

October, Op. 131 (1967) by Dmitri Shostakovich

“Real music is always revolutionary, for it cements the ranks of the people; it arouses them and leads them onward.” – Dmitri Shostakovich

Born in St. Petersburg in 1906 and educated at the Petrograd Conservatory, Shostakovich was one of the most prominent composers of the 20th century. As a composer in the Soviet Union, Shostakovich was required to belong to the Union of Soviet Composers and to adhere to the ideals of Socialist Realism, which were adopted for literature, drama, and painting, as well as music. All art needed to portray socialism in a positive light, and music was expected to be tonal, accessible, and folk-inspired. Much of Shostakovich’s career was shaped by totalitarian oppression dictating what kind of music he could produce. Though he had to comply for his safety and his career, these restrictive rules brought out Shostakovich’s disapproval and constant fight against them.

The composer’s stormy symphonic poem, *October*, was written for the 50th anniversary of the Russian October Revolution. Though the piece was written for the celebration of this revolution in which the Bolsheviks, or Communist Party of the Soviet Union, took control of the Russian government, Shostakovich found ways to portray his disapproval of the event. The symphonic poem is full of meaty heroism, thick orchestral textures, and heart-racing climaxes, all of which were expected and loved by Soviet audiences. The piece begins with a slow introduction quoting the opening theme of Shostakovich’s Tenth Symphony, a work written in part as a celebration of Stalin’s death. The main Allegro closely resembles the scherzos of his Fifth and Seventh Symphonies. Shostakovich also based the main theme of the Allegro on a song he had used in a film *Volochnayaevka Days*, which tells of individuals fighting for freedom against a repressive regime. Perhaps the true heroism of the piece is Shostakovich’s bravery for inserting messages about what he truly believed in-between the staff lines.

Four Last Songs (1948) – Richard Strauss

Have you thought about what you would like to leave behind in our world after you are no longer in it? In *Four Last Songs*, Richard Strauss assures listeners, and perhaps himself, that death does not have to be something that is feared, rather a final journey after life's many adversities and adventures.

German composer Richard Strauss had certainly seen and dealt with a lot in his lifetime. Strauss lived through both WWI and WWII, whose after-effects and devastating loss of life affected him greatly. The composer also witnessed huge musical changes happening around him including Hindemith's "New Objectivity," the intensely aggressive rhythms of Stravinsky, Arnold Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School. The world, it seemed, was spinning out of control around him and left Strauss feeling helpless and jaded. The music Strauss created in *Four Last Songs*, with its soaring melodies and lush tonal harmonies in the rich, Romantic style, harken to a time and world the composer knew was gone forever.

Though composed near the end of his life, Strauss did not know the four songs would be his last. Three of the four songs, *Frühling (Spring)*, *September*, and *Beim Schlafengehen (Time to Sleep)*, are poems by Herman Hesse. The fourth poem, *Im Abendrot (At Dusk)*, was written by Joseph von Eichendorff. Strauss completed the works in 1948 and died within a year, never having heard them performed. The composer left no indication that he intended the songs to be performed together, and thus left no sequence of presentation. It was his publishing company, Boosey & Hawkes, that put the songs together in a song cycle, in the order they are performed today (I. *Frühling*, II. *September*, III. *Beim Schlafengehen*, and IV. *Im Abendrot*).

The songs are written for soprano voice and orchestra. In the first song, *Frühling (Spring)*, the composer pays nostalgic tribute to this hopeful time of year following the chill of winter. Woodwinds frame and interact with the soprano's low opening lines, before her phrases soar upwards, mirrored by the strings. The cycle of seasons continues in *September*; as summer fades and autumn inevitably approaches, text and atmosphere darken and decay as the poet accepts the end of summer, and of all things. A powerful solo for horn – the instrument of Strauss' father – can be heard in the final moments of the movement. In *Beim Schlafengehen*, the poet continues on the journey toward the afterlife, letting go of life's hardships and toil. Another of Strauss' favorite instrumental voices, the violin, is featured between the powerful, soaring lines of the soprano. The final song, *Im Abendrot*, completes the voyage of the poet's soul. Strauss quotes the "transfiguration" theme from *Death and Transfiguration*, a tone poem he had composed 60 years earlier, just after the soprano sings "ist dies etwa der Tod?" (Can this, perhaps, be death?), perhaps symbolizing the fulfillment of the soul into death. As stated by Herbert Glass, "It is music so bewitchingly sensuous, so achingly nostalgic, so subtle in its interweaving of vocal and instrumental textures as to defy description. To more than one observer, Strauss saved his best for the very end."

Symphony No. 7 (in A Major, 1812) – Ludwig Van Beethoven

“Applause rose to the point of ecstasy,” said one newspaper of a performance of Ludwig Van Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7. This reception was not common for Beethoven’s music, as it was often viewed as too cryptic and progressive for late Classical era audiences and critics. However, this particular Symphony was extremely well received and was performed four times in the ten weeks after its premier. The four movements of this spirited symphony were premiered along with patriotic pieces at a benefit concert for soldiers wounded in the Battle of Hanau. Symphony No. 7 garnered positive attention from more than just enthusiastic audiences – German composer Richard Wagner said that Symphony No. 7 was “the apotheosis of the Dance in its highest aspect...the loftiest deed of bodily motion incorporated in an ideal world of tone.”

A slow introduction of interweaving woodwinds, punctuated by chords from the strings, opens the symphony. The transition to the main part of the first movement is accomplished by the repetition of a single pitch that connects the introduction to the exposition. The *Vivace* is dominated by lively dance-like dotted rhythms and sudden dynamic changes. The second movement is the most famous of the four and is often performed on its own. It was immediately encored at its premier, a phenomenon usually unheard of for a slow movement. In the *Allegretto*, a repeated heartbeat-like rhythmic pattern prevails amidst beautiful melodies passed between the strings and the woodwinds. In the third movement, Beethoven expanded the typical ternary, or ABA, form to ABABA. ABA is used to describe three parts to a piece of music, with the first (A) section very similar to the last (A) section, and a contrasting (B) section in between. The expanded ABABA form of the third movement means that listeners will hear themes from the A and B sections return more than once. The exuberant finale uses rhythmic energy to surpass all other climaxes in the symphony. Dr. Richard E. Rodda, program annotator and professor of music, wrote about the final movement, “So intoxicating is this music that some of Beethoven’s contemporaries were sure he had composed it in a drunken frenzy.”