ISSN 3034-3836 (Online)

Musical Genre and Style

Research article
UDC 78.082.1, 785.11
https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2026.2.006-018
EDN APJYXR

Dmitry Shostakovich's Orchestral Dialogues: The Symphony as an Opera*

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the orchestral technique in Dmitry Shostakovich's symphonies. Of all the important issues connected with the analysis of this most important component of Shostakovich's style, accentuation is made on the functions of orchestration as a dramaturgical and form-generating means, on those opportunities that orchestral writing is provided with in the process of construction of musical composition. At the center of our attention is the second movement of the Fifteenth Symphony (1972), written, similar to many of the slow movements of Shostakovich's symphonies, in a freely and original quasi-rondo form, based on juxtapositions of musical themes and the contrasts resulting thereby. The demonstrated dialogic effect induces us to remember a number of compositions in which the antithesis of musical ideas contrasting in terms of imagery and timbre provide the impulse for their purposeful development and interaction. In the *Andante* movement of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 opus 58 (1806), such an antithesis has for a long time evoked associations with the famous scene of the furies from Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762). A special type of interpretation of this narrative without any direct correspondence to the mythopoetic plotline of Gluck's opera, but with a clearly visible antithesis between life and death is suggested by Shostakovich in his Fifteenth Symphony.

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* The article was published in Chinese in the Journal of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music Musical Art, 2025, vol. 6, pp. 159–167. CN 31-1004/J*1979*b*16*192* zh*P*¥16.00*3000*17*2025-12.
https://doi.org/10.19359/j.cn31-1004/j.2025.06.015

Translated by Dr. Anton Rovner.

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Keywords: Dmitry Shostakovich, Fifteenth Symphony, Christoph Willibald Gluck, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, orchestral writing, formative functions of orchestration, musical and thematic dramaturgy

For citation: Susidko I.P., Lutsker P.V. Dmitry Shostakovich's Orchestral Dialogues: The Symphony as an Opera. *Russian Musicology*. 2026, no. 2, pp. 6–18. https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2026.2.006-018

Оркестровые диалоги Д. Д. Шостаковича: симфония как опера

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена оркестровой технике в симфониях Дмитрия Шостаковича. Из всех возможных проблем, связанных с анализом этого важнейшего компонента стиля Шостаковича, акцент сделан на функции оркестровки как драматургического и формообразующего средства, на тех возможностях, которые даёт оркестровое письмо в построении музыкальной композиции. В центре внимания — вторая часть Пятнадцатой симфонии (1972), написанная, как и многие медленные части симфоний Шостаковича, в свободно и оригинально трактованной рондальной форме, основанной на музыкально-тематических и тембровых контрастах. Возникающий диалогический эффект заставляет вспомнить ряд сочинений, в которых антитеза контрастных в образном и тембровом отношении музыкальных идей становится импульсом к их целенаправленному развитию и взаимодействию. В *Andante* Четвёртого фортепианного концерта Людвига ван Бетховена ор. 58 (1806) такого рода антитеза издавна вызывала у многих учёных ассоциации со знаменитой сценой с фуриями из «Орфея и Эвридики» (1762) Кристофа Виллибальда Глюка. Особая трактовка этого нарратива без прямого соответствия мифопоэтическому сюжету глюковской оперы, но с ясно прочерченной антитезой жизни и смерти, предложена Шостаковичем в Пятнадцатой симфонии.

Ключевые слова: Дмитрий Шостакович, Пятнадцатая симфония, Кристоф Виллибальд Глюк, «Орфей и Эвридика», оркестровое письмо, формообразующие функции оркестровки, музыкально-тематическая драматургия

Introduction

Orchestral writing plays a crucial role in the style and compositional technique of Dmitry Dmitrievich Shostakovich (1906–1975). Edison Vasilyevich Denisov wrote about the composer's attitude towards the characteristic features of the sound of orchestral instruments: "Dmitry Shostakovich thought with orchestral means already at the very first stage of creation of his compositions; all of his musical ideas were generated by him already possessing the appropriate timbres. In many cases, the expressiveness of the timbre carries much greater significance than the other components (intonation, rhythm, dynamics, etc.)." [1, p. 46]

Nonetheless, variants of orchestration did exist in the composer's works, but were stipulated by certain concrete practical goals, such as, for instance, in his early works, when he was mastering the technique of orchestral writing. [2]

The first quality marked out by Denisov, — the generation of musical ideas immediately in certain timbral guises — was not unique for the composer. In compatible ways, the themes of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's orchestral compositions appeared. In his answer to a question posed by Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck, he emphasized this moment precisely: "I never compose abstractedly, which means that a musical theme never appears to me otherwise than in a manner corresponding to its outward form. Therefore, I invent the musical theme itself simultaneously with its orchestration." [3, p. 236][1] Analogous comments can be found from Nikolai Andreyevich Rimsky-Korsakov, albeit, in many ways, the composers were antipodes. In the introduction to his work *The Principles of Orchestration*, Rimsky-Korsakov criticized the comprehension of orchestration as a process exterior from composition, which was false in its assumption: "How wrongly do many people think, when they say: a certain composer orchestrates wonderfully, or a certain (orchestral) composition is orchestrated in an excellent manner. After all, orchestration is one of the sides of the soul of the musical composition itself. The composition itself is conceived with orchestral means, and in its very conception already guarantees certain orchestral colors inherent solely to it and only to its creator." [4, p. 11] These qualities of Tchaikovsky's and Rimsky-Korsakov's musical thinking have been treated with attention by composers and musicologists. [5, pp. 105–106; 6, p. 401; 7]

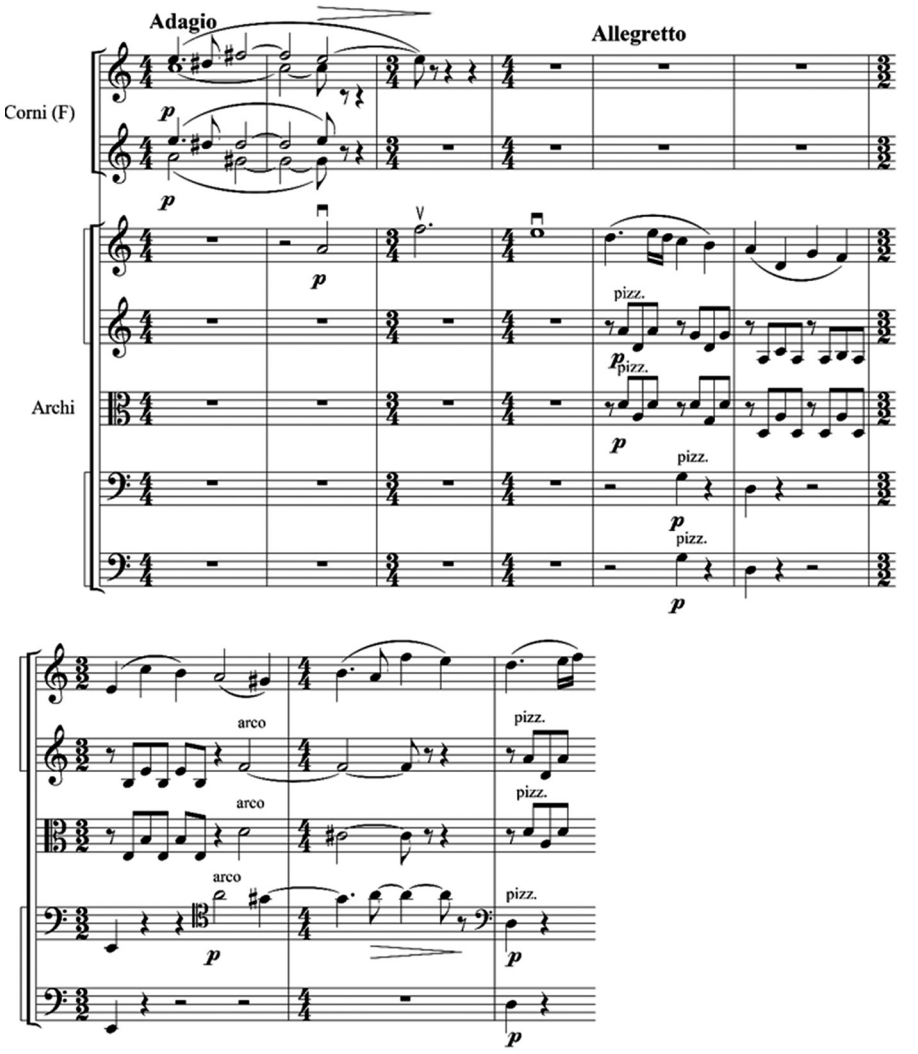
Denisov's second conclusion about Shostakovich's frequent priority of timbre over the other components of musical language establishes a feature that is extremely rare for the classical symphonic tradition. There is a wish to depart from this thesis and pose the question even more sharply: about orchestration as the most crucial means of the musical composition's construction.

The *Adagio* of the Fifteenth Symphony

Let us examine the status of orchestration in Shostakovich's music with the example of the second movement of his final symphony — the Fifteenth (1971). Notwithstanding all of the vividness of its musical themes and its outward compositional clarity, it has remained up to the present one of those compositions that has presented special difficulties for semantic interpretation. Not least of all, the reason lies in the heterogeneous allusions and quotations included in its musical text. In his letter to Krzyszrtof Meyer, Shostakovich directly indicated the presence of precise quotations from Rossini, Wagner and Beethoven. [8, p. 474] The first two of them are easily recognizable: the motive from Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* appears several times in the first movement, while the leitmotif of fate from Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* can be heard in the finale. The last quotation indicated by Shostakovich (of Beethoven) remained "unidentified" for a long time. Levon Hakobian suggested that the composer may have referred to the coincidence of the beginning of the finale's primary theme with the initial motive of the last movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 17 and, simultaneously, — with the beginning of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (Example No. 1). [9, p. 626]

[1] Pyotr Tchaikovsky's letter to Nadezhda von Meck from March 5/17, 1878.

Example No. 1 Dmitry Shostakovich. Fifteenth Symphony. Finale, mm. 13–21



The enigmatic quality of the symphony can also be seen in the striking simultaneous presence of several contrasting styles in the musical material, which, according to Meyer, even hindered it from joining the world concert repertoire, notwithstanding all of its magnetic power of impact on listeners. [8, pp. 430–431] Hakobian considers this symphony to be one of Shostakovich's auto-epitaphs. [9, p. 615] Having generalized an entire set of its hermeneutic explanations, he provided his own interpretation of its conception as an authorial confession: "…the symphony's dramaturgical linchpin — 'from Rossini to Wagner' — may be interpreted as a metaphor for the composer's path from the scherzo-type youthful works, through all sorts dramatic vicissitudes, stylistic shifts and crises, ascents and falls, towards the complex psychological expressivity of his final years." [Ibid., p. 630]

In all likelihood, the least amount of doubts and controversial estimations is caused by the second, slow movement of the symphony. Its funereal, mournful character carries a reference to the most tragic pages of Shostakovich's music. In this sense, it may be considered to present the conclusion of a whole line of the composer's instrumental utterances about

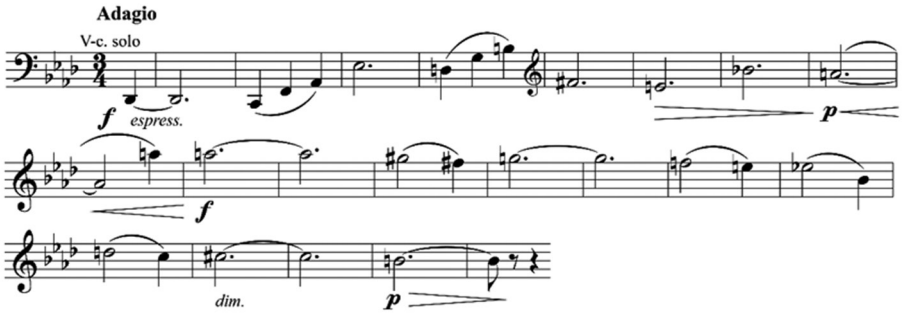
death, his attitude, and his experiencing the very fact of its existence.[2] Although no direct musical quotations have been discovered in this movement, nonetheless, it seems that it contains certain allusions bringing us beyond the limits of Shostakovich's music. They are not as apparent as the theme from Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* or the leitmotif of fate from Wagner's tetralogy, indicating the beginning and the conclusion of life. The *Adagio* movement does not have any quotations recognizable upon first hearing at all. The antithesis of life and death, comprising the basis of its narrative, is realized based on an "inner" authorial material, without any references to any sound symbols familiar to everybody. But associations still arise, nonetheless. They shall be the subject of our discussion, while we focus our attention on orchestral technique as a means of expression that is special for Shostakovich.

Orchestral Writing

The slow movement of the Fifteenth Symphony is written in a quasi-rondo form, interpreted by Shostakovich in an absolutely non-standard way. It is possible to speak of the recapitulative repetition only in the most general terms; it rather comprises a nominal basis of the structure, its outer contour. The composition itself is comprised of several sections, in which the contrasting musical material becomes juxtaposed with each other. It becomes more appropriate to label these sections as comebacks, since in both cases, vocal preimages can be divined in the thematicism — chorales, declamations, and plangent cantilenas. But most important, as it seems to us, is that virtually the entire movement is built on the juxtaposition of the instruments playing the solo passages and the "pure," homogenous full ensemble sound of the orchestral groups — the brass and the strings, which, in principle, demonstrates one of the most recognizable qualities of Shostakovich's orchestration. As a result, three episodes appear, reminding of three opera scenes in which the instrumental timbres play the roles of peculiar protagonists. The movement begins with alternations between a powerful and austere chorale in the brass instruments and the expressive monologue of the solo cello. The monologue presents one of the dodecaphonic themes of Shostakovich, who paid his due to this technique in his late works. The melody spans the range of almost three octaves, albeit during the time frame of 10 measures (Example No. 2). The brass chorus sounds three times, and the cello

Example No. 2

Dmitry Shostakovich. Fifteenth Symphony. Second movement, mm. 17–38



[2] The theme "Shostakovich and death" is examined in detail in an article by Marina Grigoryevna Raku and interpreted as a crucial factor in the composer's creative biography, [10] while its interpretation in connection with the concepts of memory, nostalgia, and melancholy is discussed in Ivana Petković Lozo's article on the vocal cycle *Seven Romances on Verses by Alexander Blok*. [11]

solo answers it, endowing the thematic statement of a semblance of a certain funereal ritual.

The second section is likewise built on an allusion on funereal music, but at this time resembling a solemn funeral setting. Against the background of the pizzicatos in the low strings counting off the steps, there is an alteration of hesitant phrases of the duo of flutes and the elevated "speech" of the trombone, evoking almost visual associations with an orator who pompously pontificates from his tribune, addressing the crowd (Example No. 3).

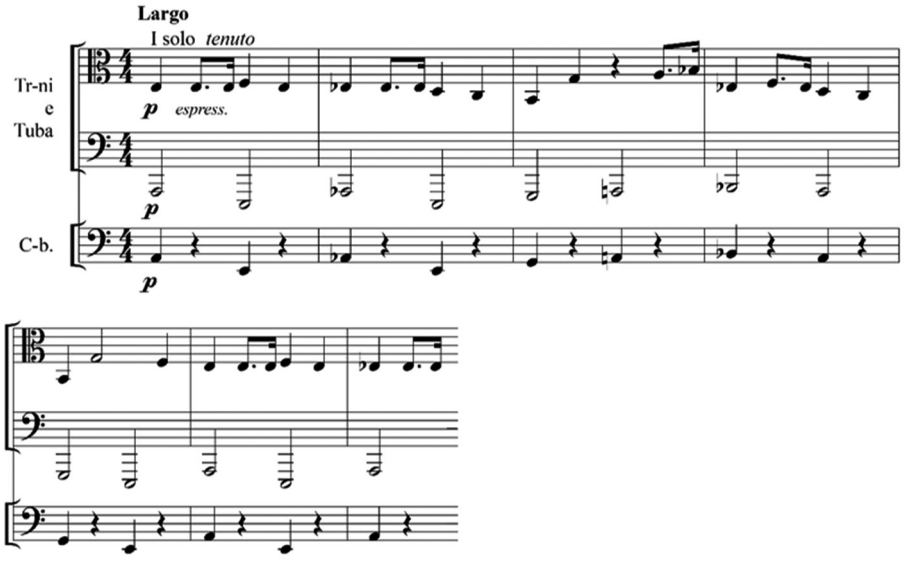
Therefore, in both sections of the form, dialogic qualities are clearly perceived. Being purposefully realized, this technique erodes the boundaries of customary instrumental composition. The associations appearing with dramatic action may be interpreted not only as a certain general analogy, but also as more concrete parallels with opera — the genre in which dialogic qualities have diverse manifestations. In the second movement, such associations appear with opera scenes, in which the images of inner, impersonal power and a personal, individual feeling come into collision. The closest parallel, virtually lying on the surface, is the scene of Orpheus with the furies from Act II of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762). There can hardly be found a musician who does not know this scene. It is fairly considered to be one of the most effective in the history of opera and, at the same time, one of the most innovative. The radical qualities of the opera experiment carried out by the composer in the genre of *azione teatrale* was in many ways stipulated particularly by it (Example No. 4). [12, p. 61]

Not only in the operatic, but also in musical forms, in general, two contrasting musical-thematic spheres are shown in interaction for the first time: the furies' retorts gradually lose their offensive onset, while Orpheus' utterances, on the contrary, acquire a greater amount of expression. In other words, the development of the musical themes on stage realizes the principles of sonata form logic.

It has been known for a long time that the scene of Orpheus and the furies has served or may have served as an example for a number of instrumental works. The most well-known example of them is the slow movement, *Andante con moto,* of Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 (1806). Larisa Valentinovna Kirillina in her monograph devoted to Beethoven's life and music highlighted very

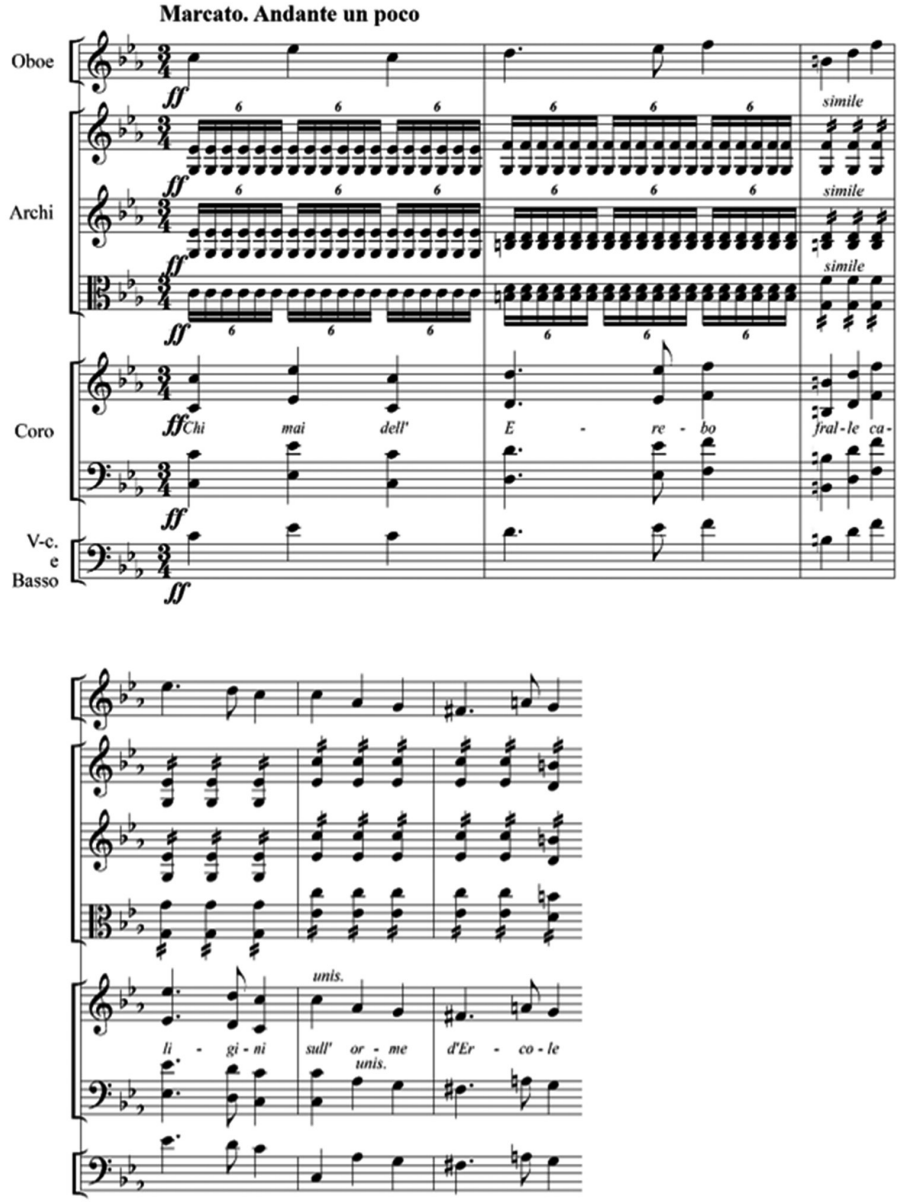
Example No. 3

Dmitry Shostakovich. Fifteenth Symphony.
Second movement, mm. 163–169



Example No. 4

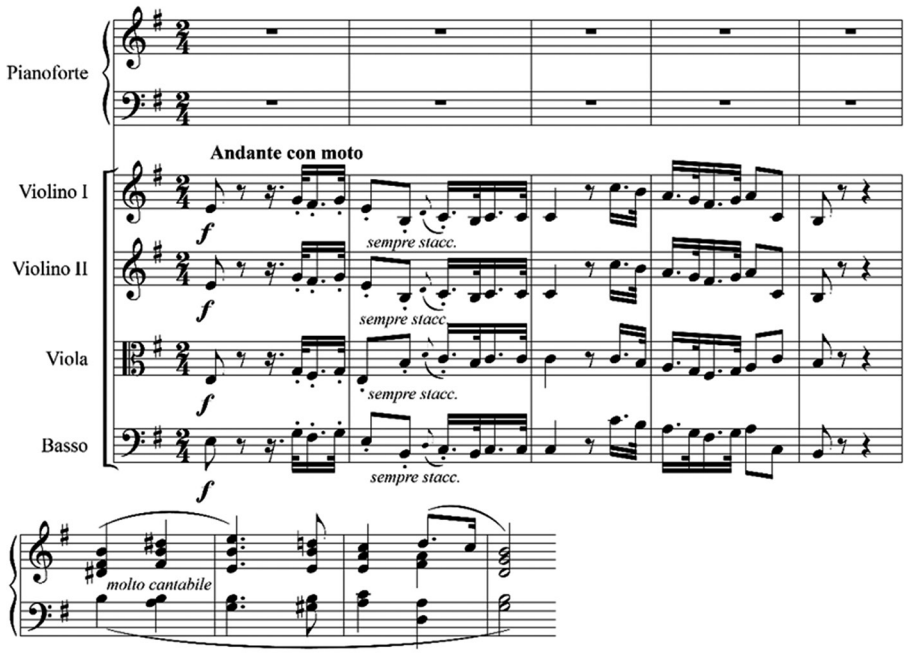
Christoph Willibald Gluck. *Orfeo ed Euridice*.
Act II. Chorus of the Furies, mm. 24–29



precisely the compositional ingenuity of this movement, having observed that its form cannot be defined otherwise than an operatic scene consisting of a set of recitatives and arioso sections. [13, p. 451] The resemblance to *Orfeo ed Euridice* had been noticed back in the 19th century — Kirillina's book provides references to an entire set of sources of such an interpretation.[3] Indeed, in the through compositional structure of the *Andante,* the commanding unisons in the string instruments are juxtaposed to the sensitive arioso answers in the piano reminding of the antecedent by Gluck (Example No. 5).

[3] In particular, the examination of this parallel has been the topic of a special article by Owen Gender, which subsequently became a part of his monograph, wherein the plotline about Orpheus is spread throughout all the three movements of the concerto. [14]

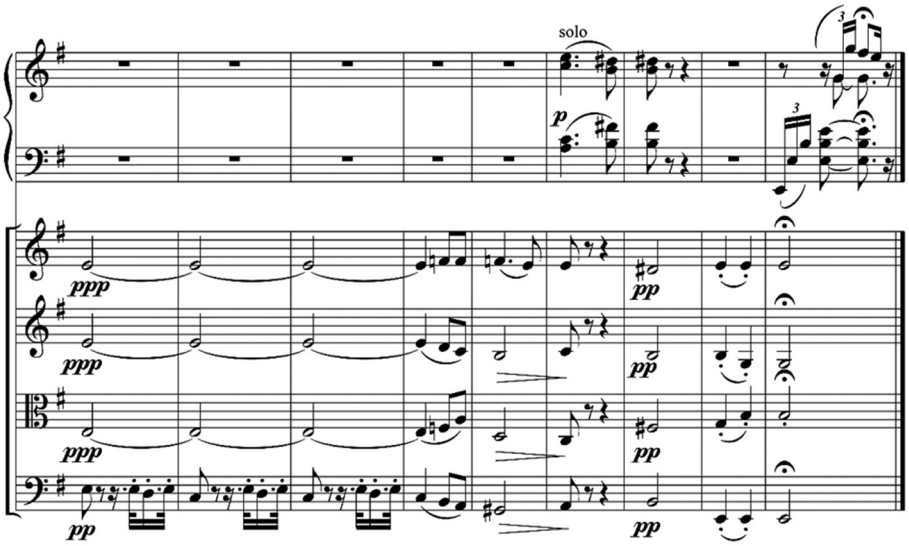
Example No. 5 Ludwig van Beethoven. Piano Concerto No. 4. Second movement, mm. 1–9



The solos in the piano part become more and more elaborated, while the unisons of the string instruments become shorter and quieter, until they are transformed into barely audible reverberations (Example No. 6).

Kirillina also names other possible and even more probable instrumental antecedents of the second movement from Beethoven's concert. They are: Carl Philipp Emmanuel Bach's Concerto in *c minor*, Wq 31 (1753), the slow movement of which also reminds of an alternation of arioso and recitative sections in an opera scene, and Haydn's Cello Concerto in *D major*. [13, p. 452] However, it must be

Example No. 6 Ludwig van Beethoven. Piano Concerto No. 4. Second movement, mm. 64–72



reminded that the fundamental direction of Beethoven's narrative in the *Andante* movement of the Piano Concerto No. 4 is especially close in the logic of its elaboration to what Gluck proposed, although in particular parts of the musical form, there are differences.

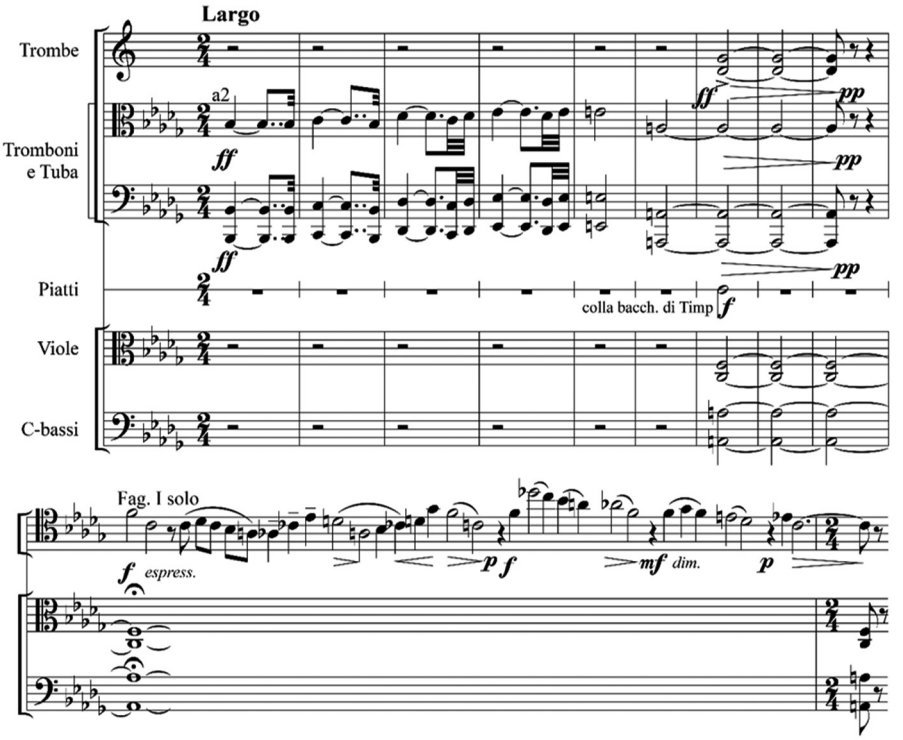
Georgy Petrovich Dmitriev, stemming from his analysis of the slow movement of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4, examines in his book an entire set of later works where the principle of such dialogic qualities is realized. The slow fourth movement of Shostakovich's Ninth Symphony, [15, pp. 20–30] brief in its duration, also appeared among their number. In the latter, the influence of the example from Gluck is also perceived: the powerful unisons played by three trombones are contrasted to the heartfelt monologue of a bassoon — a freely elaborated unmetered instrumental declamation (Example No. 7).

It seems that this movement, in which there are only two pages of the score, may be considered to be a sketch of the *Adagio* from the Fifteenth Symphony. Thus, the *Adagio* movement of Shostakovich's final symphony fits quite well into the category of slow movements of orchestral compositions genetically connected with the idea of juxtaposition of the impersonal and the personal, as expressed by Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*. They all possess non-standard forms, and in each case, their forms are crystalized first of all by means of contrast of timbres.

In the *Adagio* movement of his Fifteenth Symphony, Shostakovich not only juxtaposes contrasting spheres, but also, similarly to Gluck, Beethoven, and later Béla Bartók in his Piano Concerto No. 2, shows their interaction and mutual influence. In the unfolding of this plotline, the leading role is played, once again, by the orchestral means. During the first section, the chorale played by the brass instruments gradually loses its energy and softens, almost literally repeating the collision in the scene

Example No. 7

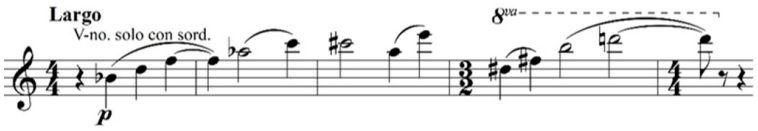
Dmitry Shostakovich. Ninth Symphony. Fourth movement, mm. 1–11



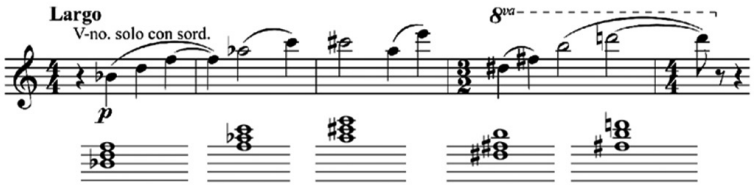
of Orpheus and the furies. The cello solo also undergoes a transformation. In conclusion of the initial section, the cello passes the cantilena melody on to the violin, which soars into the high register up to the *D* of the fourth octave. The twelve-tone theme in the cello part is replaced by yet another twelve-tone phrase. However, unlike the flexuous expressive cello solo, the melody in the violin part is comprised of motives distributed along the pitches of triads: *B-flat – f – A – B – b* (Example No. 8).

Such a consonant "twelve-tone row" induces us to remember another theme, which also sounds in the solo violin part, also in ascending motion, and also in a high register — the theme of Alban Berg's Violin Concerto (1935). The coincidence can hardly be considered accidental. As it is known, Shostakovich was personally acquainted with Berg, whose *Wozzeck* made strong impression on him. It is hardly likely that he would have bypassed the famous Violin Concerto, dedicated to the memory of Manon Gropius, the daughter of Alma Mahler who died young. The concerto bore a dedication "In Memory of an Angel," so the initial phrase soaring upwards may have also had a symbolic meaning. The similarity of Shostakovich's and Berg's melodies, as it seems to us, is quite perceptible, moreover, the violin timbre becomes their common denominator. Of course, this allusion is not in the least as recognizable as the quotations from the music of Rossini and Wagner. But the tragic directedness of Berg's Concerto clearly corresponds with the mood of Shostakovich's *Adagio* (Examples No. 9a, 9b).

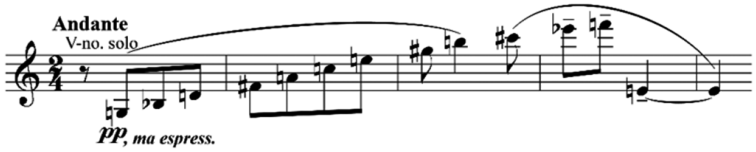
Example No. 8 Dmitry Shostakovich. Fifteenth Symphony. Second movement, mm. 174–178



Example No. 9a Dmitry Shostakovich. Fifteenth Symphony. Second movement. Violin solo



Example No. 9b Alban Berg. Violin Concerto. Solo violin, mm. 15–18

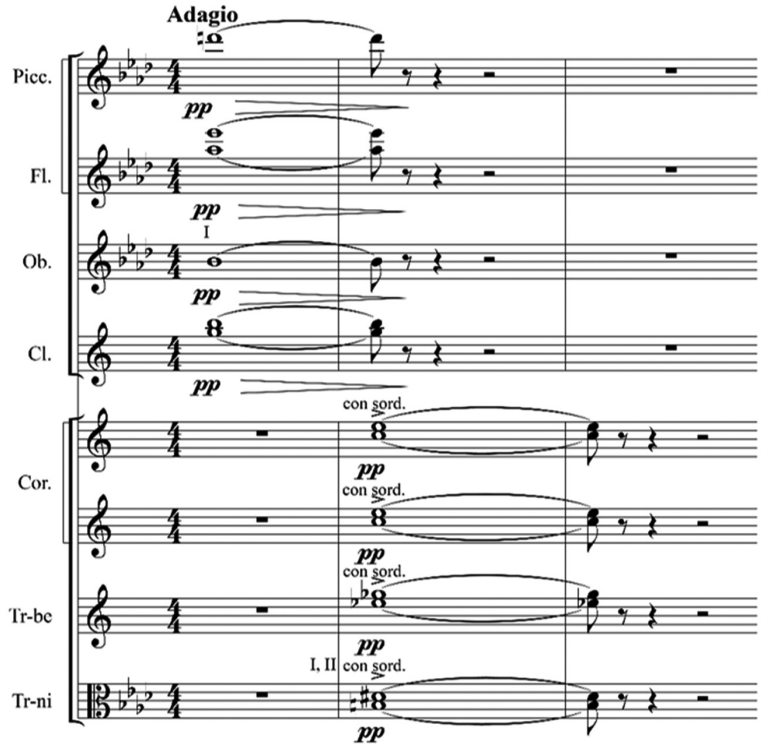


The theme in the violin in the second movement of the symphony is heard twice: in the end of the first section and before the incursion of the destructive, catastrophically sounding *tutti*. Both times, its motion is intersected by two cluster chords. The latter are orchestrated with the entire vertical sonority of the wind instruments — from trombones to a piccolo (Example No. 10). The chords appear four times in the composition, each time exactly on the same pitches and with the same orchestration.

Meyer asked himself the question: "What must be the meaning of the remarkable six-pitch chords, altogether forming a twelve-tone sonority and appearing in the most unexpected places in the score?" [8, p. 431] The fact that the chords are "remarkable" does not evoke any doubt; their phonic qualities sharply contrast with the rest of the thematicism of this movement. But as for them occurring in chance places, we could hardly agree with Meyer here. The chords, labeled by Yuri Semyonovich Korev as "chords of torpor," [16, p. 13] mark all the boundaries of the composition and choreograph the current of the musical events. So it also occurs when they appear in the score for the final, fourth time, opening up the conclusive recapitulative section, which is strikingly different from the exposition.

The chorale opening up the *Adagio* movement sounds this time at a *pp* in the strings *con sordino,* all the parts playing *divisi*, without any blends of timbres of other instruments. It sounds elevated, but at the same time, almost in an incorporeal, otherworldly manner. Instead of an expected responding phrase of the cello, a totally different timbre appears — the cold sound of the celesta. Moreover, the theme provided to the cello in the exposition is stated in inversion, in a downward motion from a high register, opposite to the soaring theme that

Example No. 10 Dmitry Shostakovich. Fifteenth Symphony. Second movement, mm. 116–118



earlier had aroused such poignant associations. The celesta is replaced by an equally intrepid vibraphone timbre. In this outcome, there is no trace of the narrative of Gluck's opera with its victory of light over darkness. In Shostakovich's work, the darkness loses its force, but the light also fades.

Conclusion

In conclusion to our discussion of the *Adagio* movement from Shostakovich's Fifteenth Symphony, it must be emphasized, once again, that the techniques of construction of the musical form here, just as in a number of Shostakovich's other instrumental compositions, remind us of the principles of dramatic development in opera. It is as if, time and again, the composer finishes telling and finishes writing what was interrupted by outward events in 1936, when his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk Dictrict* was attacked in the sadly remembered article published in the newspaper *Pravda*. In the slow movement of Shostakovich's orchestral work, the symphony discloses itself as an opera. It derives from the latter not only the dialogic qualities, but also the freedom of unfolding that modifies the customary contours of instrumental forms. In this process, orchestral writing in Shostakovich's music plays almost the decisive role, which proves its primary significance among the incorporated means of musical composition.

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Received / Поступила в редакцию: 13.01.2026
Revised / Одобрена после рецензирования: 02.03.2026
Accepted / Принята к публикации: 04.03.2026