

YEVGENY MRAVINSKY

David C F Wright

Yevgeny Aleksandrovich Mravinsky is arguably the finest Russian conductor of all time. He was born on 4 May 1903 and died in Leningrad on 19 January 1988, aged 84.

Mravinsky was born in Saint Petersburg. His aunt was the soprano Yevgeniya Mravina. His father died in 1918, and in that same year, he began to work backstage at the Mariinsky Theatre.

He first studied biology at the University in Leningrad, before going to the Leningrad Conservatory to study music. He served as a ballet répétiteur from 1923 to 1931. His first public conducting appearance was in 1929. Throughout the 1930s, he conducted at the Kirov Ballet and Bolshoi Opera. In September 1938, he won the All-Union Conductors Competition in Moscow.

In October 1938, Mravinsky took up the post that he was to hold until 1988, which was the principal conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra, with whom he had made his debut as a conductor in 1931. Under Mravinsky, the Leningrad Philharmonic gained a legendary reputation mainly due to the expertise of Mravinsky, particularly in Russian music such as Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich. During World War II, Mravinsky and the orchestra were evacuated to Siberia. But members of the Leningrad Philharmonic's reserve orchestra and the Leningrad Radio Orchestra were left behind in the siege of Leningrad, so it fell to Karl Eliasberg to conduct the surviving musicians in the Leningrad premiere of the Symphony No. 7 "Leningrad" by Shostakovich.

Legend has it that at the first performance of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5, during the applause immediately after the performance, Mravinsky took the score in his hand and waved it above his head. Mravinsky gave world premieres of six symphonies by Shostakovich: numbers 5, 6, 8 (which Shostakovich dedicated to Mravinsky), 9, 10 and finally 12 in 1961. His refusal to conduct the premiere of Shostakovich's 13th Symphony in 1962 caused a permanent rupture in their friendship. It is a vocal symphony and the texts used did not have the approval of the Russian authorities and the texts were said to be anti Semitic and did not take into account the previous sufferings of the Russian people.

He premiered Sergei Prokofiev's excellent Symphony no 6 in E flat minor in Leningrad the year of its composition, 1947, a very difficult work to mount but no music presented any problem to Mravinsky. He was a complete musician and not limited in any way. There are many well revered conductors who are very limited in their abilities.

Mravinsky made commercial studio recordings from 1938 to 1961. His issued recordings from after 1961 were taken from live concerts. His final recording was from an April 1984 live performance of Shostakovich's magnificent Symphony No. 12.

Mravinsky first went on tour abroad in 1946, including performances in Finland and in Czechoslovakia at the Prague Spring Festival. Later tours with the orchestra included a June 1956 itinerary to West Germany, East Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Their only tour of Great Britain was in September 1960 to the Edinburgh Festival and the Royal Festival Hall, London. Their first tour to Japan was in May 1973. Their last foreign tour was in 1984, to West Germany.

His last concert was on 6 March 1987 performing Schubert, Symphony No. 8, and Brahms, Symphony No. 4. Mravinsky died in Leningrad in 1988, aged 84.

Recordings reveal Mravinsky to have an extraordinary technical control over the orchestra, especially over dynamics. He was also a very exciting conductor, sometimes changing tempo in order to heighten the musical effect for which he was striving, often making prominent use of brass instrumentation.

Surviving videos show that Mravinsky had a sober appearance at the podium, making simple but very clear gestures, often without a baton. He was not a showman or a show off. The critic David Fanning has memorably described some of Mravinsky's Tchaikovsky performances:

“The Leningrad Philharmonic play like a wild stallion, only just held in check by the willpower of its master. Every smallest movement is placed with fierce pride; at any moment it may break into such a frenzied gallop that you hardly know whether to feel exhilarated or terrified “.

In a 1970s interview on Leningrad Television, when asked how he chose a particular interpretation of the music he conducted, Mravinsky explained that he tried to understand what the composer's intention was by immersing himself in the “atmosphere” of the music (he used the term “atmospherization”).

He was a very decent and moral man. He was not a martinet or pompous. He was a true servant of music and not self-promoting.

I could write much about his recordings and compare them with other performances which I have done privately. All I can say is that his performances are superlative and most other performances pale into comparative insignificance besides his.

(801)

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