

## CHAPTER 5

### THE ALTO FLUTE

#### 5.1 Introduction

Like the piccolo, the alto flute has benefited from 20th-century composers' interest in tone colour, and its solo and chamber literature is growing. Equally significant is the alto flute's growing role in the symphony orchestra. Perhaps the first such use was in Rimsky-Korsakov's 1890 opera-ballet *Mlada*. Better known examples of the standard repertoire, which have been influential in promoting the alto flute's potential, are Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1911-1913), Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloë* (1909-1912), and Holst's *The Planets* (1916). It is interesting that in the early part of this century, when this repertoire first began appearing on concert programmes, even the leading orchestral flautists did not possess the necessary instruments. (Toff 1985:74.) In the light of the alto flute's growing popularity the minimal use of the alto flute in Shostakovich's symphonies is surprising.

The author of this dissertation speculates that perhaps the unavailability of the instrument in Russia is the reason Shostakovich only uses the alto flute in the second movement of Symphony No. 7 (1941). Sadly, however, this is the only movement in all fifteen symphonies that the alto flute makes a very brief appearance.

#### 5.2 Shostakovich's use of the alto flute

The marginalized use of the alto flute in Symphony No. 7 led the author to examine the events surrounding the symphony. According to Wilson (1994:148-149) Shostakovich started writing Symphony No. 7 in Leningrad, during the time that Hitler's troops were invading the Soviet Union in June 1941 and heading towards Leningrad. The massive first movement was written in less than six weeks, the next two movements in under three weeks. Shostakovich was evacuated from Leningrad with his family on 1 October to be relocated in the city of Kuibyshev after a nightmarish journey by train. Symphony No. 7 was completed on 27 December 1941 in Kuibyshev. The number of compositions Shostakovich wrote during his year and a half in exile bears witness to his ability to continue working under dire circumstances. Besides completing

Symphony No. 7, he wrote forty-five minutes of music for his unfinished opera *The Gamblers* (based on Gogol's play), composed the *Six Romances on Verses by English Poets* Op. 62 and started his *Second Piano Sonata* Op. 61.

The following two examples cover the complete use of the alto flute. The alto flute, allocated to the second flautist, is introduced in the second movement of Symphony No. 7 (Ex. 5-1) as part of an accompaniment figure with two flutes and the harp. The alto flute plays the lowest note in a series of *staccato* chords as harmonic background to the bass clarinet solo beginning in m. 251. This is also a perfect example where the player can decide to use double or triple tonguing to articulate the demi-semi-quaver and quaver *ostinato*-like *staccato* figure. Given the soft "wispy" quality of the lower range of the flute and the "sluggish" articulation capabilities of the alto flute, the challenge lies with the players to present a homogeneous harmonic background to the deep voice of the bass clarinet as soloist. An extraordinary combination of timbres and registers are represented in this passage of 30 bars. *Pizzicato* violas between mm. 263-264, 267-269 and 274-279 briefly reinforce the scant harp accompaniment.

Example 5-1: Symphony No. 7, second movement, mm. 246-281

$\text{♩} = 96$

poco riten. 97 I. III.<sup>a</sup> tempo

Fl.  
Fl. alto

Arpe

V-nl I  
V-c.  
C-b.

246

I. III

Fl. alto

Cl. b.

Arpe

solo  
*p* *espress.*

251

I. III

Fl.  
Fl. alto

Cl. b.

Arpe

254

I. III

Fl.  
Fl. alto

Cl. b.

Arpe

257

FL. I  
III

FL. alto

Cl. b.

Arpe

260

FL. I, III 98

FL. alto

Cl. b.

Arpe

V-le con sord. div. pizz. p

262

FL. I

FL. alto

Cl. b.

Arpe

V-le

264

FL. I

FL. alto

Cl. b.

V-le

267 [p]

This musical score is divided into four systems, each featuring four staves: Flute (Fl.), Flute Alto (Fl. alto), Clarinet Bass (Cl. b.), and Violoncello (V-le). The score is written in a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 3/4 time signature.

- System 1 (Measures 268-270):** The Flute parts play a rapid sixteenth-note pattern. The Clarinet Bass part has a melodic line with slurs. The Arpeggiator part has a few chords, with a *[P]* dynamic marking. The Violoncello part has a few notes, with a measure number of 268.
- System 2 (Measures 271-273):** The Flute parts continue with the sixteenth-note pattern. The Clarinet Bass part has a melodic line with slurs. The Arpeggiator part has a few chords. The Violoncello part has a few notes, with a measure number of 271.
- System 3 (Measures 274-277):** The Flute parts continue with the sixteenth-note pattern. The Clarinet Bass part has a melodic line with slurs. The Arpeggiator part has a few chords. The Violoncello part has a melodic line with slurs, marked *div. in 3* and *[P]*, with a measure number of 274.
- System 4 (Measures 278-280):** The Flute parts continue with the sixteenth-note pattern, marked *pp*. The Clarinet Bass part has a melodic line with slurs, marked *pp*. The Arpeggiator part has a few chords, marked *pp*. The Violoncello part has a melodic line with slurs, marked *pp*, with a measure number of 278. The system concludes with a *Fl. III muta in Piccolo* instruction and a *I solo mp* marking for the Clarinet Bass part.

*poco riten.* 100 *a tempo*

FL  
FL alto  
Cl.  
Cl. b.  
V-n I  
V-n II  
V-la  
V-c.  
C-b.

*p*  
*[p]*  
*dim.*  
*dim.*  
*con sord.*  
*con sord. arco*  
*arco unis.*  
*con sord. arco*  
*con sord. arco*

*pp*  
*pp*  
*pp*  
*pp*  
*pp*  
*pp*  
*pp*  
*pp*

*div. in 2*  
*v*

276

The alto flute's only solo (a meagre four bars) is scored in the same movement of the "Leningrad" symphony (Ex. 5-2). Shostakovich exploits the low register of the alto flute between mm. 302-305 at a *pianissimo* dynamic level to create a calm yet searching atmosphere for the closure of this movement. The alto flute's articulate repetitive ascending melody seems probing. The inclusion of the harp adds an eerie serenity to the accompaniment with sustained strings. A probable reason for Shostakovich's use of the alto flute instead of the flute in this instance is the continuity of tone and register. The only other substitute could have been the clarinet, but with the strong flute presence a few bars prior to the solo, it would not have been apt.

Example 5-2: Symphony No. 7, second movement, mm. 300-311

$\text{♩} = 96$

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 300 to 304. It includes parts for Fl. alto, Arpe, V. n. I, V. n. II, V. le, V. o., and C. b. The Fl. alto part starts at measure 103 and includes the instruction 'cresc. in f. II'. The V. n. I part has a '(H)' marking. The V. o. part has 'arco' markings. The C. b. part has 'arco' markings. The second system covers measures 304 to 309. It includes parts for Arpe and Archl. The Arpe part has 'riten.' markings and a '[pp]' dynamic marking. The Archl part has 'ppz' and 'arco' markings. The score ends at measure 309.



### 5.3 Conclusion

Shostakovich's use of the alto flute is limited and conservative, with no exceptional features. There are no significant solos. Its role in Symphony No. 7 is to extend the lower range of the flute section. In spite of its infrequent use the composer still pays the utmost attention to details such as timbre, texture and exposure in the alto flute's part in the score. There is no documented explanation for Shostakovich's exclusion of the alto flute in the symphonies.

It is regretful that the composer did not make more use of the alto flute in the symphonies.