crotchet to every beat in the bar. What Shostakovich does with this material, through augmentation and diminution, is to create a picture of "chaos" in his music. Such "chaos" is depicted for entirely political-programmatic ends; in short, the chaos shown is an illustration of growing unrest and civil disarray in Tsarist Russia leading up to the events of 1917.

"Chaos" had long been a term of derision in music, and Shostakovich himself fell victim to the term several times (including the 1936 *Pravda* editorial, "Sumbur vmesto muzïki," erroneously translated as "Chaos instead of music", rather than the more accurate "Confusion [or "Muddle"] instead of music"). There is a long tradition of composers seeking to depict actual "chaos" in their music. Notable early examples include Haydn's *Creation* Oratorio, though the musical means to depict actual chaos are somewhat limited. A rather more striking example is from Jean-Fery Rebel's *Elements*, with its opening movement titled "Le Chaos," which opens with what can only be described as a tone cluster (from an early-eighteenth-century composer!).

Back to the score examples, we have two elements in the first two bars: the purring bass drum, and the steady crotchet beat of the double-basses (see Ex. 1). There is little sense of tonality here—emphasised by the lack of key signature. From the end of the second bar, cellos enter with a quaver line—twice as many notes as the double-basses. From the end of bar four, violas enter with triplets (three notes for every note in the double-bass part).

The rhythmic subdivisions continue, as the second violins split into two parts, with note values that divide into four. So far, this fits a process called 'rhythmic

Example 1




diminution', a principle of variation that dates back to at least Johann Joseph Fux and his *Gradus ad Parnassum*, a seventeenth-century composition manual that instructed composers to create variations through a process that incorporated rhythmic diminution, just as in the opening of Shostakovich's Second.

In terms of harmony, we are not on firm ground (though there is evidently still some sense of organisation). As labelled in Example 2, each line can be subdivided into 'units' that incorporate transpositions of the octatonic scale. This is a scale built entirely of alternating tones and semitones, and it has become notorious for underpinning much of Stravinsky's harmonic structures (including the notorious sense of "chaos" within a score as dense as *The Rite of Spring*). In the 1980s and 90s, Richard Taruskin demonstrated that the octatonic scale was not Stravinsky's own invention, but something he had inherited from his mentor, Rimsky-Korsakov—in some Soviet textbooks, it was called the "Korsakovian" scale.[4] For Shostakovich to use it here not only exploits its "mystical" connotations and sense of unease, just as Rimsky-Korsakov used it to depict fairy-worlds and troublesome lands, but also pins him fairly to the extended Russian tradition, via his own tutor Maximillian Steinberg, Rimsky-Korsakov's son-in-law. As such, the opening measures of the symphony have more in common with Stravinsky's *Firebird* (Ex. 3a) or Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sadko* (Ex. 3b), than they do with Shostakovich's previous symphony. In terms of harmonic material, the "chaos" depicted here is a firmly *Russian* chaos.

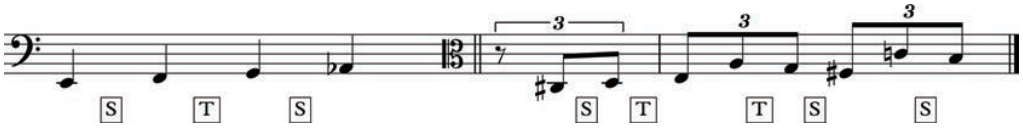
At R3, the pattern of regular subdivisions of the beat is broken with the first real seed of "chaos": the top second violins enter with five notes to every crotchet beat, but divided into a lop-sided emphasis. This slowly throws the previously-established sense of pulse askew. At R4, this becomes even more complex, as the lower first violins introduce the same figure but in reverse (Ex. 4):

A rocking, see-sawing effect is created by this uneasy exchange of emphasis between the string parts. As the parts alternate their triplet figure on each quaver beat, they start to tease out a new rhythmic pulse altogether, one that is confirmed by the top first violin at R5, which has a steady stream of triplet notes.

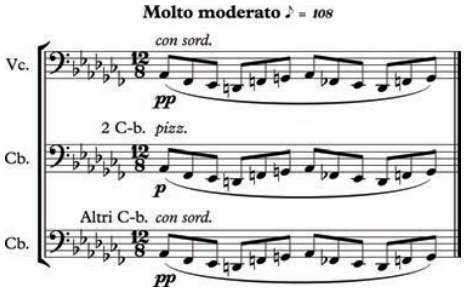
It is at R6, with the entry of brass, that a real sense of unease begins. Up to this point, we have heard subtle manipulations of pulse, but little sense of dramaturgy. Muted trombones and cornets suggest something hidden, via this subtle entry (I would note that a *ppp* entry is extremely difficult for a brass instrument, even with a mute). The brass section begins a slow exchange, with clashing raised and falling semitones—a heightened version of the clashing octatonic scales heard from the opening string section. An uneasy E-flat chord is reached by R11, which itself acts as an important pitch centre for the ultimate tonal design of the work. The central fugue concludes in F-sharp, while the chorus section concludes with a B-major chord; treated enharmonically, Shostakovich uses the triadic notes of a B-major chord as structural centres (a tactic borrowed from Prokofiev's piano works).

The work was premiered in time for 7 November 1927, and contemporary critics and audiences were generally favourable, praising its theatrical style (and ignoring its often complex and dissonant instrumental writing before the entry of the chorus). The work was published as "Dedication to 'October' for Orchestra and Chorus" and would only be designated as a symphony years later. Overall, the work was judged to be a success at the time because of its depiction of the revolution as a mass social

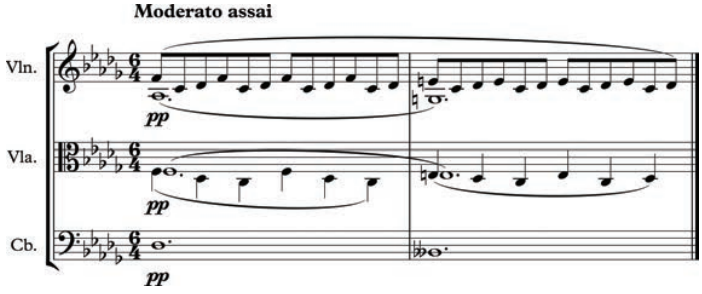
Example 2



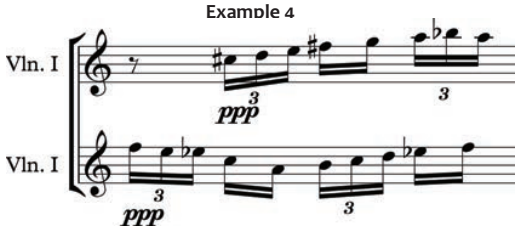

Example 3a




Example 3b




Example 4




event, which relied entirely on the success of the "chaotic" opening.

In a letter to a friend, Shostakovich described the work as "ultra-polyphony," referring to dense passages where as many as 27 independent instrumental lines weave around each other.[5] In later years, the work itself would be held against Shostakovich as an example of "formalism," and Shostakovich himself wrote it off as a "creative failure" in 1956.[6] While it is today more famous for its use of siren, and the choir boldly singing the praises of Lenin, the work really centres upon the idea of "chaos" and "stability." Its neglect in performance and recordings is unjust. It clearly sows the seeds that are nurtured in the Third Symphony, but that really culminate in the Fourth Symphony, with its impressive and chaotic first-movement fugue, its sheer proliferation of contained thematic material, and the sense of a much longer and sustained dramaturgy over the movement.

Despite the perceived flaws in the Second Symphony, the opening section provides a huge amount of unity through separate strands that group together, whether through rhythmic diminution, octatonic pitch content, or their culmination in the desperate pace of the middle-section fugue. With such large-scale organisation, perhaps the Second Symphony isn't quite so "chaotic" after all.

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**Notes:**

1 Laurel Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39.
2 Ibid., 40.
3 Ibid.
4 Richard Taruskin, "Chernomor to Kashchei: Harmonic Sorcery; or, Stravinsky's 'Angle'," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 38/1 (1985): 132.
5 Manashir Yakubov, "Commentary," in Dmitri Shostakovich, *New Collected Works: Volume Two, Second Symphony* (Moscow: DSCH publishers, 2006), 107.
6 Ibid., 108.