

Shostakovich Symphony No.8

Evgeny Mravinsky
Leningrad Philharmonic

alto



Dmitri Shostakovich

Symphony No. 8 in c minor, Op. 65

1	I. Adagio	25:16
2	II. Allegretto	6:21
3	III. Allegro non troppo	6:25
4	IV. Largo	9:52
5	V. Allegretto	13:19

Leningrad Philharmonic

Evgeny Mravinsky, *conductor*

recorded live, March 1982

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Following the instant success of his *Symphony no 7 'Leningrad'* in 1942 Shostakovich had become both a national and international hero (his picture appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in July 1942). As the German army at Stalingrad began to falter during the winter of 1942-3 it was expected that Shostakovich in his succeeding wartime symphony would be triumphalist. But this was not to be. Shostakovich disliked offering insights to his works and although the banal march in the *Seventh Symphony's* opening movement is often interpreted as a grim portrayal of the advance of the Nazis into the Soviet Union, it could equally be argued that it also represents the cultural desecration of a beautiful city by Stalin during the purges.

Shostakovich sketched his *Eighth Symphony* rapidly during the early summer months in 1943; it was composed at a time when he was engaged in judging a competition to find a new Soviet national anthem, a mind-numbingly tedious activity habitually dreaded by the composer. Refusing such a commission was not a sensible option and Shostakovich simply chose on such occasions to keep his head down. By the beginning of August 1943 the massive first movement had been

scored and he completed the symphony five weeks later at the Composer's Union Retreat at Ivanovo. Shostakovich then showed the score to Yevgeny Mravinsky, the music director of the Leningrad Philharmonic, who had premiered Shostakovich's *Fifth* and *Sixth Symphonies* from whom he received an undertaking to perform the new work at the earliest opportunity. Accordingly Mravinsky, to whom the *Eighth Symphony* was dedicated, gave the first performance on 4 November 1943 in Moscow with the USSR State Symphony Orchestra.

The Soviet public found the *Eighth Symphony* somewhat perplexing. If outside events had shown Stalin's armies to be on the ascendant in their war against the Nazi invader, there was little rejoicing in this new work by the leading Soviet composer. Accordingly Soviet critics and the Party hierarchy were not merely perplexed - they were angry. Following the first performance in Leningrad in December 1944, the work was rarely performed (although Mravinsky recorded it in Leningrad in 1947). When Shostakovich and others were very publicly censured in 1948 the *Eighth Symphony* was held up as an example of all that was bad in 'formalist distortions alien to the Soviet people'. Unsurprisingly the work was dropped from the repertoire until some time after Stalin's death in 1953 and was only performed sporadically thereafter until 1960. At that point, the *Eighth*, like a number of other works suppressed during the Stalin era, was rehabilitated. Shostakovich was present at a concert featuring the work conducted by Mravinsky at the Royal Festival Hall in London on 23 September 1960 (broadcast by the BBC) and another live performance from Leningrad (February 1961) under the same conductor was issued by Melodiya in 1962. The legendary performance here comes from a concert given in the Grand Hall of Leningrad on either 27 or 28 March 1982 (experts have been unable to verify the exact date). It had been previously available via Philips but for many years mastered at the wrong pitch, which was corrected for this incarnation by advice from the official DSCH journal.

NOTES ON THE ARTISTS

Yevgeny Mravinsky, dubbed by his biographer Gregor Tassie 'The Noble Conductor', was born on 4 June 1903 in St Petersburg. Mravinsky later recalled that music featured largely in his upbringing: he received his first piano lessons at the age of six and at the same age he was first taken to the ballet (*Sleeping Beauty*). His mother had a fine amateur singing voice as did his aunt, who sang at the Mariinsky Theatre. Although his early studies indicated a leaning towards science, he

entered the Leningrad Conservatory in 1924 and studied conducting with Nikolai Malko (1881–1961) and Alexander Gauk (1893–1963). In 1931, the year of his graduation, Mravinsky conducted the Leningrad Philharmonic for the first time and having already worked as *répétiteur* for the Mariinsky Theatre Ballet School he gave Glazunov's *The Seasons*. For the next few years Mravinsky gained experience with the Leningrad Philharmonic, his breakthrough coming with the successful premiere of Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony* on 21 October 1937, an event swiftly followed by his first recording that November. The following September Mravinsky won the USSR Conductors Competition (runners-up were Melik-Pashayev and Rakhlin) eliciting the compliment from one of the judges Samosud that he was 'one of the most gifted men of our culture'. Shortly afterwards Mravinsky was appointed Principal Conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic, a post he held for almost 50 years.

During his career Mravinsky premiered many important works including Khachaturian's *Third Symphony*, Prokofiev's *Sixth Symphony*, Myaskovsky's *24th Symphony* and Sviridov's *Piano Concerto*. However the composer best served was Shostakovich; besides the *Fifth* and *Eighth*, Mravinsky premiered his *Symphony nos 6, 9, 10* and *12*, the cantata *Song of the Forests* and the *Cello Concerto no 1* (with Rostropovich) and the *Violin Concerto no 1* (with David Oistrakh).

Other premieres might have been added to this impressive list, however bad timing prevented Mravinsky from conducting the *Second Cello Concerto*. As Kurt Sanderling (for many years Mravinsky's assistant in Leningrad) explained in the *DSCH* journal, Mravinsky liked to work only on a select few scores at any one time; since he was about to tour with the Leningrad Philharmonic he was only interested in rehearsing the pieces he was touring with. A more serious rift occurred with premiering the *Thirteenth Symphony* in 1962; in collaborating with the controversial poet Yevtushenko, Shostakovich was fully aware of the sensitive nature of this project. The composer had (reluctantly) joined the Communist Party that year and was on the board that determined the future direction for Soviet music. Once news of the work's content seeped out, doubts were raised as to Shostakovich's suitability for the post (one official said 'We let Shostakovich join the Party and then he goes and presents us with a symphony about Jews!'). Both first and second choice bass soloists opted out of the project, and then, to the composer's dismay Mravinsky also declined giving as his reason the excuse that he did not do choral music (rather lame as he had previously premiered Shostakovich's *Song of the Forests*). Gossips

felt that Mravinsky's wife, a Party official, had strongly advised Mravinsky not to participate, fearing that to do so would damage *her* career. Sanderling argues that 'Mravinsky was a man of fear...afraid for the choir and the soloist and the possible problems that might have arisen by their playing this work'.

Although Mravinsky often conducted the USSR State Symphony Orchestra during the 1940s and 1950s in Moscow, he began to feel less inclined to travel to the capital and this has become the accepted reason for his decision to stop recording commercially in 1961 (Melodiya were equally unwilling to record outside Moscow); the only non-Soviet orchestra he conducted was the Czech Philharmonic. Although his last years were blighted by ill-health, Mravinsky continued to act as chief conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic until his death in January 1988. In his last months Mravinsky spent some time in a Vienna hospital and the considerable fee was paid by the Wiener Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde 'in great gratitude to the maestro's music'. From his wide discography many Mravinsky performances are automatic first choices for those building a library. Few would dispute the towering greatness of his Tchaikovsky *Symphony nos 4 – 6* (DGG; 1956 and 1960) or his numerous recorded performances of Shostakovich symphonies. Less-known but no less worthy was his championing of non-Soviet 20th century works such as Hindemith's *Harmonie der Welt*, Honegger's *Third Symphony* and a number of works by Debussy. In his own words Mravinsky sought 'to sear art and music into the minds of the people – audiences and performers – that is my principal concern, my ultimate aim'. Nobody who has heard his finest 'live' recordings (and this Shostakovich is one of most noted) can be in any doubt that he succeeded.

The Saint Petersburg Philharmonic was founded officially in 1882 and was renamed the **Leningrad Philharmonic** in 1921, reverting to its original name in 1991. During the 1920s its principal conductors included Koussevitsky, Emil Cooper and Nikolai Malko. Alexander Gauk became principal conductor in 1930 and was replaced by Fritz Stiedry in 1934. Mravinsky took over in 1938 following Stiedry's flight from the USSR. The orchestra has had many noted guest conductors including Gustav Mahler, Artur Nikisch, Richard Strauss, Willem Mengelberg, Nikolai Golovanov, Eduard Naprávník, Otto Klemperer, Hermann Abendroth and Bruno Walter.

©2011, [James Murray](#)

Alto ALC1150

5055354411502

Recorded in 1982

Original producer and engineer uncredited

Mastered for alto by [Paul Arden-Taylor](#)

2025 digital edition produced by [Gene Gaudette](#), [Urlicht AudioVisual](#)

Cover image: "Victory Day" by [Oleg Grigorievich Ponomarenko](#), painted in 1974, courtesy Lebrecht Music & Arts

Design produced by [Imergent Images Ltd](#)

Reissue producer: [Robin Vaughan](#)

©&© 2011, Musical Concepts. All rights reserved.

Digital edition ©&© 2011, 2025, Musical Concepts. All rights reserved.

Released under license from Leningrad Philharmonic via A-Tempo.

No part of this sound recording and its component audio, text, or graphics files may be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, or shared electronically in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, file sharing, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, contact the publisher, using the subject line "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the address below.

**Musical Concepts
c/o ALTO Distribution
Magnus House
8 Ashfield Rd
Cheadle SK81BB, UK**

alto