

Kiril Petrovich Kondrashin was internationally the best-known conductor of the Soviet Union and also the most prominent one to emigrate from that country. He was known for vigorous and solid performances of a wide repertory, particularly the Russian masters.

He was brought up with music, as his family included several orchestral musicians. He took piano lessons, and the family got him lessons in musical theory at the Musical Teknikum with Nikolai Zhilyayev, who had a strong influence on him. While still a student, he made his conducting debut in 1931 at the Children's Theater. He entered the Moscow Conservatory in 1934, where he studied conducting with Boris Khaikin. He graduated in 1936, but by then had obtained a job as assistant conductor at the Nemirovich-Danchenko Music Theater in 1934, debuting with the operetta *Les cloches de Corneville* by Planquette.

In 1936 he was conductor at the Maly Opera Theater in Leningrad, retaining that post until 1943. Along with other artists who were deemed important to the war effort, he was evacuated from besieged Leningrad after the German invasion of Russia. In 1943, he became a member of the conducting staff of the Moscow Bolshoi Theater, which was also in a wartime home outside the capital. He remained with the Bolshoi until 1956, making marked improvement in his interpretation.

Meanwhile, a demand was building for him as a concert conductor. He received Stalin Prizes in 1948 and 1949. When he left the Bolshoi, it was with the intention of centering his career on the podium rather than in the pit. His fame grew greatly in 1958, when he led the orchestra in the prizewinning appearances of American pianist Van Cliburn at the Tchaikovsky International Competition. Cliburn charmed both his home country and his Russian hosts, and the resulting LP record of the Tchaikovsky First Piano Concerto, conducted by Kondrashin, was a long-time best seller. This led to his American and British debuts, making Kondrashin the first Soviet conductor to appear in the U.S.

In 1960 he was named artistic director of the Moscow Philharmonic, and as such participated in another piano concerto blockbuster recording with a U.S. piano star, the great Prokofiev Third Concerto recording for Mercury with Byron Janis, still considered by many the greatest interpretation of that brilliant work on disc. Kondrashin's performances were bright and dramatic, tending to programmatic interpretations that commentators saw as the legacy of his theater career. He was the U.S.S.R.'s finest interpreter of Mahler, leading all the symphonies with unusual restraint and with the expressive and dramatic qualities of the music seemingly enhanced by understatement.

He left the Moscow Philharmonic in 1975, turning to guest conducting. As a result of high demand outside the U.S.S.R., he decided to emigrate in 1978. He was named permanent conductor of the Amsterdam Concertgebouw in 1979, and immediately began making a notable series of recordings with them, but died in that city only two years later.



Shostakovich Symphony No. 4

Kiril Kondrashin Moscow Philharmonic



Shostakovich began composing his Symphony No. 4 in September 1935 and put it aside in January 1936 while he went on tour with his cello sonata. On January 28, he read the unsigned editorial on the front page of Pravda condemning him and two of his works and predicting he would come to a wrong end if he didn't change his tune. He finished the Fourth in May 1936, but withdrew the work while it was still in rehearsal. The piece was premiered by Kiril Kondrashin in the U.S.S.R. in 1961 and in the West in 1962. Although Shostakovich had enough sense to withdraw the Fourth, he also had enough guts to finish it as he started it: as a fusion of his own archly ironic modernism with the deep emotionalism and vast scale of the Mahlerian Romantic symphony. The result is a huge work for an enormous orchestra in three movements, lasting more than an hour in performance. The opening movement is a nearly half-hour Allegretto Poco moderato profligate in themes, bracing in orchestration, unfathomable in form, and unrelentingly violent in expression. With

an opening theme clearly based on the opening theme of Mahler's Symphony No. 6, Shostakovich's Fourth goes its own way toward savage brutality and more savage irony. Through volcanic eruptions and tectonic disruptions, the Allegretto pushes and punches its way to a grinding conclusion. The central movement is a relatively brief Moderato con moto that slithers and sneaks through a blasted landscape, trailing themes from the Scherzo of Mahler's Second over ominous percussion rattling. The closing movement is as large as the opening movement but set in several contiguous sections: an opening funeral march Largo à la Mahler, a fast and tough Allegro with a two-note ostinato, a sarcastically sentimental Viennese Waltz, a grandiloquent peroration for the whole massive orchestra, and a quietly ticking coda haunted by trumpet calls and a ghostly celesta.

Shostakovich Symphony No. 4

Kiril Kondrashin Moscow Philharmonic

- 1 Allegretto poco moderato 25:42**
- 2 Moderato con moto 8:22**
- 3 Largo - Allegro 25:57**

Recorded by Meloydiya 1962



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