

5-3-2018

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Recommended Citation

Taylor, Payden (2018) "Shostakovich's Fourth and Fifth Symphonies: A Comparative Analysis," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 7, Article 18. Available at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol7/iss1/18>

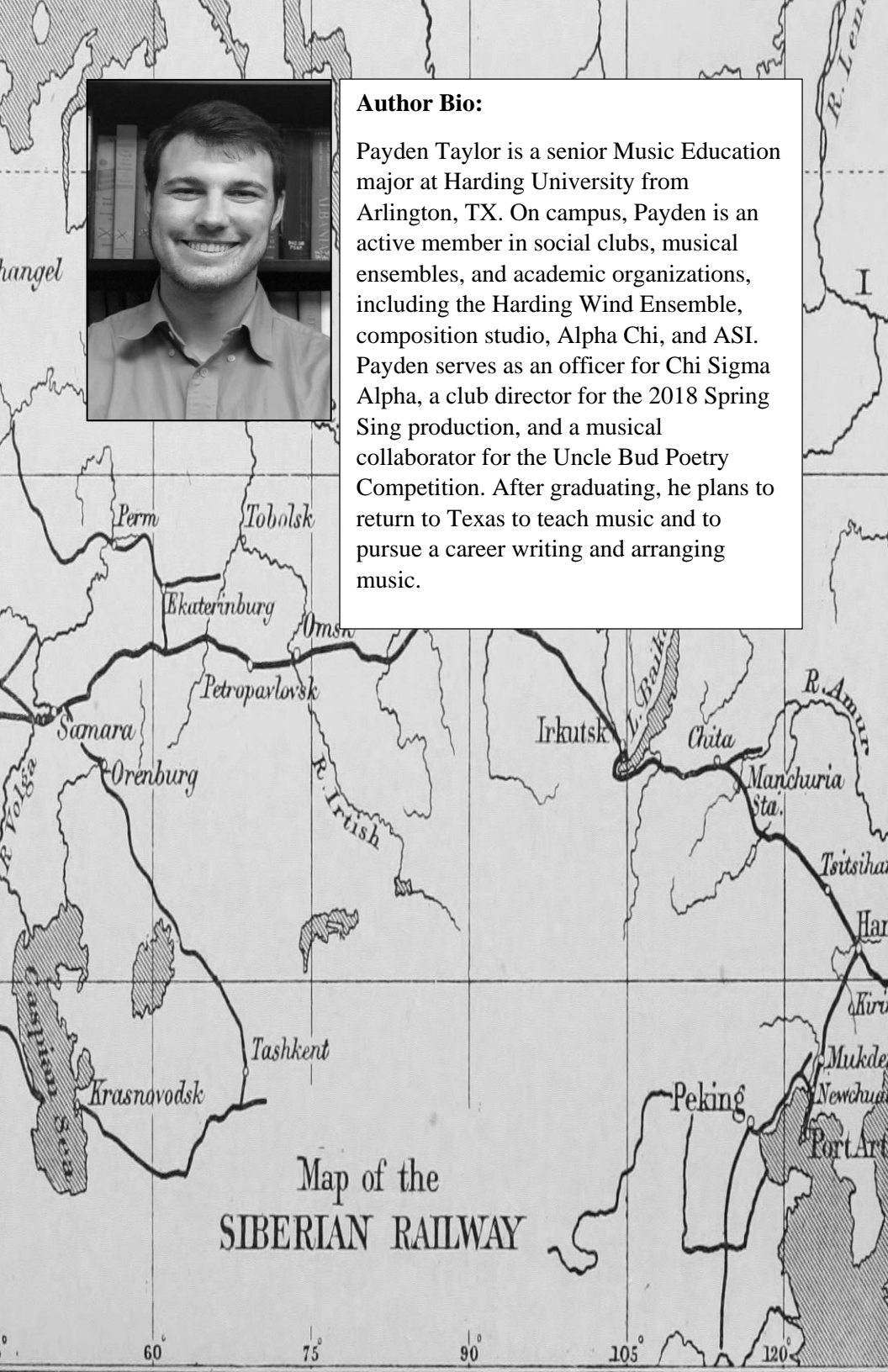
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SHOSTAKOVICH'S FOURTH AND FIFTH SYMPHONIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

By: Payden Taylor

Dmitri Shostakovich's Fourth and Fifth Symphonies bear the opus numbers 43 and 47, respectively, and, from the inception of the Fourth to the debut of the Fifth, spanned a time of less than two years. Yet for being roughly contemporaneous, these two symphonies share very little commonality. One is a sprawling, angular experiment, while the other is in Romantic-style symphonic form. One was hidden away for twenty-five years, and even today exists in relative obscurity, while the other was universally praised, quickly becoming Shostakovich's most well-known work. What led Shostakovich to enact such a drastic stylistic change in such a short period of time? Though a definitive answer cannot be certain, the heart of the matter can be more closely understood by looking at the content of the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies, as well as their places in history and in the oeuvre of Shostakovich himself.

During the 1920s, in the wake of civil war, Russian authorities assumed a hands-off approach to the arts. Young composers like Shostakovich were inspired by older Russian modernists such as Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Prokofiev, soaking up the new harmonies of the twentieth century. Alban Berg was also beloved in Russia at this time, with his opera *Wozzeck* (1914-1922) finding a crowd that the composer himself found shocking.¹ However, when Josef Stalin accumulated power and the events of the *Yezhovschina* in the 1930s began, the philosophy of Socialist realism developed as the Party's tool to control the arts. A term coined in 1934, socialist realism in music was ultimately an array of highly subjective benchmarks: it must heroically portray the working-class Soviet "everyman," its melodic and harmonic content must be easy to follow, and its form must be balanced in a manner which the Party deems satisfactory—namely, a conclusive ending.² Socialist

¹ Boris Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia 1917-1970* (London: Barrie & Jenkins Ltd., 1972), 45-46.

² George G. Weickhardt, "Dictatorship and Music: How Russian Music Survived the Soviet Regime," *Russian History* 31, no. ½ (March 2004): 125-126.

realism essentially ended the overt influence of the Second Viennese School in Russia, rejecting expressionism and even late romanticism as overly emotional or individualistic,³ and rejecting dodecaphony on the grounds of “formalism”—music using the structures of conventional music without easily digestible content.⁴ This policy shift reflects Stalin’s growing cult of personality and the USSR’s ruthless policing of the intelligentsia, meticulously molding all art into a tool that could be propagandized by the Party.⁵ In truth, the ultimate rule was Stalin’s taste. If he disliked it, the Party found a way to condemn it.

This is the political climate into which Shostakovich’s second opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* was born. Written in the early 1930s and premiering in January 1934, the opera follows the adulterous Katerina Ismailova and her womanizing lover Sergei, who repeatedly become entangled further and further into sordid affairs in an attempt to keep their meetings secret. The music famously gives no pretense about Katerina’s encounters, earning the label of “pornophony” in the West.⁶ This, however, did not halt the success of the opera. In its two-year run, it was performed 200 times between Leningrad and Moscow,⁷ as well as many more times abroad. However, this period of success came to an end in January 1936 when Josef Stalin and his highest-ranking advisers—the Politburo—came to see the opera.

Positioned right above the trombone section, the Soviet Union’s most powerful politicians were subject to the abrasive brass and percussion in close quarters.⁸ Two days later, the official Party newsletter—*Pravda*—ran a review of *Lady Macbeth* with a title that roughly translates as “Muddle Instead of Music.”⁹ One week later, *Pravda* published the article “Ballet Falsehood,” focusing on Shostakovich’s ballet *The Limpid Stream*. Both of these articles speak

³ Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 62.

⁴ Weickhardt, “Dictatorship and Music,” 135.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁶ Found in Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 121.

⁷ Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 122.

⁸ Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 103.

⁹ Simo Mikkonen, “‘Muddle Instead of Music’ in 1936: Cataclysm of Musical Administration.” In P. Fairclough (Ed.), *Shostakovich Studies 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). 231.

entirely in negative terms about the works, decrying them both as noisy, unintelligible, formalist messes.¹⁰ It did not matter that *Lady Macbeth* was finished before the doctrine of socialist realism emerged and it did not matter that *The Limpid Stream* glorified the Soviet agricultural ideal: they were, for the purposes of the officials, anti-Soviet and unacceptable.

This denunciation, however, did not come on a whim. Even at his young age, Shostakovich was the leading composer of his time, and the Politburo was aware of it. The *Pravda* articles were an open attack on a man who had become an icon in Soviet music. Party officials knew that they would embolden formalist composers by allowing Shostakovich, the composer that most publicly represented Russia's young musicians, to create raucous, expressionistic music like that of *Lady Macbeth*. While many similar instances had preceded for political or literary opponents of Soviet ideology during the *Yezhovschina*, Shostakovich's career in 1936 was the first casualty in its implementation concerning music. From the standpoint of Josef Stalin, in sacrificing one popular opera and one decent ballet, he had set a precedent of zero tolerance towards what was considered to be ideologically impure music.¹¹ The Soviet Government had to make an example of Shostakovich.

The composer lived much of the next year in quiet fear. This denunciation had come while he was approximately halfway through the Fourth Symphony, and Shostakovich focused his energies on finishing the large work in order to win back the favor of the establishment. Shostakovich finished the symphony in mid-1936 and scheduled a debut of the piece for the end of the year. However, after ten rehearsals, Shostakovich reneged on this performance, pulling the Fourth Symphony from the program.¹²

Having decided against using the Fourth Symphony as his triumphant return, the composer sought a way to thoroughly appeal to Socialist Realist expectations. Keeping a low profile until he had a satisfactory "rehabilitated" product, Shostakovich's compositional output decreased in this time; his *Four Romances on Verses by Pushkin* (1937) is the only piece written between the Fourth Symphony and

¹⁰ Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 122-123.

¹¹ Mikkonen, "'Muddle Instead of Music' in 1936," 233-234.

¹² Hugh Ottoway, "Looking Again at Shostakovich 4." *Tempo* (1975): 16.

Shostakovich's choice to answer his denunciation—the Fifth Symphony in d minor, Op. 47.

Written in mid-1937, the entirety of the Fifth Symphony's conception took place after the events of the *Pravda* articles. With the denunciation fresh in his mind, Shostakovich crafted a symphony with a thoroughly socialist realist aesthetic. The end result was a success, receiving an ovation that lasted nearly as long as the symphony.¹³ Proletariat and Politburo alike were elated with the work, and Shostakovich was the preeminent composer of the Soviet Union once more.

The content of the two symphonies is remarkably different. In terms of its basic form, the Fourth Symphony is highly atypical. It consists of three movements: two long structural anomalies approaching a half hour each in length bookending a comparatively concise scherzo. While an argument can be—and has often been—made that the first movement is in sonata form,¹⁴ its form is primarily an exercise in development. The opening movement presents itself in rhapsodic cycles, each linked by the angular, leaping first theme introduced by the opening fanfare. A subservient second theme is given considerable development in the middle sections, but the disparity in use is noticeable, and in terms of analysis this theme serves mainly for variety of familiar material as the movement progresses. An ironic coda —“one of the longest pedal C codas ever dreamed up by a European composer”¹⁵ — fades out to end the first movement. The *landler* of the second movement feels comparatively brisk and palatable in the middle of the symphony. Shostakovich allows the piece to take a break from formal complexity for these seven minutes, with little left to interpretation structurally in the dance. The third movement, however, is nearly unintelligible when analyzed from a conventional perspective. It maintains the guise of a Mahlerian funeral march for approximately a third of the movement. This is followed by a mad waltz, bridged by duple meter into a curious, comic dance. This section toys with themes and meters back and forth for much of the middle part of the movement, before exhausting itself

¹³ Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, 132-134.

¹⁴ Ottaway, “Looking Again at Shostakovich 4,” 19.

¹⁵ Found in Ottaway, “Looking Again at Shostakovich 4,” 19.

and decaying into silence. Out of this explodes a fanfare recapitulation of themes used in the opening march, and the remainder of the symphony is a decrescendo into a calm, quiet coda, punctuated by a mallet ostinato and a trumpet reiterating the head motif of the recapitulated theme. The constant shifting of style and tone gives the movement the impression of being through-composed, due to the weakness of material receiving consistent attention. Alternatively, this movement can be read as a ternary excursion, but it lacks developed themes in what would be the enormous middle section, heavily flawing this interpretation as well.

The harmonic language of the Fourth Symphony is complex and varied. However, concerning the harmonies themselves, though, there are few points in the symphony where Shostakovich altogether abandons tertian harmony; it is merely the functionality of these harmonies that Shostakovich fluctuates.¹⁶ At points it heavily suggests avant-garde influences, while in others it is reminiscent of early Classicalism. What is puzzling about this diverse language, though, is how swiftly switches are made from one extreme to another, particularly in the middle of the third movement. The shifts in tone that naturally accompany these shifts in musical languages are equally sudden, creating jarring passages and moments that verge on farcical.

While these obfuscate a central tone for the symphony, much musical intrigue stems from Shostakovich shifting the pull of tonic mid-phrase, obscuring the listener's expectations of the next chord. Throughout the third movement Shostakovich steps out of the style of the current passage long enough to establish or disrupt tonic before returning to the prior style. Notably, after the first iteration of a Classicalist dance section, Shostakovich builds to an augmented sixth chord—already an unexpected tonality in the passage—before moving into a few measures over a non-chord pedal tone that sound somewhat Stravinskian. After a few moments, the piece returns to the Classical sound of before. Conversely, in one complex counterpoint section, Shostakovich suddenly inserts a unison diatonic string statement, before immediately sequencing the statement away from tonic and reentering complicated interconnecting lines from before. Whether this technique is

¹⁶ Ottaway, "Looking Again at Shostakovich 4," 18.

successful is debated,¹⁷ but it confirms Shostakovich's attempts to marry palatability with modernity within his music.

Comparatively, the Fifth Symphony is almost a standard Romantic symphony. The first movement is not, strictly speaking, a true sonata-allegro movement, and the dance movement precedes the third, but it is a four-movement piece patterned largely after Brahms or early Mahler in terms of form, with both the first and fourth movements beginning in D minor with a finale in D major, as popularized by Beethoven—and importantly, acceptable to Stalin.¹⁸ No one movement dominates; barring a slightly shorter second movement, each lasts just longer than ten minutes. Opening with an imitative statement of a main theme, the first movement largely focuses on a handful of motifs, passing the ideas through different textures, tempi, and styles, relying more on orchestration for development than the spinning out of one theme on its own for a period of time. It builds to a climax by an increase in tempo and register, peaking with a cymbal crash, a sudden reduction in tempo, and the introduction of the full brass section and a motoric timpani line. This plays out and recedes to completion with several episodes of soli and duets, ending on an A-to-D chromatic scale from the mallets.

The rest of the symphony's movements, though, are structurally conventional. The second is a comic waltz, centered on showcasing a lyrical solo passed between the violin, clarinet, and others, followed by the oboist attempting to join in only to be interrupted by the full orchestra. It ends with the oboe trying one last time in a warped, timid statement of the theme before being rejected once again, this time with an explosive statement from the orchestra and a definitive end to the movement. The third is structured in a basic song format, drawing much of its impact from its expert treatment of melodic and harmonic content. The finale to the symphony is an unquestionable sonata-allegro movement. It opens with a fiery exposition of its themes before settling into a quiet development. At the recapitulation, the symphony slowly swells and pulls back until settling on a coda built around the first theme.

If Shostakovich was experimenting in various ways to express himself harmonically in the Fourth Symphony, he found his language of

¹⁷ Ottaway, "Looking Again at Shostakovich 4," 24.

¹⁸ Ivashkin, "Who's Afraid of Socialist Realism?" 433, 438-439.

choice—the octatonic scale—in the Fifth Symphony. It serves as the unquestionable harmonic basis for the first and third movements, and is the means by which Shostakovich delays tonic in the final melodic statement of the finale. As the scalar flavor of much Eastern European folk music, and having been proliferated by composers such as Stravinsky and Bartok, the octatonic scale brings a much more “Russian” sound to the Fifth Symphony, compared to the more chromatic, triadic, very German sound of the Fourth. This can also be attributed to the simpler harmonization the melodies in the Fifth Symphony receive: Shostakovich wrote long solo passages with little to no accompaniment in many of his pieces throughout his career, but in the Fifth Symphony this is exaggerated, particularly in the first movement. While Shostakovich filled the Fourth Symphony with thick, complex harmonies, there are few passages in the first movement of the Fifth where anything more complicated than a triad is used to harmonize the melody, and many sections use even less—a continuo line in the bass or a single countermelody. This is not true for the entire symphony, though. The full orchestral moments in the third movement involve complex layering of suspensions and traversal of distant tonal areas, and the fourth movement incorporates heavy use of the chromatic scale to harmonize its melodies. This pattern of compromising some complexity with some simplicity defines much of Shostakovich’s career between the *Pravda* articles and Stalin’s death, and as such the impetus behind the shift in style between the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies was likely at least partially politically motivated.¹⁹ This adds another layer to interpreting the Fifth Symphony and works after it: subtext.

Shostakovich professed that it was almost impossible for him to write an entirely non-programmatic piece;²⁰ ²¹ most compositions were imbued with his personality and beliefs, at least to some extent, and a large part of Shostakovich’s personality was his humor.²² In early pieces such as *The Nose* and *Bolt* Shostakovich communicated his energetic wit through satirical themes and material in his dramatic music. After the

¹⁹ Weickhardt, “Dictatorship and Music,” 126.

²⁰ Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 338-339.

²¹ Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, 158-159.

²² *Ibid.*, 158.

denunciation of *Lady Macbeth*, though, Shostakovich developed a bitterness for the Party and for Stalin.^{23 24} He also composed less music for drama, and through symphonic form Shostakovich came to use sarcasm, aimed at the socialist realism aesthetic that had condemned him, as his primary channel for his sardonic wit.

In the Fifth Symphony, this sarcasm is most evident in the finale. After a full movement and much of the symphony using in a minor tonality, the coda erupts in D major, thickly scored for the full ensemble as if it is trying to make up for lost time: until the end of the piece, the high strings and woodwinds perpetuate a high D while the timpani repeatedly plays a dominant-tonic figure, and the brass play an augmentation of the first theme for the melody. At the given tempo the coda is a lively march in a major key, but Shostakovich was notorious for disregarding his own published tempo markings,²⁵ and Yevgeny Mravinsky's interpretation—which he painstakingly developed under the personal direction of Shostakovich himself²⁶ — is at nearly half the written speed, turning the march into a boisterous farce, especially at the climax of the coda, with the clash of the trumpet's sudden non-chord tone—a high C natural—against the ostinato D natural. Shostakovich's analogy for the end of the symphony was that of telling someone to celebrate while beating them with a stick,²⁷ a fitting metaphor for the relationship between the composer and his socialist realist expectations.

The place these pieces hold in the evolution of Shostakovich's style contribute to the overwhelming differences between symphonies as well. These symphonies are among the first large-scale pieces written after Shostakovich's exposure to the music of Gustav Mahler, who was a significant force in shaping the composer's mature sound. Shostakovich's music from his time at the Leningrad Conservatoire and dramas written in his post-grad years expressed his wit,^{28 29} but much of

²³ Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, 271-272.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 333.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 244.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁷ Solomon Volkov, *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*. (New York: Limelight Editions, 2004), 183.

²⁸ Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, 71-75.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

his post-graduate concert pieces concerned themselves with searching for a style in which he could also be serious. Initially, Shostakovich became aligned with the avant-garde movement in Russia.³⁰ His Second Symphony especially tested limits, boasting a thirteen-voice atonal contrapuntal section and the use of a factory whistle.³¹ However, especially as he approached his thirties, Shostakovich began to break away from the avant-garde movement, driven at least in part by his enduring desire to write communicative music that would connect with his audience.³² He reconciled his experimental and populist aspects through means of a tool with which he familiarized himself in studying Gustav Mahler's music: massive development. Through long strains of development Shostakovich pushes tonal boundaries and asserts an individual style, while still tying himself to a conventional language. The Fourth Symphony stands as Shostakovich's grand experiment in this format, crafting an hour-long symphony from a paucity of themes via a preponderance of development; it is the composer asking the question "How far can I go and stay coherent?" Perhaps, when faced with pressure from the Party to prove adherence to Socialist realism, Shostakovich shelved the Fourth simply because it was such an experimental work. The sonata form movements of the Fifth use a melodic language similar to the Fourth, but are safe and deliberate with their harmonic and developmental directions, wherein Shostakovich takes what he knew would create good music that would also appease his stringent superiors.

Shostakovich would continue to develop the tools first used in the Fourth Symphony, further honing his balance between complexity and simplicity, particularly in later symphonies. Written later in his career, the finale of the "Leningrad" Symphony (1941) is virtually one through-composed development, and has only four clear restatements of earlier themes. Three of these happen in the final strains of the symphony, using material from the very beginning of the movement and also the very first bars of the entire piece. Yet this symphony was an overwhelming success with the establishment, the domestic public, and

³⁰ Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 124.

³¹ Ottaway, "Looking Again at Shostakovich 4," 17-18.

³² Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, 218.

the international critics.³³ The Tenth Symphony (1953) begins with a movement reminiscent of the first movement of the Fourth symphony in scope and tone, but with a central theme that undergoes various developmental episodes. The Eleventh (1957) is Shostakovich's longest, with each movement taking a collection of themes and song tunes and metamorphosing them to depict Russia on the eve of the 1905 rebellion.³⁴ "Babi Yar," the Thirteenth Symphony (1962), takes the text of five poems by Russian poet Yevgeni Yevtushenko and sets each of them as a movement in an hour-long symphony reminiscent of Mahler's *Song of the World*. Each of these symphonies develops its themes for extensive periods with more stylistic cohesion between its passages than the Fourth, drawing heavily from the precedent set for it by Shostakovich's first experiment in massive development, and making improvements in the process.

The lore surrounding the Fourth Symphony sparked many imaginations in the mid-twentieth century,³⁵ but today it is most evident that its legacy in the oeuvre of Shostakovich is that of a proof-of-concept prototype, from which at least one movement of most subsequent Shostakovich symphonies can trace its lineage. The Fifth and the Fourth share such different fates and different tones despite their close temporal proximity because of their very different purposes. The Fourth Symphony is Shostakovich's singular statement of everything that was possible with his matured compositional language; the Fifth, while in part a reaction to pressure from the oppressive Soviet establishment, is also an important statement of success from within Shostakovich's own individual compositional language—among the first of many that would come.

³³ Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 178-179.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 339-340

³⁵ Ottaway, "Looking Again at Shostakovich 4," 14-17.