

DG's Recording Gambit Pays Off With Andris Nelsons And The BSO's Second Release



Andris Nelsons and the BSO perform Shostakovich Symphony No. 8 in March. (Courtesy Michael Blanchard/BSO)

Keith Powers May 26, 2016



Pessimists say he stretches himself too thin. Optimists say he's proof of Boston's international status.

Whatever you think of music director Andris Nelsons, and his multiple affiliations and projects, he's certainly brought attention to the Boston Symphony Orchestra. His transparently emotional style, off-the-cuff stage remarks and intense conducting enthusiasms have jolted the often predictable business at Symphony Hall.

His concerts are sold-out — that's a given. Annual European tours are less of a given, but certainly something that hasn't happened for the BSO in years. And his ever-growing recording contract with Deutsche Grammophon, now comprising three orchestras and in-depth investigations of Shostakovich, Beethoven and Bruckner — that's downright unheard of.

The [BSO's first Shostakovich DG release](#) — featuring the 10th Symphony — [won a Grammy](#) this past February. Along with this month's release of the second DG disk, the label announced a surprising

increase in its commitment to Nelsons and his vision.

In addition to recording all 15 symphonies, much of the incidental music, and the complete opera “Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District” with the BSO, Nelsons will team up with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra — where he [becomes director](#), concurrent with his BSO appointment, in 2018 — for an extensive set of Bruckner symphonies.

If that’s not enough major orchestras, or composers, DG also announced that Nelsons will record the complete Beethoven symphonies with the Vienna Philharmonic over the course of the next three years.

A grand commitment, on a grand scale. In an era of downloads, live streams and alternates to recorded formats, it’s a startling partnership. (Although the DG/Nelsons relationship has been termed “exclusive,” the BSO remains committed to recording its own disks and continuing its Google Play streams.)



SHOSTAKOVICH

UNDER STALIN'S SHADOW

SYMPHONIES NOS. 5 / 8 / 9

ANDRIS NELSONS

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

The cover of the BSO's second recording with Deutsche Grammophon of Shostakovich's Symphonies No. 5, 8, 9, along with excerpts from the incidental music to "Hamlet." (Courtesy Boston Symphony Orchestra)

This month's DG release, a double-disk set with Symphonies No. 5, 8, 9, along with excerpts from the incidental music to "Hamlet," was recorded at Symphony Hall during the 2015-'16 season. Three listening experiences — live in the concert hall, following along with the score, and casually with the music in the background — give clues as to why Deutsche Grammophon and three major orchestras are making Nelsons the centerpiece of their recording future.

The scope of this second release mirrors the scope of this recording commitment. Compositions that

span the years 1932 through 1945, the “Hamlet” music, the Fifth, the Eighth and the Ninth cover a period that saw Shostakovich go from boy wonder to pariah to genius to pariah and back again. Such was life in Stalin’s Russia.

“The greatness of Shostakovich’s music lies beyond politics,” Nelsons says in the liner notes, and he’s out to prove it. Speculation about whether this phrase or that was intentionally heroic, mock heroic, just plain mocking — or just plain good music — has to come to an end if this catalog of great compositions is to be appreciated separately from its supercharged political climate.

Yoking three disparate symphonies and this stylish, quirky theatrical accompaniment helps. The music doesn’t “go” together in any marketing scheme or under any thematic rubric. Beginning the set with the Ninth — a work that confounds the expectations that number brings — might be a great way to approach the composer’s symphonies with unprejudiced intentions.

Every composer who has come to a Ninth Symphony has faced with one obstacle: Beethoven. Shostakovich faced that, and additional obstacles as well. His Seventh (“Leningrad”) was emotionally received, at home and internationally. His gigantic Eighth mystified everyone, and was initially shunned.

The Ninth, with its dual political and music-historical anticipation, furthered the unexpected narrative of himself that Shostakovich was alone capable of writing. Brief? Tuneful? Easygoing? It is all those things. In many ways, it is the kind of accessible symphony that serves as a perfect introduction to the composer.

Shostakovich seemed set on confounding his own expectations. The Nazis had been defeated, and the Ninth would celebrate that. He told friends he planned a large work for chorus and soloists, and started it. But by the time the Ninth itself actually premiered in 1945, that plan had been scrapped, and this transparent work, filled with simple appeal and gorgeous writing, emerged.

Appreciate the third movement, presto, which leads off the three conjoined movements that bring the Ninth to its end. A rollicking set of wind-oriented ideas, Nelsons leads this antic section that shocks nobody — just has fun. Flute (Elizabeth Rowe), bassoon (Richard Svoboda), clarinet (William Hudgins), oboe (John Ferrillo) all turn out effortless melodic statements.



Nelsons after performing Shostakovich's Symphony No. 8. (Courtesy Michael Blanchard/Boston Symphony Orchestra)

A stern-sounding fanfare — the BSO horns have played brilliantly of late under the direction of the former trumpeter Nelsons — makes the fourth movement, *Largo*, sound dramatic, but not tragic. The finale is a piece of concluding genius, played with professional exuberance.

This Ninth gets paired with the more complicated Fifth on the first disk. The Fifth was composed in 1937, after the official censure of Shostakovich's "Lady Macbeth" opera made the composer fear for his life. It was a dangerous time in the Soviet Union, and Shostakovich knew it. During the Stalinist terror, half a million Soviets were murdered, and five times that number were sent to gulags.

In response, he first composed a symphony (the Fourth) that he would withdraw, fearing its reception. His Fifth was calculated to either answer his critics — or answer them and subvert them at the same time.

The music is gripping, innately classical in concept, and full of originality. From the opening — a set of rising and falling intervals (sixths), that combine to form a canon — listeners are engaged. The precision that Nelsons extracts from this opening statement sound flawless.

The first movement — it has six separate tempo markings — creates its own universe of ideas. A wind

interlude at its climax must have set the composer's heart afire when he conceived it. It does that to listeners now. After 15 minutes, the movement doesn't end — it vanishes.

The small tenderness of the largo — the third movement of four — leaves out the brass altogether, after spotlighting them repeatedly in the second movement. Here the strings, divided into multiple groupings — violins in threes, the lower strings in twos — are rewarded by the composer's genius. Its elegiac tone sits midway between two noisy movements, like lovers paying no attention to a passing parade.

Andris Nelsons & BSO - Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 - Under Stalin's Shad... [↗](#)



The second disk holds the “Hamlet” music, and the Eighth. The production of “Hamlet” that Shostakovich composed for in 1932 was scandalous and short-lived. The characters were drunk most of the time, the main focus was shifted to Polonius, and this Nikolai Akimov production closed quickly.

The music joins the stylistic irreverence of the play by intentionally torpedoing sincere moments (the Funeral March sounds like fun), creating disjointed dance tunes, and even parodying the “Dies Irae” chant. Its strengths lie in small phrases like the artificial bombast of the Funeral March, or the silly quality of the Flourish and Dance movement, with athletic playing from flute (Rowe), trumpets (Thomas Rolf) and the BSO string sections.

At more than an hour, the Eighth Symphony, first performed in 1943, was met with both official and public disdain. It's a challenging work, and in that chronological context, coming hard upon the

amazing emotional and international success of the Seventh — the “Leningrad” symphony, which unabashedly commemorated the hardships of the siege in that city — its failure to excite audiences had to be expected.

Its scope approaches Mahler in intensity and breadth. The first movement alone (there are five) expands to nearly half an hour, and Nelsons, feeling no hurry, lets it inhale and exhale leisurely. Formally, each of the movements creates themes that depart from an interval of a second — and that close relationship between bass notes allows the composer to range broadly into various emotional territory.

As always, summing up an hour’s worth of dense music gets risky. So let’s not. Tracing the long arc of the Eighth, it’s easy to imagine Shostakovich simply enjoying the wealth of his own imagination, and following the path past this melody or that instrumental combination without a thought toward official responses or government action. That, at least, is what’s left to the listener, all these years later.

The BSO’s second Shostakovich recording on Deutsche Grammophon goes is [released on May 27](#).

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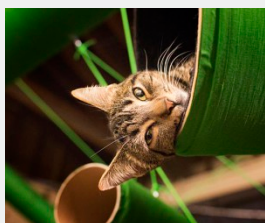
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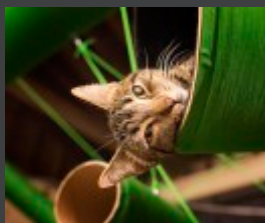
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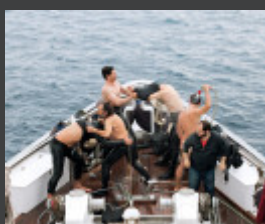
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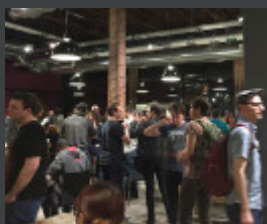
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