

Festive Overture, Op. 96 (1954)

Dmitri Shostakovich

Born St Petersburg, September 25, 1906

Died Moscow, August 9, 1975

The death of Joseph Stalin on March 5, 1953, was followed by a pronounced relaxation of the harsh restraints that had affected the work of composers, playwrights, poets and other creative artists in the Soviet Union following the denunciation of numerous prominent figures by Stalin's cultural spokesman Andrei Zhdanov in February 1948. The names of Dmitri Shostakovich and Sergei Prokofiev led this list of composers Zhdanov vilified for the sin of "formalism," and although Zhdanov himself died before that year was out, the climate of fear and repression was felt with particular severity until the death of Stalin. The lifting of that pall came too late for Prokofiev, who died on the same day as Stalin, but Shostakovich, who was at that time 47 years old, was able to take out the numerous scores he had "put in the drawer" during the difficult five years and bring them to completion and performance. Among these were the Violin Concerto No. 1 and the Tenth Symphony, which quickly made their way to the West. Within a year or two, a cultural exchange program was put in place in which Soviet and American musicians began visiting each other's country with steadily increasing frequency.

At about the time of the Tenth Symphony's premiere, in December 1953, Shostakovich was called upon to provide a brief orchestral piece to be performed in the following year's in observance of the 37th anniversary of the 1917 October Revolution. The Bolshoi's chief conductor, Vassili Nebolsin, had found himself without a suitable new work to open the concert, and contacted Shostakovich just days before. The composer set to work on the overture with great speed, completing it in three days (some say in just a few hours). The clear model is Glinka's wonderful overture to his opera *Ruslan and Ludmilla* (1842), which combines astonishing orchestral virtuosity and death-defying speed with instantly catchy melodies. Shostakovich used his Glinka model with extraordinary and sarcastic brilliance, featuring the same lively tempo and style of melody with conventional classical devices of form and harmony. The tune for his musical hi-jinks is borrowed without acknowledgement from his 1934 opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, where it accompanies the drunken discovery of the corpse of the anti-heroine's husband and the immediate reporting of the crime to the police. The resulting Festive Overture he provided for that occasion was given its world premiere on November 6, 1954 at the Moscow Bolshoi Theatre with the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra conducted by Alexander Melik-Pashayev. The virtuoso piece has since found a secure place in the international repertoire.

The overture begins with a fanfare in the brass, followed by a fast melody in the winds. The strings take up this melody and the piece reaches a climax with a four-note motif. Suddenly, the music reaches a more lyrical melody in the horns and cellos, although the tempo remains the same. Shostakovich develops this material in his typical style, using both themes in counterpoint, before the fanfare returns and leads to a rousing coda. Shostakovich bookends this already over-the-top five-minute work with a colossal fanfare, complete with added brass-band of horns, trumpets and trombones. It calls for an orchestra of 2 flutes, piccolo, 3 oboes, 3 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 French horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, a percussion section with timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, and snare drum, and strings. This fanfare has acquired a separate life of its own as the signature-tune of various events, including the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games Moscow and the 2009 Nobel Prize concert.

--adapted by Steve Larmore from notes by Gerard McBurney, provided by the publisher, Boosey & Hawkes