

CHAPTER 10

THE BASSOON

10.1 Introduction

The gentle bass voice of the bassoons in the woodwind section is heard throughout the symphonies of Shostakovich with outstanding solos in nearly all of them. The role of the bassoon is particularly interesting as Shostakovich uses it in a variety of atmospheres in which it is often the key player.

The bassoons reinforce the bass line by doubling in unison and octave doubling the cellos and double basses. Occasionally the brass are added to the cello, double bass and bassoon bass lines. Furthermore the bassoons serve as the bass line to the woodwind ensemble, often strengthened by the bass clarinet and contrabassoon. It is also used as sole accompaniment to various instruments' solos. Perhaps its most fascinating role is the one of jester. Shostakovich uses the bassoon to lift and lighten the atmosphere in his most unexpected manner.

Shostakovich scored two bassoons in Symphonies No. 1-3, 5, 9 and 15. He used three bassoons, of which the third bassoon doubles with the contrabassoon, in Symphonies No. 6-8 and 10-13. Only Symphony No. 4 is written with three bassoons and a separate contrabassoon player.

10.2 Register

Shostakovich made full use of the whole range of the bassoon in the symphonies. A significant number of exposed solo passages for the bassoon are written in the upper middle register. The bulk of the material, however, is scored in the middle register. The second or third bassoon is often written an octave below the first bassoon and the low register is consistently used in *tutti* sections, with frequent use of the lowest note (B-flat).

The high register of the bassoon is cautiously approached during the first four symphonies, usually hidden between *tutti* writing. A shift in register preference from Symphony No. 5 is twofold: Shostakovich gains confidence in the bassoons' ability to play in their high register by scoring more solo material in that range; and the composer exposes the thin and harsh quality of their range. The tenor clef is seldom used in the earlier symphonies as Shostakovich often makes extensive use of ledger lines for the high register. The extreme high register is very seldom used in solos although frequently written in an ascending melodic line.

Shostakovich requires a heavy bass line in the following *tutti* passage from the third movement of Symphony No. 7, presented by the bass clarinet, the bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, tuba and double basses in octave doubling (Ex. 10-1). This is a typical example of the bassoons, and more specifically the second bassoon, in the low register reinforcing, in octave doubling, the low strings and brass instruments. The heavy brass in Symphony No. 7, the "Leningrad", together with the bassoons, contrabassoons and low strings, contributes to the strong military atmosphere of the symphony.

Schwartz (1983:191) reminds the reader that this work was conceived in the heat of battle. Shortly after he completed it Shostakovich released a statement about the Symphony No. 7: "My Seventh Symphony I began in besieged Leningrad. [...] I composed the second and third parts – a *Scherzo* and an *Adagio* – at a time when the dark clouds gathered over our country, and painful echo in our hearts. But the Soviet people knew that they were invincible ... The *Scherzo* and *Adagio* express the confidence in the near triumph of freedom, justice and happiness."



Fl. *ff* *cresc.* *ff* *a2*

Ob. *ff* *cresc.* *ff* *a2*

Cingl. *ff* *cresc.* *ff*

Cl. ploc. *ff* *cresc.* *ff*

Cl. *ff* *cresc.* *ff* *a2*

Cl. b. *ff* *cresc.* *ff*

Fag. *ff* *cresc.* *ff* *a2*

C-fag. *ff* *cresc.* *ff*

Cor. *f* *con sord. a2 soli* *f*

Tr-be *cresc.* *ff*

Tr-ni *cresc.* *ff*

Tuba *cresc.* *ff*

Cym. *f* *cresc.* *ff* *V. VI. VII. VIII.*

Archi *ff* *cresc.* *ff*

270 *ff* *cresc.* *ff*

Symphony No. 2 “To October” (1927) displays Shostakovich’s trend toward modernism: He is primarily interested in texture and a layering method used in Abstract Expressionism (MacDonald 1990:50). The symphony was composed on commission for the anniversary of the October revolution and includes a choir. At the end of the symphony Shostakovich introduced the sound of factory hooters tuned to a certain key, or played by the trombones. The symphony received a cool reception from the critics, and the composer had no more commissions until 1929. (MacDonald 1990:51.) Nikolai Zhilyaev, as a RAPM musicologist (Russian Association for Proletarian Music who urged Shostakovich to compose music for the working man, deriding Tchaikovsky as a bourgeois individualist), wrote that “the musical language [of Symphony No. 2] seemed to be artificially complex, and the composer made no concessions to the tastes and the habits of the ‘proletarian listener’” (MacDonald 1998:4). The author of this thesis agrees with MacDonald that the symphony is not very accessible, even for the trained ear, and even more so in the wake of his Symphony No. 1.

During the instrumental first half of the symphony Shostakovich combines the clarinet, bassoon and solo violin in a technically challenging, melodically unrelated trio (Ex. 10-2). This is an example of the bassoon’s full range as the melody moves and leaps relentlessly from one end of the register to the other at a *piano* dynamic level for most of the solo. In fact, each instrument seems engrossed in their own part and completely unrelated to one another.

Example 10-2: Symphony No. 2, mm. 117-142

$\text{♩} = 152$

Cl. **32** I solo *p*

Fag. I solo *p*

V-ni I V-no solo

V-c.

C-b. 117

Cl. **33**

Fag. I *trun*

V-ni I V-no solo 120

Cl. I

Fag. I *trun*

V-ni I V-no solo *gliss.* *gliss.* *gliss.* *gliss.* 123

This musical score page contains five systems of music, each with three staves: Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Fag.), and Violin I (V-ni I). The measures are numbered 126, 129, 132, 135, and 138. Each system begins with a measure number in a box (34, 35, 36, 37, 38) and a first finger (I) marking. The Violin I part is marked "V-no solo" in each system. The Bassoon part includes dynamic markings such as "cresc." and "f". The Clarinet part includes dynamic markings such as "cresc." and "f". The Violin I part includes dynamic markings such as "cresc." and "f". The score is written in 4/4 time and features complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth and thirty-second notes, and various articulations like accents and slurs.

Example 10-3 Symphony No. 8 (III) *Andante* mm. 483-532

sempre crescendo al **53**

53

Ob.

Cl.

Fag.

V-no solo
gliss. [+] pizz.
p

V-ni I
altri pizz.
p

tutti

141

A comprehensive harmonic display of the register qualities of three bassoons is found in the final movement of Symphony No. 8 (Ex. 10-3). The *subito forte e diminuendo* dynamic indication and dwindling descending nature of the melodic line display the true nature of high, middle and low registers of the bassoons in this exposed example. From as early as Symphony No. 4 Shostakovich has shown a partiality for chamber music textures, which became more pronounced toward the later symphonies. Using groups of like woodwinds in exposed textures, like this example with three bassoons, is typical of his style (especially in the symphonies scored for larger orchestra, for example Symphonies No. 4, 7, 8, and 10) although it is not exclusive to the woodwind section.

Example 10-3: Symphony No. 8, fifth movement, mm. 483-532

167 $\text{♩} = 168$

Fag.
I *f subito* *dim.*
II *f subito* *dim.*
III *f subito* *dim.*

V-no solo

V-ni I altri

V-ni II

V-le

V-o solo *f* *dim.* *p*

V-o altri

C-b. 483

Fag.
I *p*
II *p*
III *p* 492

Fag.
I *riten.*
II
III 501

3/16

169 a tempo (senza animando)

FL. I *pp*

Cl. I *pp*

Fag. I *pp* *cresc.*

Sil. 506 *pp*

FL. I *poco riten.* *a tempo*

Cl. I

Fag. I *dim.*

Sil. 512

169 $\text{♩} = 152$

Fag. I *p*

V-ni I *tutti con sord. arco* *p*

V-ni II *con sord. arco* *p*

V-le *con sord. arco* *p*

V-co *tutti con sord. arco* *p*

C-b. *con sord. arco* *p* 520

Picc. *I solo* *riten.* *a tempo*

Fag. I *p*

Archi

526

10.3 Allocation of solo material to the bassoon

Shostakovich wrote solos to match every character and quality of the bassoon voice in the symphonies.

The majority of solos are scored for the middle register of the bassoon although they deviate to the extremes of the register within the solos. Outstanding solos are found in the first and third movements of Symphony No. 4, the first movement of Symphony No. 7, and the final movements of Symphonies No. 8 (see Ex. 10-3) and 10 (Ex. 10-5). But the bassoon is the only instrument to be honoured with a solo comprising of an entire movement as heard in the fourth movement of Symphony No. 9 (Ex. 10-4). Seldom does the bassoon player have the opportunity to show his virtuosity of technique and musical interpretation as in Shostakovich's Symphony No. 9.

Symphonies No. 2, 3, and 13 do not have as many prominent bassoon solos as the other symphonies. This is probably due to the fact that Symphonies No. 2 and 3 are experimental in nature and Shostakovich did not write as much chamber sonorities as in the other symphonies. There are no solos of great significance in Symphony No. 13 because Shostakovich may have felt that it would overexpose the bass line, bearing in mind the prominent parts for bass soloist and bass chorus. The author speculates that it is mere coincidence that these three symphonies are for voices and orchestra and that it has no bearing on Shostakovich's writing for the bassoon.

Shostakovich indulges the player and listener in the fourth and fifth (final) movement of Symphony No. 9 to a kaleidoscopic solo. The dismally solemn solo that begins in m. 10 against a static chord from the violas and double basses, is at a *forte espressivo* dynamic level that dwindles to a *piano* dynamic level in mm. 10-11. The mood shifts dramatically with the *fortissimo* brass interlude in mm. 12-21. Sustained strings patiently egg the bassoon solo on toward a solemn and seemingly final ending. Its vivid vocalise suddenly slips into the final movement in an instant character change as the *staccato* articulation lightens the atmosphere, aided by *pizzicato* violas and double basses.

Example 10-4: Symphony No. 9, fourth movement, mm. 1-34, and fifth movement, mm. 1-31

IV

67 *Largo* $\text{♩} = 84$

2 Trombe
3 Tromboni e Tuba
Piatti
Viole
Contrabassi

Fag. *1 solo sempre*
f espress. *p* *f* *mf dim.* *p*

V-le
C-b.

68

Tr-bc
Tr-n e Tuba
P-tti
V-le
C-b.

Fag. *p* *f* *p cresc.* *f* *p*

Archi

22

69

Fag. *morendo p* *pp*

Archi *pp unis.* *morendo*

23 *pp* *morendo* *attaca*

V

70 Allegretto $\text{♩} = 100$

2 Fagotti
Viola
Contrabassi

Fag.
V-le
C-b.

Fag.
V-nII
V-le
C-b.

Fag.
Archi

The following solo in the final movement of Symphony No. 10 is of the very few that meander around the low register of the bassoon displaying its lighter character, fortified with an interesting selection of percussion instruments as part of the accompaniment (Ex. 10-5). In fact, it seems to be a dialogue between the percussion, consisting of side drum, cymbals and bass drum, and the bassoon with the cellos and double basses providing a dull *ostinato*.



Example 10-5: Symphony No. 10, fourth movement, mm. 479-517

♩ = 176

The musical score is arranged in a standard orchestral format. The top staff is for Flute (Fl.), marked 'Solo' and starting with a dynamic of *p*. The next two staves are for Trumpet (Tr.) and Trombone (Tr.), both marked with a Roman numeral 'I' and a dynamic of *pp*. The percussion section includes Timpani (Timp.) with a dynamic of *p*, Snare Drum (Tr.) with a dynamic of *p*, and Cymbals (Cym.) with a dynamic of *p*. The string section consists of Violin (V.) and Cello (C.), both marked with a dynamic of *mf* and a *dim.* marking. The score is in 4/4 time and features a variety of rhythmic patterns and dynamics.

The trombone plays a prominent role in the third movement of Symphony No. 4 and begins with an opening which Richter & Deering (1979:52) refer to as a

192

I

Fag. *pp*

T-ro *pp*

P.tti *pp*

Cassa *pp*

V.c. *p*

C.b. *p*

491

193

I

Fag. *pp*

T-ro *pp*

P.tti *pp*

Cassa *pp*

V.c. *p*

C.b. *p*

501

I solo 194

Cl. *p*

Fag. *pp*

T-ro *pp*

P.tti *pp*

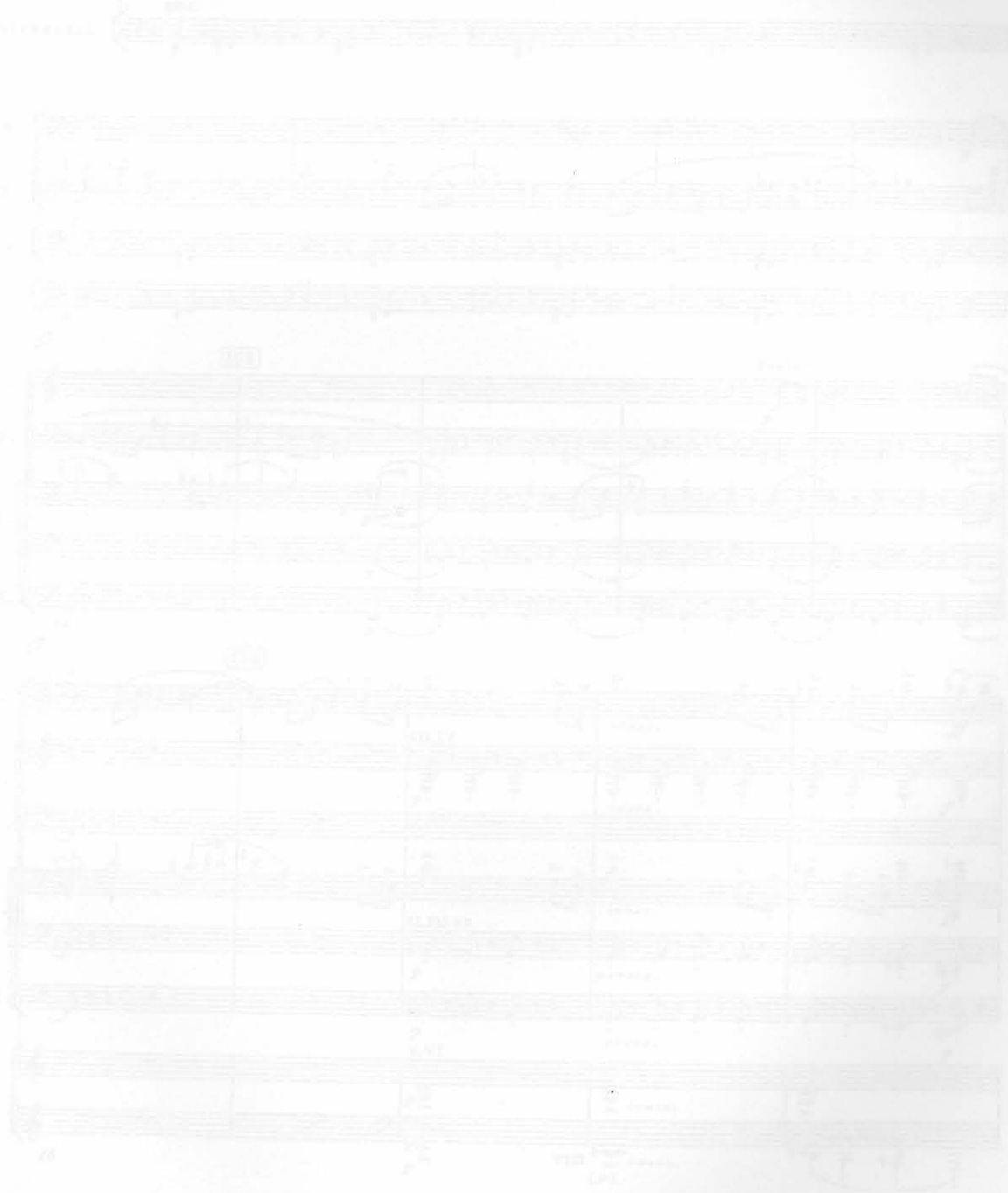
Cassa *pp*

V.c. *p*

C.b. *p*

510

The bassoon plays a prominent role in the third movement of Symphony No. 4 that begins with an opening solo, which Blokker & Dearling (1979:62) refer to as Shostakovich's reference to Mahler (Ex.10-6). "Over solemn timpani and double bass crotchets the solo bassoon announces a funeral march, a sombre and beautiful theme promising a fascinating movement". The highly articulate solo scored in the bassoon's middle register paves the way for other woodwind instruments to embellish the funeral motive throughout the movement as well as for more very exposed bassoon solos.



Example 10-7 Symphony No. 7, first movement, mm. 564-601

The musical score for Example 10-7, Symphony No. 7, first movement, measures 564-601, is presented for five instruments: Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Fag.), and Cello/Double Bass (C-fag.). The Flute part is marked 'I solo' and 'p' (piano). The Oboe part is marked 'dim.' (diminuendo) and 'p'. The Clarinet part is marked 'III, IV' and 'p'. The Bassoon part is marked 'I' and 'dim.', and the Cello/Double Bass part is marked 'II, III' and 'p'. The score shows a complex texture with various articulations and dynamics.

Shostakovich exploits the serious character of the bassoon in a *legato* solo in the first movement of Symphony No. 7 in what Blokker & Dearling (1979:86) describe as a “requiem for the dead” (Ex. 10-7). Shostakovich is, in fact, portraying an ominous tone in the “Leningrad” Symphony as the city is invaded by German troops. The composer is expressing his anger that Leningrad is being destroyed by Hitler, and indirectly, by Stalin too. The *piano espressivo* solo is scored for the mid-high register of the bassoon and is starkly supported by *pianissimo pizzicato* violas, cellos, double basses, articulated *staccato secco*. The addition of the piano adds an unusual colour in the accompaniment to the bassoon solo. The piano’s explosive sounding *staccato* articulation blends well with the strings and provide a contrasting background to the *legato* bassoon solo.

Example 10-7: Symphony No. 7, first movement, mm. 564-601

$\text{♩} = 92$

I solo
p cresc.

Fag. 564

P-no

V-le

V-c.

C-b.

61

570

I

Fag.

P-no

V-le

V-c.

C-b.

576

62

Flg.
P-no
V-le
V-o
C-b.
582

63

(in B) I, II

(in A) III

II

Cl.
Cl. b.
Flg.
C-flg.
P-no
V-le
V-o
C-b.
589

According to Cramer (1962:26) a well reliable *staccato* is one of the highest levels in the hierarchy of *staccato*. Shostakovich uses this character of the *staccato* continually by writing almost half of the solos with a *staccato* articulation. Only the last movement of Symphony No. 13 has *staccato* solos which are all written with a *staccato* articulation. The *staccato* articulation

10.3.1 Articulation

Articulation markings and tempo are in many cases inextricably bound to characterizing the mood of a musical passage and to the tone colour of the instrument. This is particularly the case with the bassoon whose personality can change quickly into extreme moods, as is seen in the solo from the last two movements of Symphony No. 9 (see Ex. 10-4). Shostakovich exploits this quality of the bassoon by writing approximately an equal number of solos with *legato* and with *staccato* articulation markings.

According to Piston (1962:187) the bassoons perform an everyday function of replicating the single tonguing on the bassoon can be executed with remarkable speed (Adler 1982:198). The bassoon *staccato* is especially effective in creating a lighter and often humorous atmosphere. According to Camden (1962:26) a good reliable *staccato* is one of the brightest jewels in the bassoon player's crown. Shostakovich uses this character of the bassoon continually by writing almost half of the solos with a *staccato* articulation. Only the last movement of Symphony No. 13 has bassoon solos which are all written with a *staccato* articulation. The bassoon *staccato*

excellently emulates the string *pizzicato* and has been used by Shostakovich throughout the symphonies to double the string *pizzicato*, as well as used on its own as an accompaniment to other instruments' solos.

10.3.2 Accompaniment to bassoon solos

Fully aware of the bassoon's fairly timid voice as soloist, Shostakovich made very sure not to overpower the bassoon solos by carefully choosing the accompaniment to best suit its timbre.

Shostakovich uses the gentle bass voices of the cello and double bass as accompaniment to bassoon solos in almost all of the symphonies, mostly at a *piano* dynamic level. The next most popular choice for accompaniment is the characteristic *pizzicato* or *tremolo* strings. Perhaps the most interesting and unique aspect of the choice of accompaniment instruments is the composer's frequent use of percussion instruments. The bass drum, side drum, timpani, cymbals and piano are included as part of the accompaniment to bassoon solos in Symphonies No. 1, 4, 6, 7, 10 and 11. It can be concluded that Shostakovich shows a sensitive awareness to the overpowering quality of melodic instruments, and capitalises on the unusual combination of the bassoon and percussion.

Shostakovich developed a predilection for the lone voice of the unaccompanied bassoon towards the end of his symphonic career in Symphonies No. 11, 13 and 15. This trend is in keeping with his writing style, which became more ensemble-like towards his later symphonies.

10.4 Bassoons in combination with other instruments

According to Piston (1982:199) the bassoons perform an everyday function of replicating the bass part of the strings in unison or at the octave. They not only reinforce the double bass and cello tone, but give point and clarity to *staccato* and rhythmic figures, without noticeably affecting the string tone quality. Inner harmonic and contrapuntal voices are likewise often strengthened or taken over by bassoons. Shostakovich's main use of the bassoon in *tutti* sections is to bolster the cello and double bass line and to add a little body and warmth to the string section when necessary. The bass line is usually strengthened even more with the addition of the

bass clarinet and contrabassoon that join the octave doubling of the bass line (see Ex. 10-1). In *tutti* playing the low brass such as the tubas and trombones are regular additions to the bass line.

The bassoon's role in the combination of instruments in the symphonies is therefore more than threefold: It underlines and supports the strings bass line; it supplies the bass line to the woodwind; and it is used as the accompaniment to a variety of solo instruments. In addition, Shostakovich also uses the bassoon in a combination solo, for example the flute and bassoon, or the piccolo and bassoon, which have been used together in a solo on a number of occasions (see Ex. 10-8). The bassoon and contrabassoon have been scored together as soloists on two occasions in Symphonies No. 4 and 5 (see Chapter 11).

The following passage from the second movement of Symphony No. 9 illustrates the bassoon in a dual role as it is combined in octave doubling from mm. 56-73 with the flute, as well as providing the bass line in the woodwind ensemble as it assumes a more accompanying role from m. 82 onward (Ex. 10-8).



Example 10-8: Symphony No. 9, second movement, mm. 51-99

Moderato

32

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system (mm. 51-58) features the Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Fag.), Violoncello (V-c.), and Contrabass (C-b.). The Flute part begins with a first finger (I) and a dynamic of *p*, followed by a *cresc.* and a fortissimo (*f*) section. The Clarinet and Bassoon parts also show a *cresc.* and *mf* dynamic. The Violoncello and Contrabass parts are marked *sf*. The second system (mm. 59-66) features the Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), and Bassoon (Fag.). All parts in this system are marked *p cresc.* and feature a first finger (I) articulation. The score is in 3/4 time and D major.

33

Fl. I *f* *dim.* *mf*

Cl. *f* *dim.* *p* II

Fag. I *f* *dim.* *p*

71

34

Fl. I *dim.* *p*

Cl. II *pp*

Fag. *pp*

81

35 a tempo

Fl. I *p*

Cl. I *p* *riten.* *a tempo* *Cl. I, II muta in B*

Fag.

Archl

pp *con sord. sul G al ♯*

pp *con sord. sul G al ♯*

pp *con sord.*

pp *con sord. arco*

pp *con sord. arco*

pp *con sord. arco*

91

The bassoons and first clarinet are effectively joined in octave doubling in the fourth movement of Symphony No. 5 (Ex. 10-9). The clarinet and bassoons carry the melody, two octaves apart, at a *pianissimo* dynamic level accompanied by the *pianissimo* sustained tones of the horns and the incessant rhythmic *ostinato* from the timpani and the side drum. According to MacDonald (1990:131) the rhythm played by the timpani contains the “Stalin” two-note figure (two quavers or crotchets, sometimes dotted), used before in the opening of Symphony No. 4.

Wilson (1994:127) concludes that in the last movement of Symphony No. 5 Shostakovich uses a quotation from his *Pushkin Romances*. Although premièred only three years later in 1940, they were written before Symphony No. 5. Sofia Khentova (2000:11) is of a different opinion: she said that the example of Pushkin, the poet’s life, full of difficulties and hardships, reminded Shostakovich of his own position. The four notes which set the first three words of the first poem “Rebirth” forms the kernel of the initial march theme of the last movement of Symphony No. 5.

The first four notes of the following example between mm. 250-252 is a repeat of the march theme at the beginning of the movement. The tuba takes over from the horns for three bars in mm. 252-254. Shostakovich uses the horns and tuba in relay to create a continuous sustained bass line, and allowing the horns to take a much-needed breath.



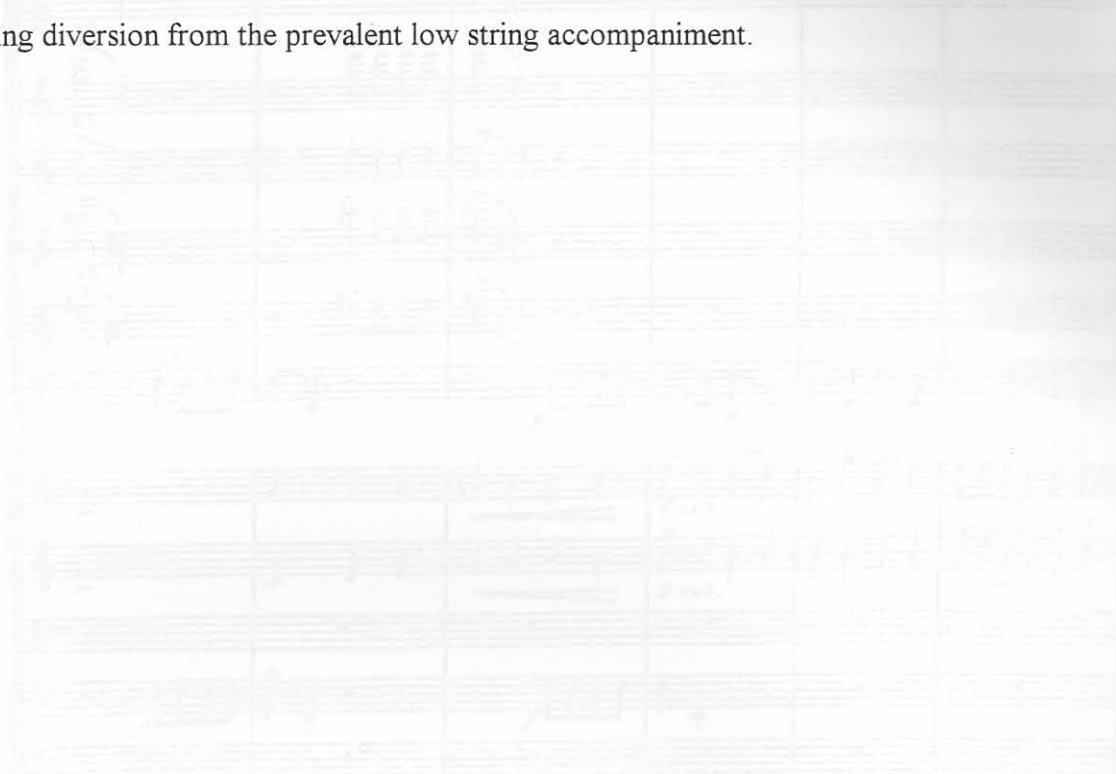
Example 10-9: Symphony No. 5, fourth movement, mm. 249-258

$\text{♩} = 100-108$

Musical score for measures 249-258. The score includes parts for Cl., Fag., C-fag., Cor., Tuba, Timp., T-ro, and Archi. Measure numbers 249 and 9245 are indicated at the bottom.

Musical score for measures 122-123. The score includes parts for Fl., Ob., Cl. picc., Cl., Fag., C-fag., Cor., Tuba, Timp., and T-ro. Measure number 122 is indicated in a box at the top right.

Shostakovich makes use of the bassoon as the accompaniment to a variety of woodwind solos, but one of the more unusual combinations is found in the third movement of Symphony No. 6 (Ex. 10-10). The first and second bassoons serve as the sole accompaniment to first and second violins in mm. 394-404. A brief but effective interlude between these two instruments creates a refreshing diversion from the prevalent low string accompaniment.



Example 10-10: Symphony No. 6, third movement, mm. 392-404

d-152

119

Picc.

Fl.

Ob.

Cl.
picc.

Cl.

Fag.

Archi

392

Fag.

Archi

398

10.5 Conclusion

Shostakovich presents the bassoon section with a very exciting and accessible palette of material throughout the symphonies. Its role includes the traditional function of providing and reinforcing the bass line, mostly by doubling in the cellos and double basses in unison and octave unison. More importantly, the bassoon's comic ability to lighten the mood and tone of the symphonies has been exploited. Furthermore, Shostakovich wrote many solo passages for the bassoon throughout the symphonies, the most momentous being the second movement of Symphony No. 9 which is entirely devoted to the bassoon. The composer takes particular care not to overpower the bassoon in his choice of instruments to accompany it. Unlike with the other woodwinds, Shostakovich uses percussion instruments to add interest to sparse accompaniment of bassoon solos.

11.2 Register

Orchestration manuals have little to say about the high register of the contrabassoon except that it has a poor tone quality. They advise composers to limit the use of the weak high register.

Shostakovich scores the contrabassoon for the first time in Symphony No. 4 where it is mostly written in the middle and low register. In the following symphony, No. 5, mostly the middle to mid-high register was used. It seems as though his curiosity peaks in Symphony No. 6 with a brief encounter into the high register (Ex. 11-2). For the remaining symphonies the middle and low register is generally employed. On average the middle register is the most utilized.