

Shostakovich and Chopin: Another Look at Shostakovich's First Symphony¹

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Many critics have pointed out the extent to which the Soviet composer Dmitrii Dmitrievich Shostakovich (1906-1975) owed the development of his musical language to symphonists, such as Mahler, Tchaikovsky, and Beethoven.

This paper proposes an additional influence that has generally been overlooked: the music of Fryderyk Chopin.

During his student days at the Leningrad Conservatory, Shostakovich was at times quite absorbed in the music of Chopin, a process that culminated in his participation in the First International Chopin Competition in 1927. While one might expect his interest in Chopin to have influenced his early piano music, it actually had a more substantial impact on his First Symphony. This is not to suggest that the symphony actually sounds like Chopin, but reverberations of Chopin's music can be found in both theme structures and formal layout, particularly in Shostakovich's approach to sonata form.

Dmitrii Dmitrievich entered the Conservatory, then called Petrograd Conservatory in the fall of 1919 as a student of both piano and composition. He studied piano with Aleksandra Rozanova-Nechaeva² as a freshman, then next year transferred to the class of Leonid Nikolaev³. His principal instructor in composition was Maximilian Shteinberg⁴. Shostakovich completed his formal piano study at the Conservatory in 1923. The program of his graduation recital included Chopin's *Third Ballade* in A-flat Major, among other works, such as *Prelude and Fugue* in f-sharp minor from *Well-Tempered Clavier* Book I by J. S. Bach, Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata, Mozart's *Theme and Variations* in C Major, *Venice and Naples from Année de Pelerinage* by Liszt, and Schumann's Concerto.

The entire repertoires of Shostakovich that he studied with Nikolaev is not known, but since Nikolaev was a traditionally-minded pianist who championed the works of Chopin, it is reasonable to assume that Shostakovich studied a fair number of Chopin's works as his student. The fact that Shostakovich participated in the International Chopin Competition in 1927 would support this assumption. Prior to the competition, Shostakovich gave a recital with the competition pieces for a discriminating audience in Moscow. Its program included following pieces:

Polonaise in f-sharp minor
Nocturnes in f-sharp minor and c-sharp minor
Mazurkas in b minor and c-sharp minor
Etudes in c-sharp minor and A-flat Major.

The opening of the competition was on 23 January 1927. Shostakovich suffered from appendicitis after arriving in Warsaw, but nevertheless he did well enough to make it to the final round and performed the e-minor Concerto with orchestra. The First Prize was awarded to his close friend Lev Oborin⁵, and Shostakovich was left out of the prizes, receiving only an honourable mention. This disappointing result did not hinder Shostakovich's engagement with Chopin's music. He was active as a concertising pianist until around 1930, and, according to Fay, he often played Chopin's two concertos as well as Tchaikovsky's First Concerto⁶.

Shostakovich's fellow student-pianist Nathan Perel'man⁷ recalls Shostakovich's Chopin playing as "idiosyncratic pianism." Perel'man says, "he (Shostakovich) never allowed himself the slightest hint of Chopinesque sentiment," and his Chopin playing was "anti-sentimental" in its approach to music: very precise in all the details, emphasising the linear aspect of music, and using little *tempo rubato*.⁸ From Perel'man's description, it would be possible to say that Shostakovich was interested in structural and textural aspects of Chopin's music more than their Romantic emotionality.

Shostakovich's ambitions as a pianist seems to have spurred his interest in writing for the piano. Among Shostakovich's piano composition from the 1920s, Piano Sonata No.1 op.12 (1926) and *Aphorisms* op.13 (1927) reflect formalistic tendencies of the composer during this period. The First Piano Sonata is often related to his Second Symphony. Aphorisms are a collection of miniatures pieces in different styles, such as, recitative, serenade, nocturne, elegy, funeral march, and so on. But in composing 24 Preludes op. 34 (1932-33) Shostakovich must have been conscious of the tradition of Preludes derived from Chopin. He does take the tonal plan of Chopin's opus 24, but the musical style of Shostakovich's Preludes does not show much influence by the Polish composer.

• Symphony No. 1 in f minor, op. 10

Shostakovich's First Symphony was completed in July 1925. It was written as his graduation work at the Leningrad Conservatory. Although he was only 19 years old at the time, this symphony showed not only his mastery of symphonic writing, but also striking individuality and originality. The piece was premiered on 12 May 1926 at the Leningrad Philharmonic Large Hall by the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra under Nikolai Malko's baton. Later that year the conductor Bruno Walter visited Moscow and became acquainted with

Shostakovich who impressed Walter when playing the symphony on the piano. Walter conducted this symphony in Berlin next year, in 1927, followed by the Philadelphia premier by Stokowski among others. Thus, the First Symphony was crucial in establishing Shostakovich on an international scene.

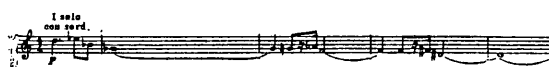
(1) First Movement

The first movement of this symphony is clearly structured as a sonata form, and I would like to discuss some similarities between the formal layout of this movement and Chopin's distinct use of sonata form (see the chart of the movement). This movement is in f-minor key, and it begins with an introduction of 57 measures. The first theme is played by clarinet in m. 1 and the tonic key of f-minor is established here for the first time. After an extremely brief transition of two measures, the second theme begins in m. 94. It is a lyrical, waltz-like theme and its key is in A-flat Major, the mediant of f-minor. The development section is divided into two parts. The first part is based on the materials from the introduction. When the first theme returns in m. 172, it is in the key of b-flat minor, and continues to modulate in ways that emphasize the developmental nature of this section. Through successive climaxes Shostakovich builds up an expectation of approaching the recapitulation, and indeed the dominant seventh chord of measure 208 prepares the return of the tonic of f-minor. But this if of course the very concise transition we first heard in preparation of the second theme of the exposition. And thus it is not the first theme that will appear now, but the second theme, which is heard in the major tonic. The first theme in f-minor eventually follows but it is radically truncated. A short coda that refers back to materials of the introduction completes the movement.

Shostakovich, Symphony No. 1 in f minor, op. 10, First Movement

Introduction

m. 1 Allegretto



Exposition

m. 58 f minor Theme 1; Allegro no troppo



(transition)

m. 94 A-flat Major Theme 2



Development

(Part 1)

m. 145 Material from Introduction

(Part 2)

m. 172 b-flat minor Theme 1; modulation; reaches climax
m. 208 f minor

(transition)

Recapitulation

m. 226 F Major Theme 2

m. 259 f minor Theme 1 (truncated)

Coda

m. 289 Material from Introduction

This idiosyncratic approach of sonata form strongly resembles the way in which Chopin used this form. Both of his piano sonatas begin the recapitulation with the second theme in the major tonic. The first theme will only make truncated appearances. The idea of a radically shortened recapitulation is employed in other works by Chopin as well. The Third Ballade, for instance, features this design. But for this paper Chopin's Second Sonata will serve as an example.

Given the fact that Chopin's music was an important part of Shostakovich's professional life in the years preceding the First Symphony, it seems unlikely that these similarities are an accident. Shostakovich took similar approaches to the sonata form in the last movement of the same symphony as well as in his later works, such as, the first movement of the Fifth, Eighth, and Tenth Symphonies, and one might speculate about whether his fondness for this design actually originated with his First Symphony, and perhaps even with his study of Chopin.

(2) Third Movement

Let us now look at the third movement of the First Symphony. I would like to suggest that this movement actually was composed in reference to the third movement of Chopin's Sonata in b-flat minor, the famous funeral march. Here the formal parallels are not as direct as in the first movement; in fact Shostakovich's movement seems to invert the parts of Chopin's composition. Chopin's funeral march is a simple ABA construction: the march as the outer parts, and a lyrical melody accompanied by a nocturne-like texture as the trio. Shostakovich begins his movement with a lyrical oboe melody that is supported

by sustained slow tremolandi in the strings, which create a texture that can be described as the orchestral equivalent to a nocturne. There really are no direct melodic or harmonic similarities between Shostakovich's and Chopin's trio, but note that the key is the same: D-flat major / b-flat minor. At the core of the third movement of the symphony is a march melody that bears a striking rhythmic similarity to main theme of Chopin's funeral march. And in this trio part, Shostakovich creates climaxes by building up tension with repeated motives, in the same way Chopin did in the last part of his funeral march. Again, the harmonic language is entirely different. Shostakovich seems to be emulating more of Scriabin's harmonic idiom than Chopin's⁹.

**Shostakovich, Symphony No. 1, op. 10
Third Movement, D-flat Major**

A: lyrical melody + tremolandi, D-flat Major
(m. 1)

B: Funeral march,
(m. 47)

A: lyrical melody + tremolandi, D-flat Major
(m. 81)

**Chopin, Sonata in b-flat minor, op. 35
Third Movement, b-flat minor**

A: Funeral march, b-flat minor
(m. 1)

B: Trio, D-flat Major
(m. 31)

A: Funeral March, b-flat minor
(m. 55)

Shostakovich was having a difficult time when he was writing the First Symphony. His father died in 1922, and Dmitrii Started working as a cinematographer in 1924 to support himself and his family. He wrote to his friend Glivenko¹⁰ on 7 November 1924, "Now I am writing a symphony (conservatory task for this year), which is bad, but I have to write it so that I can have done with the Conservatory this year."¹¹ In other words, Shostakovich needed to complete the new symphony and have it approved by conservatively minded professors of the Conservatory. Considering this situation, it would be conceivable that Shostakovich looked for a model for his new work in classical repertoire, and I suggest that Chopin's music influenced at least on the first and third

movements of his First Symphony.

¹This paper was originally presented at the International Symposium *Shostakovich 25 Years On* which took place in Glasgow, UK, between 27 and 29 October 2000.

²Aleksandra Aleksandrovna Rozanova-Nechaeva (1876-1942). Pianist. Taught at Sankt-Peterburg Conservatory. A disciple of Anton Rubinstein.

³Leonid Vladimirovich Nikolaev (1878-1942). Pianist and composer.

⁴Maksimilian Oseevich Shteinberg (1883-1946). Composer. Taught at the Petrograd/Sankt-Peterburg Conservatory. Son-in-law of Rimsky-Korsakov.

⁵Lev Nikolaevich Oborin (1907-1974). Pianist.

⁶Laurel Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press): 73.

⁷Natan Efimovich Perel'man (1906-). Pianist. Studied with Nikolaev. Taught at the Leningrad Conservatory.

⁸Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press): 58-59.

⁹In his own report about this symphony, Shostakovich described the middle section of the third movement as funeral march. I. A. Bobykina, ed. *Dmitrii Shostakovich v pis'makh i dokumentakh* (Moscow: Antikva, 2000): 450.

¹⁰Tat'iana Glivenko (1906-). Friend of Shostakovich. Met in 1923.

¹¹Letter from Shostakovich to Glivenko dated 7 November 1924. Quoted in Laurel Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 25.