



D • S • C • H JOURNAL

July 2019 • N° 51



DEDICATED TO THE LIFE AND
WORK OF DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Honorary President - Vladimir Ashkenazy



New Babylon in Reality

Opus 17: the solo piano score

By Alan Mercer

The *DSCH Journal* recently interviewed pianist Sasha Grynyuk on performing the complete score for piano to the silent film *New Babylon* from 1929, directed by Grigori Kozintsev & Leonid Trauberg and restored by Marek Pytel (produced by Marek Pytel and Jane Elliott¹). Grynyuk premiered the work in March 2017 at London's LSO St. Luke's (in association with the Barbican).

Born in Kiev, Ukraine, Sasha Grynyuk studied at the National Music Academy of Ukraine and later at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. He is a winner of many international competitions and regularly performs recitals, as a chamber musician and as a soloist with orchestras around the world, such as Royal Philharmonic, Orquestra Sinfônica Brasileira, Bergen Symphony, Kyiv State Philharmonic. Sasha is an Artist at the Keyboard Trust, one of the key participants in the project.

In the summer of 2019 Sasha Grynyuk will again perform the piano version of Shostakovich's monumental score to the film *New Babylon*, at the fourth Rosendal Chamber Music Festival (8–11 August) in Norway.

DSCH Journal: When did you first hear about this project?

Sasha Grynyuk: I think it was around 2015 when the Keyboard Trust asked me to come and meet Marek and Jane. I had never come across such a project before and this seemed to be something very fascinating and fresh to get involved in. Given the amount of work that was needed to study and play the piece I had to wait until there was confirmation of a performance, which came in 2017 at the Barbican.

DSCH: Did you already know the film before you started to work on the piano score?

SG: No, not at all. To be honest I knew early films such as *Potemkin*, but I knew nothing at all about this film. It was truly an unknown entity! I had no idea about the music either, which was partly why I agreed to the project in the first place. I felt it would be interesting for me to work with a director and to understand and experience how this score might have worked out at that time, in the 1920s, a piano solo playing along with a full-length silent film.

DSCH: What came first then—viewing the film or listening to existing orchestral versions of the score?

SG: First I went to Marek's studio and I watched the film along with the orchestral version that Marek

had prepared to accompany the full cut of the film. At the same time I followed the piano score, comparing it to the orchestral version in order to ascertain differences and similarities. So the three components were: the film and its visuals, an orchestral recording and the piano score. I had to have several run throughs—it was simply impossible to take in everything in one pass. And slowly I began to appreciate just how well the film and the score were constructed, how logically the ensemble works—the film, the music—everything has a meaning, everything has a structure. It was fascinating to see the different types of acting and the different types of on-screen detail. Hollywood is too hurried now compared to this kind of film. I gradually learned to enjoy the precision of every scene and appreciate the nuances that one would never find in contemporary film productions, especially in Hollywood.

DSCH: To what extent did the film's post-revolutionary context play a part in informing you or inspiring you?

SG: I was of course aware of the enormous suffering that took place during the Russian post-revolutionary period, from books and from my own family stories. The film provided an additional perspective that emanated from its creators who were



"Hoban Babylon"

opus. Mosmanobur

Lacmus 1st

Allegro moderato

1-1





Pianist Sasha Grynyuk

themselves directly affected by the terrible repercussions of such events. Crucially, the length of time spent working alongside the film provided a natural environment for my mind to wander and to dig deeper into the multitude of details involved in events of such a scale. These wanderings were in themselves an enriching reward for the time spent. After all, the film and story-telling of this kind pinpoint the conflicts and struggles that are present in our society and everyday lives—constantly, and not only in revolutionary times.

DSCH: At the same time, the 1920s was a time for experimentation in Russia, through Western influences as well as thanks to the driving forward of new forms and styles, both dramatically and musically?

SG: Yes, and good art is always on the edge—music, film and whatever the genre, all come together to try to push the boundaries. Even in works set in a historical context such as, in this case, the time of the Paris Commune, you can still feel this “edge” through the minds of masters.

DSCH: Were you able to relate to this notion of artistic inventiveness in approaching the score?

SG: I played both of Shostakovich’s

Piano Concertos which I think helped; the concerto for piano and trumpet is so sarcastic, almost like pop music. And I also know later Shostakovich which is more polyphonic. I guess at first I thought that he composed this music in a very rushed fashion, but the more I played it, the more I realised that this was avant-garde Shostakovich, completely avant-garde, a different type of thinking that the composer had to find in order to write this score.

DSCH: So after you met with Marek and viewed the film and read through the score—remind us of how many pages of piano writing?

SG: I have no idea, but it’s a large score, with no breaks—95 mins of continuous playing to a film that contains some 20 percent more footage than the 1929 censored version and projected at its correct speed of 24 frames per second. In a way this fact excites me as well—it’s something very much out of the ordinary. But for me this score absolutely needed to be played with the film, otherwise I simply wouldn’t be able to relate to the music—it might have possibly been of no interest. This “immersion” process revealed so many aspects of the film—there are political as well as musical nuances, some of which Marek explained to me and

some of which I found myself. And the more I delved into the score the more I understood, and these nuances became part of me in fact. So now I feel that I really can relate to the work, and that my view of the world has been enriched by this experience—it’s added to my experience of life around me.

DSCH: Do you intend to perform this work as part of your standard repertoire?

SG: Well I certainly would like to perform the work as much as possible; after the Barbican in London, it will be now performed in Rosendal, Norway, and this will not be the last performance for sure! Now that I know the piece better, I can enjoy it more and I feel at ease playing the work to a greater extent. There are of course challenges, like synchronising the score with the on-screen action, and before I first played the work live this seemed like something that would be very hard to achieve. But once learned, you feel “at home”; you know instinctively how the performance will work out on stage.

DSCH: Do you prepare the performance by running through the entire score, or is it a segmented approach, taking single sections or acts from the film?





Marek Pytel and Sasha Grynyuk on stage at LSO St Luke's 27 March 2017

SG: Before the 2017 premiere I played though the entire score only twice, otherwise I took separate extracts from the film to rehearse to, taking the opportunity to discuss the fine details with Marek, where needed. It was really an enjoyable experience!

DSCH: What are the main challenges for the performer?

SG: Well as a pianist, as a musician, someone who has to do the job live on stage, the biggest challenge is to stay with the narrative of the film. This has to be planned carefully, because for example if something happens 40 minutes 11 seconds, something really important, I simply cannot allow it to sound at 40 minutes 7 seconds, as the impression will be that the music is suddenly is out of context. And so the whole concept of planning in this work is that everything has to lead to something. I have specific milestones, marks, moments where I have to hit the time exactly, for example for explosions

and the emotional points; here we are talking an accuracy of tenths of seconds. But at the same time I cannot simply wait for the moment to come—the music and the on-screen action would be out of sync. These are the challenges, as an instrumentalist. In terms of the music itself, it's a difficult score, sometimes you don't even know if you're playing the right note, it is this kind of writing—he uses clusters. To sit and practice this type of music in sync is really tough! Just recently I went on tour and played only Beethoven sonatas, and this felt to me like total silence! I'd never previously perceived Beethoven's music as silent! Heifetz said that contemporary composers were good for us because then we might realise what a wonderful composer Beethoven was! He was joking, of course. In any case I never perceived Beethoven this way; however, after practising *New Babylon* for a few hours a day, to come back to playing Beethoven was like going to paradise. This was truly the effect!

DSCH: Did you carry out much research about the piece?

SG: I certainly didn't do research in the way Marek did; but I had an opportunity to understand and explore the piece by performing it. So the more I play this music, the more I understand the film and the score and with time I have more things to say than I did at the start of the project. The time frame in which Shostakovich was expected to complete the music was so very tight—incredibly so—I think there was some form of madness at play. The composer probably almost went insane after completing such a huge project in such a short time! I had to learn the piece in a month or so and I know I almost went insane!

DSCH: Well, good luck with future performances of *New Babylon* in this remarkable original version; and thank you from the Shostakovich fraternity for the work and dedication you've shown in bringing the film to life, as it were, 90 years on.

Notes:

1 See <http://newbabylon.co.uk/>

