Shostakovich

Symphony No. 5
This report uses recordings to chronicle the development of many performance traditions concerning Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony. The most interesting recordings of this work are those of Eugene Mravinsky, Leonard Bernstein, Maxim Shostakovich, and Leonard Slatkin; however, other examples are cited. This piece was written in 1937, and first recorded in 1938 by the same conductor and orchestra, making it easier to follow its development in recordings than many of the other canonical masterpieces. Performance traditions for individual players and conductors appear in these recordings.

Performance traditions for individual players can easily be followed in the many solos throughout the Fifth Symphony. I have chosen to follow the violin and flute solos in the second movement between rehearsal numbers 58 and 61 (especially noting the ritards); and to note whether or not the bass drum covers the timpani pitch at the end of the symphony. The ritards in the violin and flute solos are marked in the score and the score indicates that the bass drum will be louder than the timpani.

The Mravinsky/Leningrad Philharmonic recording (the conductor and orchestra which premiered the work in 1937) does not observe the ritards at all. Mravinsky was a friend of Shostakovich’s (Shostakovich dedicated his Eighth Symphony to him) and they were in contact with one another prior to and during the rehearsals for the premier; however, this is the only recording that does not observe the marking. The Golschman and Mitchell recordings both have slight ritards and after that, the ritards become more substantial. (See performance tradition table 1). It is not until Maxim Shostakovich’s recording of 1970 that the markings are observed strictly. And, nobody waits until the following measure to start the *a tempo*; they all start it early.

The bass drum at the end is a little ambiguous in the score; while it is marked *fff*, the timpani part is marked *ff* with accents. The different players solved this in different ways.
(see performance tradition table 1). Mravinsky’s recording has the bass drum covering the timpani, but that does not happen again until Bernstein. In the Shostakovich recording, the bass drum not only covers, it obliterates! Many people believe that this is done to negate the affirmative major-key at the end of the piece. If that is true, how this section is played has tremendous relevance to the overall impression of the piece (especially since this is the very last thing that the listener hears!)

### Shostakovich Symphony No. 5
Performance Tradition Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year/ Conductor</th>
<th>Vln &amp; Flt solos</th>
<th>II Mvt 58-61</th>
<th>Does Bass Drum Cover timp pitch at end?</th>
<th>I Mvt Tempo</th>
<th>II Mvt Tempo</th>
<th>III Mvt Tempo</th>
<th>IV Mvt Tempo At Beg</th>
<th>IV Mvt Final Tempo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1938 Mravinsky</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bass Drum Marked FFF; Timpani Marked FF</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>90!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955 Golschman</td>
<td>Slight ritard</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td>110</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955 Rodzinsky</td>
<td>Ritard</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td>116</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959 Mitchell</td>
<td>Slight ritard</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td>86</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959 Bernstein</td>
<td>Ritard</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>84</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964 Kondrashin</td>
<td>Ritard</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970 Maxim Shostakovich</td>
<td>Slight ritard, but only where</td>
<td>YES!</td>
<td></td>
<td>68</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>marked, not earlier</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1986 Slatkin</td>
<td>Large ritard, much earlier than marked</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>32!</td>
<td>70!</td>
<td>174</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Performance tradition table 1 also includes the tempos used by various conductors at the beginning of each movement and at the end of the final movement. Mravinsky’s recording comes the closest to the tempos indicated in the score, with the exception of the final tempo. The tempos for the first movement vary from 66 to 116.

The tempos only tell half of the story though. For example, Golschman’s opening tempo of 110, is made worse by the fact that the “affect” is almost flippant. (In almost all of the other recordings, this “affect” is much darker.) His opening does not have any gravity at all. Rodzinsky’s opening is not as bad, even though it is faster, but the quarter/two eighths rhythm at rehearsal #9 is too fast and light. Kondrashin also starts fast, but he is able to maintain the traditional affect. His recording is interesting only in that he takes everything too fast. (He actually reaches a top speed of 200 in the first movement. The next closest in speed, is Bernstein at 165.)

The second movement is all one tempo (with the exception of some ritards in the solos). It really seems to play better at a slightly faster tempo than the score marking. However, Mravinsky plays it at the tempo Shostakovich indicated. This negates any mistakes in the score. So, here we see an example of performance tradition superseding the score.
In the third movement, most of the conductors stayed within ten beats per minute of the marking. In fact, half of them were right at 50. Kondrashin was again fast, and Slatkin was slow. The conductors were most in agreement with the score in this movement.

Skipping ahead in the chart for a moment, it is interesting to note that the three Russian conductors take the final tempo at almost half speed. This would seem to indicate a mistake in the published score. (See Performance tradition table 2, The Russians.)

Shostakovich Symphony No. 5
Performance Tradition Table 2
The Russians

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Score</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938 Mravinsky</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>106</td>
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</table>

This is the only tempo variance that points toward either a publishing error or a national trend.

The beginning of the fourth movement is a different story. Nobody takes it as slow as the score indicates (except Slatkin who goes slower!) There are many opening tempos ranging from 70-132 but at rehearsal #104, that range is condensed to 138-146. This indicates that the conductors agree on the goal, but not on the means of achieving it. This is
seen again at rehearsal #111. The issue here is the written out accelerando in Shostakovich’s score. Table 3, on the following page, is a graph of four conductor’s approach to this first section of the movement.

The same accelerando issues appear at the end of the movement. (See Table 4 after Table 3.) However, here there is not much agreement. As stated above, the Russian conductors are much slower, but the others range from 138-240! Here, there is a large discrepancy in performance practice. In Testimony, Shostakovich says “people who came to the premier of the fifth in the best of moods wept.” This would seem to indicate that the slower, more grave, tempo is correct even though it is not in the score that way.

As stated in opening paragraph, the most interesting recordings of this work are those of Eugene Mravinsky, Leonard Bernstein, Maxim Shostakovich, and Leonard Slatkin. Tables 5-8 (at the end) show each of their approaches to the final section of the symphony. Mravinsky accelerates early, but arrives at rehearsal #128 at about the indicated tempo. He sets the precedent that states: it is OK to deviate from Shostakovich’s markings as long as you are close at the big moments and you maintain the overall shape intended.

Bernstein (Table 6) on the other hand, creates his own effects. He comes in way over tempo and only brings it down for two more big effects. These are a huge ritard into rehearsal #128 and then the following accelerando. His interpretation as a whole is very exciting because he exploits every effect possible. His scherzo is one of the fastest, and his largo is one of the slowest (refer back to table 1). He does maintain the traditional affect during all of these effects; although the effects tend to place the affects “on steroids” at times.

Maxim Shostakovich (Table 7) also adheres more to the spirit of the markings than the letter. He too maximizes the effects, although not to the level of Bernstein. But it is in
the details past the tempos where this recording shines. For example, the bass pizzicati in the 
third movement at rehearsal #90 is very prominent and angry sounding. It is marked sfff but 
no other recording observes this. The violin and flute solos mentioned above ritard exactly 
where they are marked, all others ritard early or not at all. The final snare drum entrance is 
attacked ff. This is not how it is marked, but it does maximize the affect (and works well as 
a signifier to M. Shostakovich taking the following section slow!)

Slatkin’s recording is just too slow. He, like Mravinsky, stays very close to the 
markings and maintains the shape. But, he is always on the shy side of the tempo and this 
makes most of his recording boring. The one exception is the largo; here his recording is 
interesting. The violin and flute solos mentioned above ritard the most and the earliest of all 
of the recordings sampled. It appears that Slatkin is trying to milk every last drop of 
emotion (dark emotion) out of this piece and it just doesn’t work.

In closing, the performance tradition of Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony can be 
followed in recordings from one year after the premier. Through the recordings sampled, a 
traditional affect is established (primarily with Bernstein’s 1959 recording.) (It is interesting 
to note that Bernstein and his orchestra performed in Russia in 1959, and Bernstein 
contacted Shostakovich while he was there.) Following this, many recordings exploited the 
tempos and effect a great deal more. Slatkin and M. Shostakovich almost act like an “early 
music revival” in that they both attempt to interpret the score more literally. M. 
Shostakovich’s recording in particular defines the current performance tradition for 
individual musicians as well as for the conductor.