

Philadelphia

(1987-1991)

‘Learn by Doing.’

I was standing in front of Bernstein’s graduation photo that decorates the walls of the main campus. Standing fourth in line on the second row of the Class of 1941 picture is Leonard Bernstein in all of his boyish charms, smiling with a messy mop of hair that pokes out his graduation cap. It’s a more candid image that captures a lighthearted celebration of his commencement. As it’s well known, he went on to have a decorated career as an angel singing the gospel of music around the world. The maestro was set to return to his old stomping grounds that evening to deliver a masterclass. I slipped into Field Concert Hall after a long day of classes. I had picked German as an elective and was memorizing verb conjugations for a midterm later that week. The seniors of the Curtis Symphony Orchestra were dressed in their evening wear and running from Lenfest Hall with their instruments, emotionally preparing each other to be conducted by Bernstein. The freshmen in winter wear, myself included, were ecstatic at this once in a lifetime opportunity to see the master in his natural habitat. I sat in the center of the first row making small talk with my overly stimulated classmates. The other students were referring to him as ‘Lenny’ as he was universally known, but it felt inferior for me to call him Lenny. I called him ‘maestro’ or referred to him by his last name until he asked me to call him Lenny months later at the Tanglewood Music Center.

Shortly after six, the maestro walked in for immediate applause.

I have never been flustered by another man’s presence. My first impression of him was that he was, in fact, human. I had collected photographs of him, read his interviews, listened to his music, watched him conduct but it never occurred to me that he was one of us. He was always a superior version of a human to me, an euphonious cyborg with an invisible halo around his head. It is an absurd expectation to have but when he was standing in front of me, with his snow white hair and elastic skin, that’s when it occurred to me that music is worth giving your life for. He joked about the unforgiving weather and stated the subject at discussion; Shostakovich’s *Symphony 11*, subtitled *The Year 1905*.

1905 is another addition in Shostakovich's politically motivated body of work written to commemorate a crucial moment of Russia's eventful history. The growing unrest against Tsar Nicholas II's regime boiled over on Sunday, January 22, 1905 (9 January per the Julian calendar) when the Imperial Guard opened fire at a peaceful gathering of disheartened Russians at the grounds of the Winter Palace. The demonstrators were unarmed civilians that included women and children waiting in knee deep snow to deliver a petition to the Tsar. The number of casualties are widely disputed but it's believed to be easily over 200. It was a befitting symphony to discuss as Philadelphia was healing from a calamity of its own. On Monday, May 13 , 1985 (the day after mother's day), the Philadelphia Police Department bombed a row of residences in the Cobbs Creek neighborhood, 23 minutes from Curtis, that housed the members and families of MOVE, a black liberation organization. Six adults and five children were killed and many were left homeless. It is quite the paradoxical response from law enforcement whose city motto translates to 'let brotherly love endure.'

The symphony's four movements dramatizes 'Bloody Sunday' with a growing sense of heightened discomfort that takes refuge in each movement which can also be alluded to the events of the MOVE bombing.

1905 begins picturing the calm before the storm.

The elongated phrases of the strings and the wind resembles the shivers of the civilians gathering at *The Palace Square*, and the calculated footsteps of the armed battalion assembling in front of the residences. The restrained chords create a macabre atmosphere that hints at an atrocity impatiently waiting to unfold. There's the eerie, unbidden attendance of Death breathed by the unforgiving air. The occasional rattle of the snare drums is spine chilling. The military presence is armed for combat and lies in wait for command at both settings. A lone horn cries despair that's carried into the second movement, *The Ninth of January*. The tempo gallops, driven by the screeching brass and a pulsating bed of strings. The snare drum rattles again echoing the muzzles of rifles fired at the crowd and the detonation of explosives at the vicinity of the houses. The massacre has just begun. Panic and terror dawns and there begins a stampede to flee the Palace square and the homes. The cries for help are undermined by murderous intentions of the armed forces. The military drum rolls heard continuously prompts more violence from the Imperial Guard and the Police. Soldiers follow the demonstrators on horseback, executing them at point black range. The Police empty rounds of ammunition at the incinerating houses. The intensifying fugal strings and the percussion backed up by the trombones and the tubas portray a visceral bloodbath. The grounds of the Winter Palace are coated crimson and the air at Cobbs Creek is acrid with the

homes engulfed in flames. The mutilated and charred bodies of the victims adorn the town square and the neighborhood. The cries for reform are inaudible. The very people who took oath to ensure peace and protect the vulnerable have descended into maniacal, bloodthirsty tyrants. Are you promoted ranks on how many you managed to murder? Are your divisions given budget cuts on how quickly you disperse the crowds? Are you going to strip their fingernails and pin it as insignia of your barbarism? These questions carry into the third movement, *In Memoriam*. The tempo slows and features elongated phrases of strings and the wind again, but this time it's elegiac, sorrowful and laments over the destruction of humanity at the hands of soi-disant 'humans'. The movement serves as a much needed requiem remembering the named and the anonymous that died in St. Petersburg and Philadelphia. The final movement is invigorated with a new found revolutionary grit and rebellious ardor. Named *The Tocsin* after an alarm bell, it's a call to fight authoritarianism and injustice. The orchestra pounds with a frenzied hysteria that switches to an amicable alertness that culminates with a bell tolling continuously, summoning a call for immediate action.

