

Shostakovich's Violin Concerto No. 1

Written by bluesever

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During his long career under the Communists, Dmitri Shostakovich seesawed between being the pride of Russian music and a pariah one step away from the Siberian Gulag. His lowest moments came in 1936, when he was denounced for his seamy opera "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" (he restored himself to favor with his famous Fifth Symphony), and again in 1948. In that year, Stalin, aging and crazier than ever, attacked musicians, writers, scientists, and scholars: denouncing the most prominent figures to cow the masses. A Party Resolution condemned composers for *"formalistic distortions and anti-democratic tendencies alien to the Soviet people."* Black lists were drawn up, and heading the composers' list were the names of Shostakovich and Prokofiev.

Dmitri Shostakovich - Violin Concerto No 1 in A Minor

In 1948, Shostakovich had just completed his First Violin Concerto, but locked it away in a desk drawer; this probing and sometimes sarcastic work might seal his doom with the Soviet authorities. With little warning, Shostakovich and other leading Soviet composers found that many of their works that were once praised were now banned. The rationales given were ludicrous; Shostakovich and other composers were forced to listen to long harangues from cultural apparatchiks laden with virtually meaningless terms like *"formalism"* and *"socialist realism."*

Despite having sincerely tried to understand these terms for the past two decades, many composers came to the conclusion that social realist works were simply the ones in favor at the moment and formalist ones were not. It would have been laughable if only so much had not been at stake.



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Shostakovich and Stalin

After the death of Stalin in 1953, there was a gradual relaxation of the persecution of Soviet artists. By 1955 when the composer was 50, under the more relaxed regime of Nikita Khrushchev, compositions that had been hidden away for fear of disciplinary actions were beginning to emerge. One such was Shostakovich's Violin Concerto No. 1. He revised the score a bit; the premiere was given in Leningrad on October 29 of that year by the illustrious violinist David Oistrakh with the Leningrad Philharmonic under Evgeny Mravinsky, and published as Op. 99.



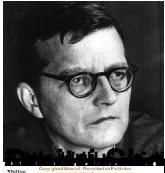
Mravinsky, Oistrakh and Shostakovich

The Concerto is drawn to the broad proportions of such predecessors as the violin concertos of Beethoven and Brahms, but it is in four movements rather than the usual three (as Brahms had actually intended for his own concerto at first), resembling the form of a symphony more than a concerto, and quite specifically the somewhat unorthodox layout characteristic of Shostakovich's own symphonies.

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Dmitri Shostakovich - Violin Concerto No 1 - David Oistrakh