

Alexander Porfiriyevich Borodin (November 12, 1833 - February 27, 1887)

Symphony No. 2 in B minor (composed in 1870-1874 amidst numerous interruptions, premiered in 1877)

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubles piccolo), two oboes (one doubles English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, four percussion (cymbals, bass drum, triangle, tambourine), timpani, harp, and strings.

- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Scherzo: Molto vivo
- III. Andante
- IV. Finale: Allegro

Born an illegitimate son of a Georgian nobleman, Alexander Borodin was registered as the child of one of his biological father's serfs. Even though they weren't related on paper, Borodin's nobleman father still ensured that his son received some trappings of his noble lineage. When he turned seven years old, Borodin's father emancipated his son from serfdom, and provided him and his biological mother with housing and money on which to live. Alexander received a private education in many topics, something he would not have received had he remained a serf. He took a particular interest in medical sciences, and enrolled in the Medical–Surgical Academy in Saint Petersburg when he turned 17. From here, Borodin pursued a career in medicine; he served as a military surgeon from 1856 to 1859. During this time, he became interested in chemistry, traveling around western Europe to attend various conferences with other chemists. Borodin made several important contributions to the field of chemistry, including the discovery of a specific chemical reaction that still bears his name today (the Hunsdiecker-Borodin reaction, which I will not attempt to explain).

At this point in these notes, one might ask, “why is a career scientist showing up in the hallowed halls of classical music?” As most of us do, Alexander Borodin contained multitudes, as music became something of a “side hustle” over the course of his life. Outside of some basic study of music during his teens, he learned the cello and was more or less a self-taught composer, writing small chamber works as early as 1850. In 1862, Borodin met the composer Mily Balakriev, which led to deeper study of composing and orchestration. Meeting and studying with Balakriev also led to Borodin's association with the so-called Mighty Handful, a group of five Russian composers in the mid-19th century (Balakriev, Borodin, Cesar Cui, Modest Mussorgsky, and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov) who championed a distinctly nationalistic Russian music. In contrast to other artists trained in the more Western tradition of classical music, the Mighty Handful sought out a sound more tied to the Russian people and spirit, free of the influence of the idealized music from the Germanic tradition (ie, Beethoven and his ilk). To achieve this, they included folk music from their native lands, and developed novel melodic, harmonic, and contrapuntal techniques (such as use of the whole tone scale, modal mixture, and octatonicism), as well as eschewing the “rules” of common practice compositional techniques in voice leading (*gasp* they used parallel fifths and octaves).

By 1869, Borodin's musical attention turned to the composition of his second symphony. After a relatively successful premiere of the First Symphony, Borodin seemed to feel encouraged, as he also began (though never completed) his opera, *Prince Igor* (he ended up setting aside the opera in favor of writing the symphony). While momentum was building for a more prominent musical career, Borodin was also still a scientist and professor, and thus found himself often preoccupied with his professional duties and experiments. Rimsky-Korsakov recounts spending time with Borodin during this period:

"On visiting him I seldom found him working in the laboratory which adjoined his apartment. When he sat over his retorts filled with some colorless gas and distilled it by means of a tube from one vessel into another, I used to tell him that he was 'transfusing emptiness into vacancy'. Having finished his work, he would go without me to his apartment, where he began musical operations or conversations, in the midst of which he used to jump up, run back to the laboratory to see whether something had not burned out or boiled over; meanwhile he filled the corridor with incredible sequences from successions of ninths or sevenths."

After several other distractions - a commission for a project that didn't come to fruition, and the development of coursework for a new School of Medicine for women at his alma mater - Borodin finally wrapped up work on the Second Symphony in 1875. When an imminent performance materialized in 1876, Borodin couldn't find his original score, and was forced to reorchestrate the outer two movements. The work was finally premiered in early 1877, and reception of his new piece was mixed at best. After talking it over with Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin revised the orchestration to make the brass writing a bit lighter, and upon a second performance in 1879, the piece received broad accolades from critics and audiences alike.

A declamatory, attention grabbing opening gesture launches the first movement, a gesture that immediately brings to mind the musical intent of the *Mighty Handful*. Whether it's due to cultural associations or the suggestion of the artists is up for debate, but either way, this music sounds and feels Russian. The opening gesture permeates much of the first movement, which alternates between various iterations of the opening and a more song-like tune. Much of the music from this symphony was lifted verbatim for the 1953 Broadway musical *Kismet*.

The colorful Scherzo lives up to its whimsical name, with lively repeated notes in the horns, and lots of syncopation that obscures the downbeat. This contrasts with the lyrical Trio section of the movement, which shows off the melodic capabilities of the oboe and clarinet in particular. The Andante third movement takes the lyricism to another level with a lovely clarinet and harp duo that is then taken up by the horn. This music feels almost pensive, yet builds its way to denser textures that start to show more resolve. A restatement of the opening leads directly to the finale, a boisterous movement that is equal parts heroic and nostalgic.

Fellow *Mighty Handful* member Cesar Cui gave a nice summary of Borodin's work: "In the first movement an atmosphere of grandeur is predominant, whereas humor prevails in the last movement. The first movement is like an everyday picture of some solemn ritual; the last movement is a vivid, motley, varied celebration of sparkling gaiety."

Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich (September 12, 1906 - August 9, 1975)

Violin Concerto No. 1 in A minor (op. 77, composed in 1947-1948, premiered October 29, 1955, Leningrad Philharmonic, David Oistrakh, soloist and Yevgeny Mravinsky, conductor)

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubles piccolo), three oboes (one doubles English horn), three clarinets (one doubles bass clarinet), three bassoons (one doubles contrabassoon), four horns, tuba, two percussion (xylophone, tam-tam, tambourine), timpani, two harps, strings, and violin soloist.

- I. Nocturne: Moderato
- II. Scherzo: Allegro
- III. Passacaglia: Andante - Cadenza
- IV. (attacca) Burlesque: Allegro con brio - Presto

One of the few 20th century Russian composers to produce the bulk of their oeuvre within the restrictive social construct that was the Soviet Union, Shostakovich's music frequently reflects a tumultuous inner and outer life. Living under the thumb of the oppressive Soviet regime meant conforming to their rules, however vague or arbitrary those rules may have been. As a result, Shostakovich's forward-thinking aesthetic position was frequently denounced by the Soviet demagogues. It occurred once in the form of harsh criticism of his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtensk District* (1932), but more severely in 1948, when the Soviet regime condemned Shostakovich and other artists (such as Sergei Prokofiev) for "formalistic distortions and anti-democratic tendencies alien to the Soviet people." This condemnation forced Shostakovich to hide some of his more forward-thinking compositions, and focus more on accessible musical materials, such as his extensive work in incidental music for theater and film. Among the works he hid from the public view at this time was his first Violin Concerto.

The Concerto was first composed between 1947 and 1948, but did not receive its premiere until 1955, two years after the death of Stalin and the loosening of restrictions placed on Soviet artists. Shostakovich dedicated the work to the famed violinist David Oistrakh, with whom he worked closely with to work out the playability of the solo part, especially during the period between the completion of the piece and its actual premiere seven years later. Oistrakh was born and raised in the Ukrainian port city of Odessa, but later moved to Moscow to further his career as a violinist. This move to Russia came with the need to conform to the Soviet cultural politics at the time, which proved difficult for Oistrakh, especially as it pertained to his Jewish ancestry. Stalin's Soviet Union after World War II saw a huge rise in antisemitism, which forced many Soviets "of Jewish origin" (the required addition to Soviet passports) to pledge allegiance to the State. Simultaneously, given his stature as a renowned violinist, the Soviet regime also used Oistrakh's fame to further their own agenda. All of this is to say that Shostakovich and Oistrakh both struggled mightily in their interactions with Soviet political life, and thus likely found much in common with each other.

A unique entry into the concerto genre, this incredible masterwork defies the traditional three-movement “classical” concerto form, harkening back to Baroque forms without fully adhering to them. It begins with a moderato Nocturne in something of a song form, while a more “normal” concerto would begin with an Allegro movement, most likely in sonata form. The Nocturne can be thought of as a sort of meditation on several themes that the soloist picks up from the low strings in the beginning. The mood of the movement is decidedly dreary, with brief interjections by the winds and strings between explorations of the themes by the soloist. The movement slowly winds down from its climax with wonderful colors in the accompanying strings, harp and celeste.

The second movement, a raucous Scherzo, begins with the soloist accompanying a flute and bass clarinet playing the same line in octaves (again, not your traditional concerto!), but the violin quickly begins to display fiery virtuosity. Shostakovich’s proclivity toward frantic writing is on full display in this movement, and many of the themes suggest a folk origin. One of these themes is inspired by Klezmer music, perhaps a nod to Oistrakh’s Jewish heritage and/or a veiled protest against the rising anti-Semitism in post-World War 2 Soviet Russia.

The best known part of the concerto is likely the third movement, a Passacaglia, which is a standard musical form in triple meter (3 beats per measure) that is based on a repeating bass line. The melody from the first movement makes its return, and the character of the music finds its way back to a more somber mood. The movement ends with an extensive and impressive violin cadenza, one of the most difficult cadenzas in the literature (due to its length, depth of expression, and technical demands), which gradually builds in intensity to launch the final movement. In an early version of the piece, Shostakovich had the violinist continue playing into the final movement, which begins *attacca* immediately after the lengthy cadenza. Oistrakh pleaded with the composer to give the soloist a break, so that he could at least “wipe the sweat from my brow” before conquering the rest of the virtuosic music.

The finale, a “Burlesque,” lends itself to a more sarcastic character than the rest of the work. The tone becomes mocking, but in an almost self-deprecating way. We also hear the same kind of virtuosity found in the second movement, but it feels more frantic and driven toward the final climactic moments.

The work as whole is an important contribution to the violin concerto genre, with its experiments in form and Shostakovich’s seamless ability to transition between moments of joy and anguish, making it stand out from other concerti from the same period. This concerto can be seen as a microcosm of Shostakovich’s overall style as a composer, with cosmopolitan influences integrated into Russian aesthetics, and a skillful blend of experimentation and traditional elements that together show the intelligence and depth of one of the greatest composers of the 20th century.