

Music in terrible times

This will be our response to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before.
—Leonard Bernstein

On Sunday, June 22, 1941, Germany invaded Russia under the code name Operation Barbarossa, a plan that led to the Siege of Leningrad, the horrific isolation of a city of three million people. After systematically closing access routes to the city during the summer, the German army closed the last road into Leningrad on September 8, and during the ensuing 872 days nearly a million people died from starvation—one out of three people. Think about your neighborhood. The woman across the street you've never spoken to. The kid who delivers your newspaper. The men on the garbage truck. Your husband, your wife, your children. One out of three.

Dmitri Shostakovich was born in Leningrad (then known as St. Petersburg) in 1906 and established himself as an outspoken, provocative artist. In 1936, Joseph Stalin stormed out of the Bolshoi Theater after the third act of Shostakovich's opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. The next morning, the state newspaper, *Pravda*, wrote that Shostakovich was "playing a game" that "may end very badly."¹

Shostakovich wrote the first two movements of his *Seventh Symphony* in Leningrad as the siege began. He and his family were evacuated to Kuibyshev in central Russia in October 1941, after all roads were closed, during a period when 650,000 civilians were evacuated, mostly by boat across Lake Ladoga or by ice road across the lake as winter set in. There, he completed the symphony on December 27, 1941, dedicating it to the city of Leningrad. The orchestra of the Bolshoi Theater in Kuibyshev performed the premiere on March 5, 1942. Arturo Toscanini led the NBC Symphony Orchestra in the American premiere in a radio broadcast on July 19.

The people of Leningrad first heard "their" symphony on August 9, 1942. The score and parts were flown into the city by a pilot, skimming above the surface of Lake Ladoga to avoid detection. The Leningrad Philharmonic had been evacuated, and there were only 15 players remaining in the orchestra of the city's radio station, so the ensemble was filled out by musicians who were serving as active soldiers in the Russian army, released by their commanders for the occasion.

I hadn't thought much about Shostakovich's *Seventh Symphony* until last week when Wendy and I heard it performed in Carnegie Hall by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Six minutes into the opening Allegretto, when the muffled snare drum started a relentless

ostinato and pizzicato violins introduced the seductive melody, I was on the edge of my seat. The oboe repeated the melody, echoed phrase by phrase by the clarinet, and the haunting tune repeated with ever increasing orchestration, ever more complex harmonizations, and ever expanding, even maniacal intensity until the orchestra reached a towering climax with all the thundering guns of the percussion section, and an astonishing closing statement of the theme by the bass brass, as powerful in that mighty orchestra as all the diaphonic fog horns the Coast Guard could muster from Maine to North Carolina.

We were dressed for a night at the symphony and seated on red velvet chairs in a box in the first balcony. The heat was on, the hall was comfortable, the lighting was perfect, and the legendary acoustics of Carnegie Hall brought every nuance of the complex score to every ear in the house. Each musician on the stage was playing a first-class instrument in perfect condition, and each was supported by a comfortable salary and pension plan. You could just tell that they had all practiced earlier in the day. And by the way, that was the first time I heard the BSO's new conductor, Andris Nelsons. Wow! They should keep him.

It takes about 75 minutes to play Shostakovich's *Seventh Symphony*. The program book listed a huge orchestra, with a phalanx of percussion, and almost as a footnote, "additional brass group (3 trumpets, 4 horns, 3 trombones)." Those bad boys and girls were seated in a long row, stage right, with the traditional brass section (3 trumpets, 4 horns, 3 trombones, tuba) seated stage left.

That first performance in Leningrad must have been a very different experience. If you were a musician serving in the Russian army, you hadn't practiced in months. Your fingers were rough and stiff from the rigors of military life. Your lips were blistered and raw. You were hungry and malnourished, and your health was sketchy. Maybe there was a morning muster of your unit when the commanding officer barked, "All musicians, one step forward." What would that mean?

You were released from duty for this special performance and smuggled across the lake to the starving city, where people were trading cats with their neighbors so they didn't have to eat their own pet. Death was everywhere. Water, electricity, sanitation, and medical care were scarce. Your violin was in a closet, untouched for months, maybe years. You tried to tune it and a string broke. Did you have a spare? If not, too bad, because the shop had been closed since the owner died. Your fingers felt like hammers on the fingerboard, your neck and chin chafed as you tried to play. But you played your heart out.

The performance was broadcast by radio, and over loudspeakers in public places. I bet that not one member of that audience was sitting on red velvet. I wonder if there's a Syrian refugee at work on the score of the *Aleppo Symphony*.

A cathedral in ruins

On November 14, 1940, the German *Luftwaffe* (Air Force) dropped more than 36,000 bombs on the city of Coventry in Great Britain, killing more than 1,400 people. Hundreds of structures were destroyed, including St. Michael's

Cathedral. Besides the human loss and suffering, think of the cultural and historical loss. How many works of art, how many rare books, how many pipe organs were destroyed during that attack?

I was seven days old when Queen Elizabeth II laid the cornerstone for the new Coventry Cathedral on March 23, 1956, and the controversial contemporary structure was consecrated on May 25, 1962. Benjamin Britten was commissioned to write a choral work for that occasion, with freedom to choose topic and content. Britten's *War Requiem* comprises a combination of the Latin Requiem Mass and nine poems of the British poet, Wilfred Owen, who at the age of 25 was killed in action in the British army during World War I, seven days before the Armistice of 1918.

War Requiem is dedicated to Roger Burney, Piers Dunkerly, David Gill, and Michael Halliday, all close friends of Benjamin Britten and his partner, the tenor Peter Pears, who were killed during World War II. Like Shostakovich's *Seventh*, *War Requiem* is scored for a huge force of musicians, including full orchestra, chamber orchestra, four-part chorus, soprano, tenor, and baritone soloists, a boy choir (at a distance) accompanied by a chamber organ or harmonium, and grand organ. It's about five minutes longer than Shostakovich's *Seventh*, and it rings with the deepest emotions.

Wilfred Owen became well known as a war poet posthumously. He was commander of a rifle brigade, and the poems that Britten chose to include in *War Requiem* were written in the field. Imagine the young man on a bedroll in a military camp, writing *Sonnet on Seeing a Piece of our Heavy Artillery Brought into Action*:

Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm,
Great Gun towering toward heaven, about
to curse;
Sway steep against them, and for years re-
hearse
Huge imprecations like a blasting charm!
Reach at that Arrogance which needs thy
harm,
And beat it down before its sins grow
worse.
Spend our resentment, cannon, yea dis-
perse
Our gold in shapes of flame, our breaths
in storm.
Yet for men's sakes whom thy vast malison
Must wither innocent of enmity,
Be not withdrawn, dark arm, the spoilure
done,
Safe to the bosom of our prosperity.
But when thy spell be cast complete and
whole,
May God curse thee, and cut thee from
our soul.

I had to look up some of the words. In English, there are many words for curse.

He plays like a German.

Charles-Marie Widor (1844–1937) is one of the towering figures of the pipe organ. He was born into a family of organbuilders in Lyon, France, and his earliest studies were with his father François-Charles, a church organist. The great French organbuilder, Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, a friend of the Widor family, encouraged young Charles-Marie to go to Belgium to study with Jacques-Nicolas Lemmens at the Royal Brussels Conservatoire.

Louis James Alfred Lefébure-Wély (1817–1869) was a prominent French organist, known for his many



The ruins of Coventry Cathedral (photo credit: Nigel Allcoat)

compositions in "popular" style. I have enjoyed playing his music, especially programming the famous Sorties as rollicking larks, foils to more serious, meaty music. Cavaillé-Coll advocated Lefébure-Wély, arranging for him to play the dedication recitals of many of his prominent organs. It's no accident that he was installed as organist at the Church of Saint-Sulpice in 1863, home to Cavaillé-Coll's monumental magnum opus completed in 1860. But by that time, the young Widor was in Cavaillé-Coll's sights as a young genius who represented the future of serious organ playing and composition, and Cavaillé-Coll apparently grew tired of Lefébure-Wély's shallower antics, feeling that his huge and sophisticated organ was deserving of a more serious musician. Legend has it that Cavaillé-Coll made life miserable for Lefébure-Wély, even hinting that contributed to his death.

In the late 1860s, Paris was in a state of political tension as Prussia was on a tear toward German unification, and the French Empire of Napoleon III anticipated and feared that if the Prussians succeeded, the balance of power in Europe would be upset. Sure enough, on July 16, 1870, France declared war on Prussia, and three days later, the Germans invaded France.

With that political climate as background, Cavaillé-Coll championed the 26-year-old Widor to the rector at Saint-Sulpice, but Parisian organists, many of whom must have wanted a crack at the plum position, protested that Widor "plays like a German."² That explains why the rector offered Widor a temporary position, feeling the weight of Cavaillé-Coll's recommendation, but not making a full commitment. Widor started his legendary tenure in a France occupied by Germany. Marcel Dupré, in his memoir *Recollections*, shares Widor's telling of presenting himself at the rectory when the year was up, hoping for an upgrade in his status. The rector simply wished him "Happy New Year," so Widor assumed he should just keep playing—64 years as temporary organist!

Marcel Dupré succeeded Widor as organist at Saint-Sulpice in 1934. German troops marched into Paris on June 14, 1940, starting the occupation that lasted until 1944. In his memoir, Dupré wrote that as the occupation began, while many Parisians were fleeing the city, he and his wife Jeanne stayed at their home in Meudon, about 6½ miles from Paris. The city was deserted and transportation was stopped. For the first two Sundays, Marcel and Jeanne Dupré walked together back and forth to Saint-Sulpice: "Our fatigue was nothing compared to the joy we felt when we reached the organ, and I know that the parishioners still remaining in Paris found comfort when they heard it."

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A few days into the occupation, German officers visited Dupré's home in Meudon, where there was a clear view of the entire city. The Germans intended to install anti-aircraft guns on the roof of Dupré's *salle d'orgue*. When they saw the hall's interior, they thought it was a chapel, but Jeanne Dupré told them that a musician worked in that room. The Germans reconsidered, and occupied the roof of the house next door, evicting the woman who lived there.³

A cold night at Stalag VIII A

Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992) was a soldier in the French army during the German invasion of 1940 when he was captured and taken to a German prisoner-of-war camp in Görlitz, near the modern border between Germany and Poland. Fellow prisoners included the clarinetist Henri Akoka, violinist Jean le Boulaire, and cellist Étienne Pasquier, which explains the unusual instrumentation of *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Quartet for the End of Time), which Messiaen wrote after his arrival at Stalag VIII A. Karl-Albert Brüll, a sympathetic guard, provided Messiaen with paper and pencil.

The premiere of the quartet was presented on January 15, 1941, in an unheated space in Barracks 27, using instruments that Brüll helped procure. The performance was announced with a flyer bearing an official stamp, "Stalag VIII A 49 geprüft" (approved). There was an audience of about 400 prisoners, with German officers sitting in the front row.⁴

Messiaen's deep Catholic faith was at the heart of the composition. In the preface to the score, he quoted from the Book of Revelations, Chapter 10:

And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire . . . and he set his right foot upon the sea, and his left foot on the earth. . . . And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, and swore by him that liveth for ever and ever . . . that there should be time no longer: But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished. . . .

The opening movement is titled *Liturgie de cristal* (Crystal Liturgy). In the preface, Messiaen described the movement:

Between three and four in the morning, the awakening of birds: a solo blackbird or nightingale improvises, surrounded by a shimmer of sound, by a halo of trills lost very high in the trees. Transpose this onto a religious plane, and you have the harmonious silence of heaven.

Imagine the mix of emotions of prisoners of war, playing that new music on beat-up instruments in a frigid prison room, with their captors in the audience shivering among the other prisoners, the throng listening to music expressing the sadness, the rage, the pathos of war.

Just another gig

Have you ever felt that a gig was a nuisance? "Do I really have to play that wedding on Saturday or grind out another Sunday in the heart of Pentecost?" Is your phone sitting on the console on "silent" while you're playing a service? Have you ever sent a text from the bench during a sermon? When I receive a text from an organist at 10:42 on a Sunday morning, letting me know that the swell shutters are squeaking, I know that his eyes are not on the road, and that his heart is not in church.

I keep two artifacts in the top drawer of my bureau in our bedroom in Maine. One is a note I received 25 years ago from a soon-to-be bride. I had met with

her and her fiancé a few evenings earlier to help them choose the music for their wedding. It's a simple drugstore thank-you card, and the handwriting is childish (the transcription is verbatim):

Mr. Bishop, we wanted to thank you for such a nice night, we had picking out our music. You were so very nice, the way you helped us, pick out what we wanted. I am sure our wedding day will sound beautiful, thank you again for your kindness. Steve and Ruth.

Maybe Steve and Ruth's wedding was another go-round of Wagner, Mendelssohn, and *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*. Did I think it was just another gig I had to finish? Doesn't matter. It was important to them.

Music matters. Music is important. A bride and groom and a war-torn city have something in common. They can express themselves through music. If you think you're a vendor providing music, standing in line for a check with limo drivers, florists, and caterers, you're missing something. Anyone can wrap bacon around a scallop. You know how to play the organ. You're providing a sacred art. It matters to people. You're their voice.

So pretty

The second artifact in that bureau drawer is my draft card, dated April 15, 1974. The draft had ended in 1973, but the Selective Service issued numbers to all American men born in 1954, 1955, and 1956, in case the draft was extended. I had to report to Local Board No. 108 in the Fresh Pond Shopping Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. (There's a McDonald's in that storefront now.)

In 1968, while war was raging in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, Leonard Bernstein wrote the song, *So Pretty*, with lyrics by Comden and Green for a fundraiser for Broadway for Peace, where it was premiered by Barbra Streisand, with Bernstein at the piano. A child is learning in school about a far-away place, wondering why the pretty people are dying. The teacher replies, ". . . they must die for peace. . . ."⁵

Notes

1. Book review: "Leningrad: Siege and Symphony," *The Washington Post*, Peter Finn, October 3, 2014, quoting from the book by Brian Moynahan.

2. That story was told to me by Daniel Roth, current organist at St. Sulpice, as we walked together up Park Avenue in New York after he played a recital at the Church of the Resurrection.

3. Marcel Dupré, *Recollections*, page 107, Belwin-Mills, 1972.

4. Alex Ross, "Revelations: The Story behind Messiaen's 'Quartet for the End of Time,'" *The New Yorker*, March 22, 2004.

5. You can read the lyrics of *So Pretty* here: <https://www.antiwarsongs.org/canzone.php?id=7245&lang=en>, and hear Deborah Voight singing it on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrYlwwRmv8c>.

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