

'22

voorjaar | spring | printemps

BRUSSELS PHILHARMONIC

SHOSTAKOVICH 7 'LENINGRAD'

YOEL LEVI, DIR.
BRUSSELS PHILHARMONIC

19.03.2022

klara
festival

11 — 27
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LET'S — STICK

TOGETHER

- [introduction](#) -
- [welcome](#) -
- [programme & artists](#) -
- [discover more](#) -
- [programme notes](#) -
- [biographies](#) -
- [musicians](#) -

[version française](#) - [nederlandse versie](#) - [print versie](#)

INTRODUCTION

The Brussels Philharmonic family is home to more than 20 different nationalities. All of them passionate people who work together intensively day after day to make and share music. With respect for each other, for the public, for their profession, they show what can be achieved with mutual understanding and brotherhood: harmony, beauty, and unity.

We share the concerns of our musicians from the affected areas, who are justifiably worried about their families and loved ones and fear the impact of this conflict now and in the future.

After careful consideration, the Brussels Philharmonic together with partners Klarafestival, Muziekcentrum De Bijloke and Flagey, has decided to go ahead with the planned

*performances of Shostakovich 7th Symphony
'Leningrad' on March 17 and 19, 2022.*

There are several possible interpretations of this work, but whatever they may be, for us today the 7th Symphony conveys above all this important message: the frank indictment of the violence of war, the tribute to the resilience of humankind, and the recognition of the victims. And the permanent reminder that mutual understanding is the only certainty for a harmonious society in which respect for each individual takes centre stage.

#notowar

WELCOME

Officially, Shostakovich dedicates his 7th Symphony to his beloved city of Leningrad and depicts 'the historic days of its defence against fascist oppressors'. But in reality, it is his personal indictment of the Soviet regime's violence against its own citizens and a tribute to its victims.

After the German army's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Shostakovich wants to roll up his sleeves: he digs anti-tank trenches around Leningrad and erects barricades, meanwhile working frantically on the start of what will become his 7th Symphony. And then the German blockade of Leningrad begins. Nearly a million people are dying of deprivation and famine – after the Holocaust, this will become the greatest tragedy of WWII.

The symbolic value of Shostakovich's determination to stay in his city and write this work as a sign of resistance and support was immense. This symphony is not about musical sophistication: "The music is about terror, slavery, the oppression of the mind." But also about how hope floats to the surface, how people resist and fight back. Later Shostakovich said, "I wrote my Seventh Symphony, the 'Leningrad', very quickly. I couldn't not write it. War was all around. I had to be with the people. I wanted to create the image of our country at war, capture it in music".

PROGRAMME & ARTISTS

Brussels Philharmonic · Yoel Levi, conductor

Piet J. Swerts

Slava Ukraini! Heroyam Slava!

(2022, world premiere)

Dmitri Shostakovich

Symphony No. 7 in C major, op. 60, 'Leningrad'
(1941)

- I. *Allegretto*
- II. *Moderato (poco allegretto)*
- III. *Adagio*
- IV. *Allegro troppo*

"Slava Ukraini! Heroyam Slava! (Glory to Ukraine and its Heroes) is a re-translation and new orchestration of the official march of the Ukrainian army combined with the national anthem. It is an artistic musical stand against

senseless war violence as we are now experiencing in Ukraine." – Piet J. Swerts

Piet J. Swerts made the score and orchestral parts available free of charge to all orchestras in the world so that, to offer musical resistance as one united voice.

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PROGRAMME NOTES

Leningrad – Kyiv

Why it makes sense to perform Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony today

Shostakovich wrote his *Seventh Symphony* in 1941, during the siege of his hometown Leningrad by Nazi Germany. The composer wrote the first three movements while in the city, after which he was required to evacuate. The siege is a terrible episode in Russian history and one of many examples in warfare where a magnificent city was not only attacked for military-strategic reasons, but at least as much to deal a blow to the soul of its people. In this respect, there is certainly a comparison to be made with the present siege of the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv. There are also huge differences that make any comparison difficult and even

dangerous: where Russia was the victim in the siege of Leningrad, it is itself the aggressor in the Ukrainian war. This raises the question of whether today it is legitimate and/or opportune to perform an emotionally charged work like Shostakovich's *Seventh Symphony*.

Basic premises

In general terms, one can today take two basic positions with respect to Russian cultural products. We recently saw the first at the four-day Shostakovich festival in BOZAR that started just a day after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, but continued nonetheless. This included, on Friday 25 February, a performance of Shostakovich's *Thirteenth Symphony*, preceded by the most silent minute's silence I've ever experienced. This silence was certainly more than a tribute to the Ukrainians, but was also meant as a moment of reflection. Paradoxically enough, the Russian music created a powerful

humanitarian awareness and an almost tangible empathy with the Ukrainian people. Incidentally, the concert was also preceded by a short statement, in which the war was denounced and support for the Ukrainian people was expressed. In brief, a context was created in which reflection and empathy were stimulated, where the plight of the Ukrainians was definitely the priority, and the music handled in a manner which – in the tradition of Beethoven's *Ninth* – called for solidarity rather than further alienation. One can well imagine that the Ukrainians themselves, right now have no time for conciliatory initiatives but, cynically enough, every historical conflict until now has ultimately decided upon an act of reconciliation. Besides, discrete reconciliatory gestures are probably more beneficial than the rhetoric of war, however abstract or futile they might appear at such a moment.

A second basic premise exists in which every trace of Russian culture is temporarily banished

from our lives. So did the Haarlem Philharmonic recently decide to cancel their 48-hour festival of Russian music because “now would not be appropriate to celebrate Russian music”. Aside from the fact that the two featured composers (Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky) have very little to do with current developments and even with the ideologies that form its background, this decision was also naturally meant as a demonstration of support for the Ukrainian people, and from this perspective certainly honourable. (By the way, instead of the planned festival, there are now two benefit concerts taking place.) Nevertheless, their decision raises certain questions. Russia expert Michel Krielaars, who recently published a book on music during the Stalin years (*The sound of the State of Salvation*), was quick to state that we should always continue to make a distinction between “the Russia of Putin and the Russia of Pushkin”. Politics and culture cannot simply be associated with one another, and that applies also to the leaders of a people and the people

themselves. Such self-censorship is perhaps a well-meant symbol of empathy but where does it end? Until when do we ban Russian music? Who is affected by it and who actually benefits from it?

The case of the Seventh

Occasionally, as with Shostakovich's *Seventh Symphony*, things are (even) more complex. Simply because of the unusual context of its creation, this symphony carries a highly explicit Russian imprint. Even if one opts for the first basic premise (namely, to continue playing Russian music even during this war), a work such as the *Seventh* could nevertheless provoke opposition. This basically has to do with two issues. The first is that the *Seventh Symphony* is a programmatic symphony: it is explicitly linked to an extra-musical event (Nazi-Germany's attack on Leningrad) and the music is to a certain extent a reflection of this. It is clearly audible in the lengthy, overwhelming first movement in which

the central section evokes an invasion; and again in the final movement, which expresses the hope for eventual victory. The second issue is that the symphony has, certainly in its finale, a clearly triumphalist character, which for many in Russia has become a symbol of national pre-eminence. For example, it was no coincidence that this work was on the poster when the much talked about, and until very recently in the West much-praised, conductor Valery Gergiev performed it in the South-Ossetian capital Tskhinvali in 2008, to celebrate the expulsion of Georgians by the Russian military.

Further nuancing is therefore necessary here. As always when interpreting Shostakovich, we are for the most part referred to problematic sources. On the one hand, there exist many documents *from* Shostakovich himself. However, these are often published via official channels and are therefore not always reliable. On the other hand, we have numerous written testimonies *about*

Shostakovich that are for the most part highly biased, depending on whether the writer wishes (or wished) to portray Shostakovich as a victim, or otherwise, of the communist regime. These views have become so polarised over the past forty years that impartiality is now almost impossible (see on this matter my recent short publication *De leugens en de schaterlach [Lies and laughter]*), which is why it is futile to go in search of a singular, undisputed truth. What one can do is clarify various aspects of the reception history and then, with the utmost caution, adopt one's stance.

At the time he was writing this symphony, Shostakovich himself spoke frequently about the ideas that formed the basis for it. One of his most concrete statements appeared in *Pravda* at the end of March 1942, three weeks after the premiere, and goes as follows: "The war that we are currently waging against Hitler is an absolutely just war. We are defending the

freedom, the honour and the independence of our fatherland. We are fighting for the highest humanitarian ideals in history. We are fighting for our culture, science, art and everything that we have created and built. The Soviet-artist will never hang back from the historic confrontation now taking place between reason and obscurantism, between culture and barbarism, between light and darkness. I dedicate my symphony to our fight against fascism, to our imminent victory over the enemy, and to my birthplace, Leningrad.”

What immediately strikes one in this statement is the direct reference to German fascism, the self-profiling as Soviet-artist and the combative, indeed patriotic, rhetoric. These elements recur time and again in the wide reception history of the piece in the early '40s, not only in Russia but also in much of Europe and even in the United States. Here of course it must not be forgotten

that Nazi Germany at that time was regarded by all these parties as a common enemy.

From 1979 onwards, particularly after the publication of Shostakovich's allegedly authentic *Testimony* by the young Russian musicologist Solomon Volkov, Shostakovich's image changed dramatically. He was now portrayed as a kind of secret dissident, who had supposedly always been a rabid opponent of the communist regime and who, in many of his works, had concealed messages that revealed this aversion clearly to good listeners. Naturally, that view, whose essence was certainly justified but whose elaboration is probably too tendentious, had enormous implications for the interpretation of the *Seventh Symphony*. This specific work, which during World War II had increasingly stood as *the* symbol of Shostakovich's Soviet sympathies, was now seized upon to assert precisely the opposite. "The invasion theme has nothing to do with *that*

invasion", maintained Shostakovich, according to Volkov.

"I was thinking of completely different enemies of mankind when I composed that theme. Naturally I feel only abhorrence for fascism; not only for the German form, but for every form of fascism. The time before the war is now often depicted as an idyll. Everything was wonderful then, they say, until Hitler disrupted it. Hitler was a criminal, that is certain. But Stalin too. I have so much grief for all those people that Hitler destroyed. But I have no less grief for the people murdered on Stalin's orders. I grieve for all those people tortured to death, shot to death and starved to death. Before the war against Hitler began, there were already millions of victims in our country." According to Volkov, Shostakovich explained many of his symphonies as requiems or funerary monuments, particularly for the many 'disappeared' victims who did not even have a grave.

What is crucial about this statement is obviously the quite radical shift in perspective. In comparison with the comments made in the early '40s, Stalin in particular is now the main target. This switch aligns with Volkov's broader attempt to put on display a completely new portrait of Shostakovich, in which Stalin was an even greater foe than Hitler. In essence however, this is mostly about an *expansion* of perspective: the symphony is equally anti-German and anti-Russian, but essentially it is primarily anti-totalitarian. Considered in this light, it takes on rather the allure of a universal, humanitarian indictment. Other sources, even some sources from the early '40s, seem to support this view; as, for example, Shostakovich's statement, reported by Flora Litvinova, that fascism was indeed the theme of the symphony, but that "genuine music is never bound to a single theme" and that it was mainly "music about terror, slavery, spiritual depletion" and "about every tyranny or totalitarianism generally".

Furthermore, what is important is that the two visions are not fundamentally irreconcilable, and certainly not if one knows exactly how to evaluate the composer's (at that time more or less inescapable) self-promotion as Soviet-artist and the bellicose, patriotic rhetoric. Whoever only focuses on the *content* of the 1942 text, reads that Shostakovich through his symphony is, above all, fighting "for the highest humanitarian ideals in history (...), for our culture, science, art and for everything we have created and built up (...) for reason against obscurantism, for culture against barbarity, for light against darkness." That Shostakovich thereby, in an all-out war situation, took the siege of Leningrad as his starting and reference point is no more than logical, but it may not be a reason for seeing the symphony as simply a symbol of Russian defiance and triumphalism.

Since almost every source and statement from and about Shostakovich is open to dispute, it is

also useful to bring other examples of the composer's work into the analysis. From this, we see that Shostakovich did often have a broader view on humanitarian issues and the injustice visited on others. One example in particular springs to mind in the present context: the already mentioned *Thirteenth Symphony*. This symphony was written long after the *Seventh*, in 1961-62, but it is also about war-time events that took place in 1941. The work's title is *Babi Yar* and refers to a ravine in Kyiv, literally a stone's throw from the place where, in the early days of the Ukraine war, the tall television tower was bombarded. In this ravine, in September '41, approximately 34,000 Jews were murdered. Shostakovich was not Jewish himself but detested any form of antisemitism and by extension any form of violence. That he wrote this symphony, living in a regime that itself displayed clear anti-Semitic tropes, is in any case a courageous act and is actually *in itself* sufficient to show that Shostakovich was never a

narrow-minded or slavish nationalist. The text used by the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko makes this even clearer. Thus one reads in the first section: "Oh, my Russian people, I know that deep within you are internationalists / but those with soiled hands have abused your good name." Something like that naturally went down the wrong way with Soviet leaders. In particular, the composer and poet were informed that they were focussing too much on *Jewish* victims, while at Babi Yar "Russians and Ukrainians were also killed and lay communally in the same ground." This was all already particularly cynical in 1961, and today it is naturally even more so; certainly when one considers that one of the motives for the present Russian aggression is the supposed 'nazism' of the Ukrainian government (by the way, led by a Jew).

In the same poem about Babi Yar, one also reads: "I myself am a long, silent scream / above the thousands and thousands who lie buried here / I

am each man who was shot dead here. / I am each child who was shot dead here. / Nothing in me will ever forget this." Of course, during the siege of Leningrad, the poem had not yet been written, but the fact that, many years later, Shostakovich chose this text to begin his audacious symphony, indicates how deeply rooted his grief lay and how unlikely it is that the *Seventh Symphony* would be nothing more than an expression of profound love of the fatherland. However, if this were the case, a performance of the *Leningrad* symphony would be, in the present circumstances, undoubtedly misplaced. In the opposite case, that this nationalistic element is a minor part of the overall humanitarian protest enclosed in the symphony, then its performance is certainly relevant.

What's more: given that the status of a work of art is not simply defined by the meaning given to it in the past (by the composer or others), but also by the way we see it today, a contemporary

performance can rightly have the objective of increasing its higher humanitarian relevance for the future. Seen thus, the Leningrad symphony becomes less and less a symphony about one particular conflict, and more and more a symbol of the perpetual search for “culture over barbarity” and “light over darkness”.

Commentary by Pieter Bergé, professor of musicology, KU Leuven

YOEL LEVI

CONDUCTOR

Yoel Levi is one of the world's leading conductors, known for his vast repertoire, masterly interpretations and electrifying performances. Currently holding the position of

Artistic Advisor of the Haifa Symphony in Israel, he was Chief Conductor of the KBS Symphony Orchestra in Seoul, a position he held from 2014 through 2019. The fourth Seoul Arts Center Awards bestowed Mr. Levi and the KBS Symphony Grand Prize in 2017.

Having conducted some of the most prestigious orchestras throughout the world and appearing with esteemed soloists, Yoel Levi has led orchestras in North America that include the Cleveland and Philadelphia Orchestras, the Boston, Chicago and San Francisco Symphonies, and the New York Philharmonic, to name a very few. In Europe he has led orchestras in cities that include London, Paris, Berlin, Prague, Budapest, Rome, Frankfurt and Munich and in the Far East, in addition to South Korea, he has conducted in Japan and China.

Also, Mr. Levi has conducted some of the world's leading opera companies, including the Lyric

Opera of Chicago in addition to leading productions in Florence, Genoa, Prague, Brussels, and throughout France.

Yoel Levi's extensive discography - on several labels featuring many composers - numbers more than forty. This includes more than thirty with the Atlanta Symphony on the Telarc label. His most recent recording, released on the Deutsche Grammophon label, is a live-recording of the Mahler Ninth Symphony with the KBS Symphony.

Mr. Levi was Music Director of the Atlanta Symphony from 1988 to 2000. Other posts have included Principal Conductor of the Brussels Philharmonic from 2001-2007 and Principal Conductor of the Orchestre National d'Ile de France from 2005 to 2012. He was the first Israeli to serve as Principal Guest Conductor of the Israel Philharmonic.

Yoel Levi won first prize at the International Conductors Competition in Besançon in 1978 before spending six years as the assistant of Lorin Maazel and resident conductor at the Cleveland Orchestra. He then assumed the post of Music Director at Atlanta. During his tenure in Atlanta, the British Magazine Gramophone applauded his impact on the artistic standard of the orchestra, stating '*Yoel Levi has built a reputation for himself and for his orchestra that is increasingly the envy of the big five American counterparts in New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Boston and Chicago.*' This sentiment was reinforced with the nomination of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra as "Best Orchestra of the Year" for 1991/92 at the First Annual International Classical Music Awards.

Other highlights of his career include a recent successful European tour with the KBS Symphony. Similarly, during his tenure at the helm of France's Orchestre National d'Ile de France he conducted that orchestra in regular concerts in

Paris, and led the orchestra on tours to London, Spain and Eastern Europe. With the Israel Philharmonic, he conducted tours of the United States including their most recent tour in 2019. Also, he has conducted the IPO on tour to Mexico and led them in a special concert celebrating the 60th Anniversary of State of Israel. Other recent tours include an extensive tour of New Zealand with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra and highly acclaimed concerts in Spain with the Orchestre de Paris. Frequently Yoel Levi is invited to conduct at special events such as the Nobel Prize Ceremony with the Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra. In March, 2020 Yoel Levi made a triumphant return to conduct the Atlanta Symphony in a Gala performance featuring Pinchas Zukerman.

In 1997, Yoel Levi was awarded an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts Degree by Oglethorpe University in Atlanta. In June, 2001 he was

awarded “Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres” by the French Government.

Born in Romania, Yoel Levi was raised in Israel where he studied at the Tel Aviv Academy of Music. Receiving a Master of Arts degree with distinction, he also studied under Mendi Rodan at The Jerusalem Academy of Music.

Subsequently Yoel Levi studied with Franco Ferrara in Siena and Rome and with Kirill Kondrashin in the Netherlands and at London’s Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

BRUSSELS PHILHARMONIC

www.brusselsphilharmonic.be

Brussels Philharmonic was founded in 1935 by the Belgian public broadcaster (National Broadcasting Institute (NIR/INR)). Since its

creation, it has worked with top international conductors and soloists. The orchestra was and is known as a pioneer in performing contemporary music – a reputation that brought world-renowned composers such as Bartók, Stravinsky and Messiaen to Brussels. To this day, Brussels Philharmonic has continued this tradition, including a 21st-century work in almost every concert programme.

The orchestra's historic home port is the Flagey building in Brussels, the heart of Europe, where it rehearses and performs in Studio 4 – in acoustic terms one of the top concert halls in the world – and which serves as its home base for concerts in Belgium and the rest of the world.

The leading French conductor Stéphane Denève is the music director of Brussels Philharmonic. His passion for 21st-century music and personal mission to create dialogue between the repertoire of the past and the future is fully in

keeping with the orchestra's DNA. Starting in the 2022-23 season, Kazushi Ono will take up the baton as music director of Brussels Philharmonic.

At the international level, Brussels Philharmonic has made a name for itself, with regular appearances at the major venues and festivals, such as Carnegie Hall in New York, the Philharmonie de Paris, Wiener Musikverein, Grosses Festspielhaus Salzburg, Usher Hall in Edinburgh and Cadogan Hall in London. International representation by IMG Touring has brought further tours and concerts on new stages both in Europe and beyond (e.g. Japan in 2017, North America in 2019).

Another speciality for which Brussels Philharmonic has gained an international reputation is the recording of soundtracks for series, games and films, including the Oscar-winning score for '*The Artist*' (music by Ludovic Bource). In Belgium, the orchestra is a regular partner of the Film Fest Gent and of

MotorMusic, and participates each year in concerts with iconic films (both blockbusters with award-winning scores and black-and-white classics with a new soundtrack).

Meanwhile, the orchestra has proved to be a pioneer in other respects as well. Besides ground-breaking initiatives such as the Tax Shelter, the establishment of a foundation for the purchase of string instruments, and more recently the partnership with Brussels Airlines, the orchestra embraces innovation in every area and all levels of its activities. The gentlemen of the orchestra are dressed by Café Costume in the custom-designed Symphonic Sporting Jacket, with technical innovations in the field of fabric and cut, and 2021 saw the release of the orchestra's own smartphone app.

The various recordings of Brussels Philharmonic (Deutsche Grammophon, Palazzetto Bru Zane, Klara/Warner Classics, Film Fest Gent,

Naxos, Brussels Philharmonic Recordings) have been warmly received by the international press and gaining awards such as the ECHO Klassik, Choc de Classica de l'année and Diapason d'Or de l'année.

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concertmaster

Henry Raudales

Otto Derolez (1)

violin I

Nadja Nevolovitsch (2), Sylvie Bagara,
Olivia Bergeot, Annelies Broeckhoven,
Stefan Claeys, Cristina Constantinescu,
Bart Lemmens, Chen Lim, Justine Rigutto,
Elizaveta Rybentseva, Alissa Vaitsner,
Gillis Veldeman

violin II

Mari Hagiwara (1), Sayoko Mundy (2),
Caroline Chardonnet, Aline Janeczek,
Mireille Kovac, Eléonore Malaboef,

Eline Pauwels, An-Sofie Perneel,
Julien Poli, Naoko Ogura,
Stefanie Van Backlé, Bram Van Eenoo

viola

Mihai Cocea (1), Griet François (2),
Marina Barskaya, Phung Ha,
Hélène Koerver, Amalija Kokeza,
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Barbara Peynsaert, Stephan Uelpenich,
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cello

Kristaps Bergs (1), Karel Steylaerts (1),
Kirsten Andersen, Julius Himmler,
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Emmanuel Tondus, Elke Wynants

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Thomas Fiorini, Daniele Giampaolo,
Benjamin Heymans, Maarten Taelman

flute

Lieve Schuermans (1), Jill Jeschek (2),
Sarah Miller (2)

oboe

Joost Gils (1), Lode Cartrysse (2),
Maarten Wijnen

clarinette

Anne Boeykens (1), Maura Marinucci (1),
Danny Corstjens (2), Midori Mori (2)

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Alexander Kuksa

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Claudia Rigoni, Loek Paulissen (2),
Luc Van den Hove

trumpet

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Diego Hernandez Torres (2),
Jeroen Bavin, Arthur Kerklaan,
Senne La Mela, Luc Sirjacques

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Søren Brassaert, Daniel Foeteler,
Mika Kamei, Drik Vanmanshoven

tuba

Jean Xhonneux (2)

timpani

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