

What's Playing at HEHS!

Symphony No. 10 (movement 2) by Dmitri Shostakovich

Shostakovich was a 20th Century Russian composer and pianist, who spent most of his career working under the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. After studying at music college in Petrograd (now called St Petersburg), Shostakovich embarked on a musical career which would be very successful...but very complicated. In 1948, Shostakovich was accused of writing 'inappropriate' music by the Soviet government. This meant anything that had a Western influence and was seen as 'non-Russian'. After this, all Soviet composers could only write 'proletarian' music – music for the Russian masses. Shostakovich's creativity was limited by Stalin's regime. Another Russian composer, Nicolas Nabokov, said that Shostakovich was "not a free man, but an obedient tool of his government".

Stalin's death in 1953 was the biggest step towards Shostakovich's restoration as a creative artist – finally he could express himself freely! This transition was marked by his 10th Symphony which was written at some point in the early 1950s, and premiered on 17 December 1953, after Stalin had died. Shostakovich said himself of the piece: "I did depict Stalin in my 10th symphony. I wrote it right after Stalin's death and no one has yet guessed what the symphony is about. It's about Stalin and the Stalin years. The second part, the scherzo, is a musical portrait of Stalin."

Scherzo means 'joke' so while Shostakovich was pretending to write 'good, Russian music' for Stalin, he was perhaps sneakily making fun of him. Either way, if this savage piece is a portrait of Stalin, it's not a very flattering one. Have a listen and see what it makes you think of – would you like someone to compose a piece of music like this about you?

Toreador Song from Carmen by Georges Bizet

Bizet came from a very musical family – his father was a composer and his mother was a pianist – and his own musical talents were obvious from an early age. In fact, he was such a talented child that he was allowed to study at the Paris Conservatoire (music college) when he was just nine years old! Bizet's work remained individual throughout his career - he went on to write operas, symphonies and other orchestral pieces.

Bizet finished his most famous and most popular piece of work, the opera 'Carmen', in 1874. The first performances of 'Carmen' caused quite a stir. Its themes of immorality and murder, alongside a deviant female lead, weren't often seen in opera, and the conservative Parisian audiences were shocked and appalled by the performance. The newspaper reviews weren't good at all. A year later, though, 'Carmen' was performed again, in Vienna, where it met with rapturous applause and great acclaim! This success came a few months too late for Bizet, though, as tragically, he'd died of a heart attack in his holiday home in a Parisian suburb just weeks after the first performance in Paris. He would never know just how enduringly popular 'Carmen' became.

The 'Toreador Song' from Act II of 'Carmen' is now one of the best known of all operatic arias. That's a pretty big achievement for an opera that Bizet originally predicted would be "a definite and hopeless flop". As it turned out, he couldn't have been more wrong. The bold drama of the storyline and punchiness of Bizet's melodies have made it a lasting favorite with audiences. Its powerful story of love, lust, betrayal and revenge continues to capture imaginations the world over, almost 150 years on.