

## CHAPTER 11

### THE CONTRABASSOON

#### 11.1 Introduction

The contrabassoon receives surprisingly little attention from Shostakovich in his symphonies. Its role compared with the other woodwinds in the symphonies, particularly the auxiliary instruments, seems marginalized. It is apparent that Shostakovich did not have any aspiration for the contrabassoon as soloist as there are no pure solos scored for the instrument in the symphonies, even though it is present in more symphonies than its counterpart, the bass clarinet. There are, however, a few memorable combination solos, which will be discussed during the course of the chapter. The contrabassoon is selectively used. Shostakovich was very specific and clear about the role he wanted it to play in complementing the bass line when it was needed.

The contrabassoon is employed in Symphonies No. 4-8 and 10-13. With the exception of Symphony No. 4, in which the contrabassoon has its own part, the contrabassoon part is shared with the third bassoon player in all the other symphonies.

#### 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 utilised.

Shostakovich's fascination with the low register of the contrabassoon is clearly demonstrated in the closing few bars of the first movement of Symphony No. 4 (Ex. 11-1). The composer mulls around the low register of the contrabassoon throughout the symphony although he only ventures to the low C, as illustrated in this example. The contrabassoon's *piano morendo* low C is in unison with the tuba. Shostakovich creates the effect of sustained continuity by writing an uninterrupted held note for the third oboe in mm. 1040-1045 while the contrabassoon and brass take a breath in mm. 1039-1040 and 1042.

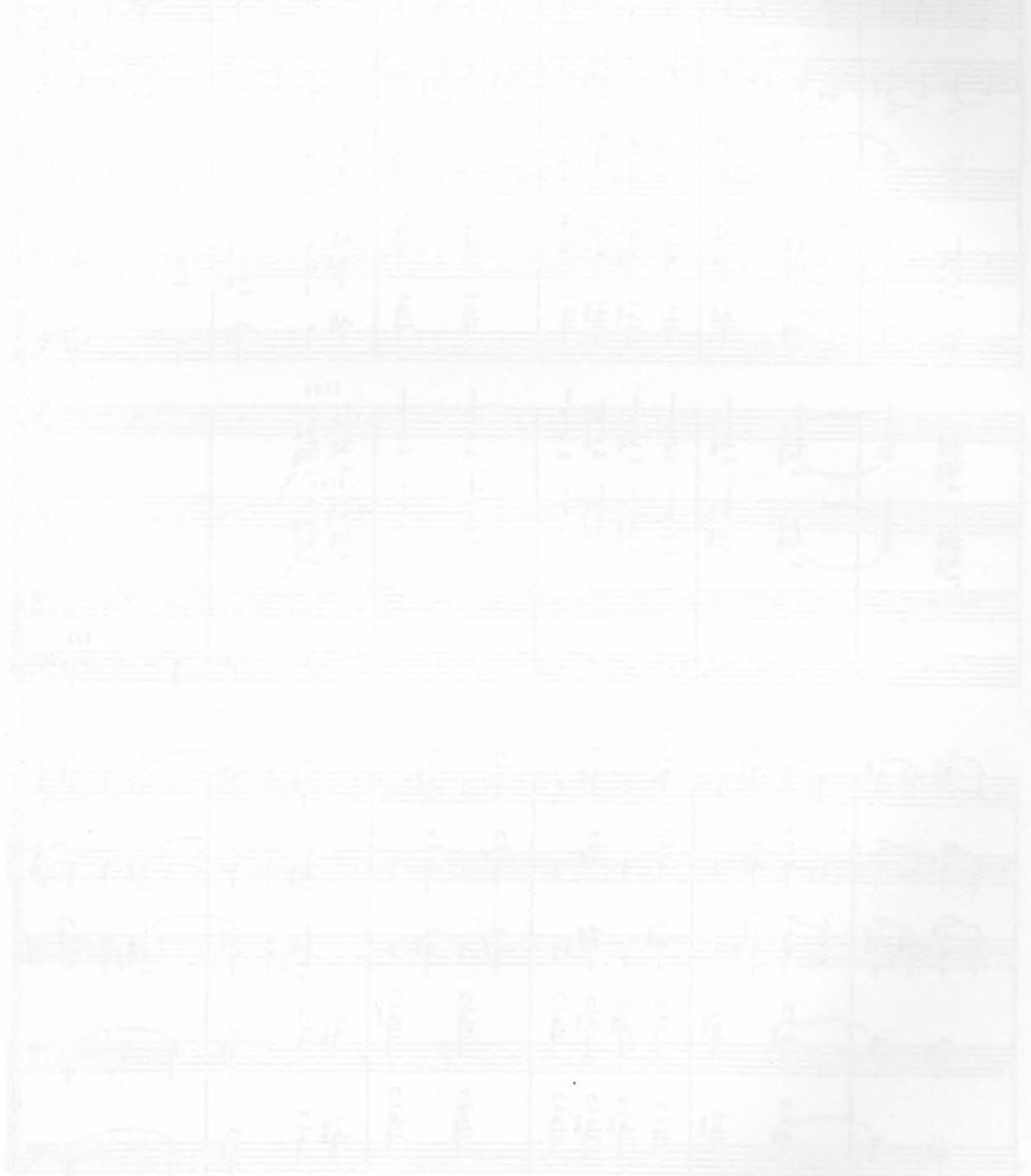
The image displays a musical score for the contrabassoon and tuba parts of Symphony No. 4, Ex. 11-1. The score is written on two staves, with the contrabassoon part on the upper staff and the tuba part on the lower staff. The music is in 4/4 time and features a low, sustained note (low C) in the contrabassoon, which is in unison with the tuba. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings, illustrating the effect of sustained continuity created by the composer.

$\text{♩} = 69$

1037



The ensuing example displays one of the very few moments Shostakovich uses the high register of the contrabassoon as well as illustrates his typical use of the instrument in *tutti* playing throughout the symphonies it is used in (Ex. 11-2). The contrabassoon's high A reached in mm. 447-448 is in unison and octave unison with the bassoons, bass clarinet, cellos and double basses, although it is much less of an effort for the bassoon. This is a standard example of the bass instruments of the woodwind, brass and string section working together in octave unison in Shostakovich's symphonies.



## Example 11-2: Symphony No. 6, third movement, mm. 445-456

 $\text{♩} = 152$ 

Fl.

Ob.

Cl. picc.

Cl.

Cl. b.

Fag.

C.fag.

Cor.

Tr-ni  
Tuba

Archi

445



11.3 Allocation of solo material to the contrabassoon

Fl. a.2  
Ob. a.2  
Cl. in G.  
Cl. in Bb.  
Cl. b.  
Fag.  
Cb. fag.  
Tr. b.  
Cor.  
Tuba  
Archi  
451

### 11.3 Allocation of solo material to the contrabassoon

Shostakovich shies away from outright solos for the contrabassoon in the symphonies. Its main contribution is to enhance the *tutti* sound. Two instances in which the contrabassoon is combined with the bassoon deserve to be highlighted: in Symphonies No. 4 and 5.

Lyndesay G. Langwill's book, *The Bassoon and Contrabassoon* (1965:135), discusses the orchestral use of the contrabassoon and emphasises solos written for the instrument by various composers in the 19th and 20th century. Shostakovich is one of the composers mentioned. The information is somewhat misleading because it mentions that the contrabassoon (in exposed solos) is included in Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 and 6 (first movement). Firstly, Langwill could possibly have overlooked including Symphony No. 4, composed in 1936, which contains noteworthy exposed passages for the contrabassoon, because Shostakovich withheld the symphony for 25 years until December 30, 1961, four years prior to the publishing of the book. Secondly, the first movement of Symphony No. 6 does not contain significant revealing passages for the contrabassoon.

According to Blokker & Dearling (1979:57) Shostakovich withdrew Symphony No. 4 because he was afraid of the response it would receive after the 1936 attack on him. This is untrue as a number of sources can attest. According to Wilson (1994:119) it was during one of the final rehearsals of the Symphony with Fritz Stiedri as conductor that two Party officials interrupted the practice. Shostakovich was strongly advised to cancel the performance. However, it is claimed that Shostakovich himself recognized that the work had its weaknesses and is quoted as writing that it is a "very imperfect, long-winded work that suffers from, 'grandiosmania'". From the present author's point of view Symphony No. 4 possesses good features: it contains many very well orchestrated sections for the whole orchestra, as is evidenced in the number of examples chosen and included throughout this thesis.

In the first movement of Symphony No. 4 Shostakovich gives the contrabassoon and third bassoon a quick moment of exposure in a chattering *staccato* dialogue with the oboe in mm. 499-504, the piccolo, E-flat clarinet and two bassoons in mm. 503-506, once again the oboe in mm. 506-514, followed by the clarinet in mm. 513-519. A subtle variation in the execution of



articulation could result between the double reed instruments with the oboe's sharp and precise *piano staccato* and the more sluggish version from the bassoons and contrabassoon. The demisemiquaver entry in m. 514 would probably require the bassoon and contrabassoon to use double tonguing. This particular passage with its light and humorous atmosphere is part of a short section in the symphony that is sandwiched between very loud and oppressive sounding *tutti* sections. The interplay between dark and light timbres and textures is one of the first signs in the symphonies of Shostakovich reflecting musically the oppressive atmosphere in his country.



Example 11-3: Symphony No. 4, first movement, mm. 497-523

$\text{♩} = 108$

53

Picc. *I*

Ob. *I solo*

Cl. picc. *f* *p*

Cl. *III* *IV* *Cl. IV (A) muta in Cl. B*

Cl. b.

Fag. *I* *II* *III solo* *p*

C-fag. *p*

497

54

Picc. *p*

Ob. *I* *f marc.*

Cl. picc. *I*

Fag. *II* *III*

C-fag. *504*

Ob. 55

Cl. *I solo*

Fag. *I*

C-fag. *I*

Cl. 56

Fag.

C-fag.

Tr-be *con sord. a2*

Cor. *ff a2* *ppp*

Tr-ni *con sord. a2*

Tuba *con sord. a2*

Legno *ff*

Arch. *pizz. p* *pizz. p* *pizz. p* *pizz. p* *div. p* *ff dim. p*

516



The first bassoon and contrabassoon share the most definitive solo for the latter instrument in the second movement of Symphony No. 5 (Ex. 11-4). Shostakovich is conservative in this example which in many cases bears a strong resemblance to the previous example from Symphony No. 4. The similarities between the two examples are the *staccato* articulation, the *piano* dynamic level, the similar middle to low register used for the contrabassoon, as well as the break of a few bars in the solo to give the contrabassoon player a needed break before resuming the solo.

In this example the bassoon and contrabassoon are completely alone for the first half of the solo from mm. 157-166, after which the *pizzicato* uttering from the strings are added from mm. 167-169. After a ten bar break, the bassoon and contrabassoon resume their solo from mm. 181-196. It is a pity Shostakovich did not attempt further solos for the contrabassoon which would no doubt have become more adventurous, as he proved with solo material for the other auxiliary instruments, the piccolo, cor anglais and bass clarinet.



## Example 11-4: Symphony No. 5, second movement, mm. 157-199

♩ = 138

65

Picc. *pp.*  
I.

Fl. *pp.*  
I.

Cl. *pp.*  
I. solo

Fag. *p*  
solo

C-fag. *p*  
solo

Cor. *a2*  
*pp.*  
*a2*  
*pp.*

Archi *pp.*  
unia.  
*pp.*

157 *pp.*

66

Fag. *I*

C-fag.

Archi *pizz.*  
*p*  
*pizz.*  
*p*

163

Pico. *tr* *p*

Archi

170

Fag. *p* **67** *I*

C-fag. *p*

Archi *mf* *pizz.* *p* *mf* *f*

176

Fag. *I*

C-fag.

Archi *p*

182

This musical score page contains three systems of staves. The first system (measures 170-175) includes a Piccolo part with trills and a piano (*p*) dynamic, and a string section (*Archi*) with a melodic line. The second system (measures 176-181) features a Flute (*Fag.*) and Clarinet (*C-fag.*) part with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a first ending bracket labeled **67** and *I*. The string section (*Archi*) has multiple parts with dynamics ranging from *mf* to *f*, including a pizzicato (*pizz.*) section. The third system (measures 182-187) shows the Flute (*Fag.*) and Clarinet (*C-fag.*) parts continuing, with the string section (*Archi*) playing a melodic line starting at measure 182 with a piano (*p*) dynamic.



68

Fag. *cresc.* *f*

C fag. *cresc.* *f*

Archi *p* *cresc.* *f* (pizz.) *f*

188

Pico. *f*

Fl. *I* *p* *cresc.*

Cl. *I* *p* *cresc.*

Fag. *I* *p* *cresc.*

C fag. *p* *cresc.*

Archi *dim.* *p* *cresc.*

194



#### 11.4 The contrabassoon in combination with other instruments

The contrabassoon in combination solos is dealt with in Chapter 11.3 and is evidently very limited. In *tutti* playing Shostakovich realizes the contrabassoon's true potential with combinations that are mostly traditional, doubling the bass clarinet, bassoon, trombones, tubas, cellos and double basses in unison and at the octave. Shostakovich likes to combine the contrabassoon with brass instruments, particularly the trombones and tubas.

One of the contrabassoon's most significant roles is being part of the accompaniment to various solos. An ingenious effect is attained in the third movement of Symphony No. 4 by using the piccolo, third bassoon and contrabassoon as part of the extraordinary accompaniment to a first trombone solo (Ex. 11-5). Shostakovich's choice of instruments for the accompaniment is very fitting for the trombone, with the bass sounds presented in octave doubling by the bassoon and contrabassoon, and the piccolo adding a touch of lightness with its *acciaccaturas* on the offbeat.



## Example 11-5: Symphony No. 4, third movement, mm. 610-633

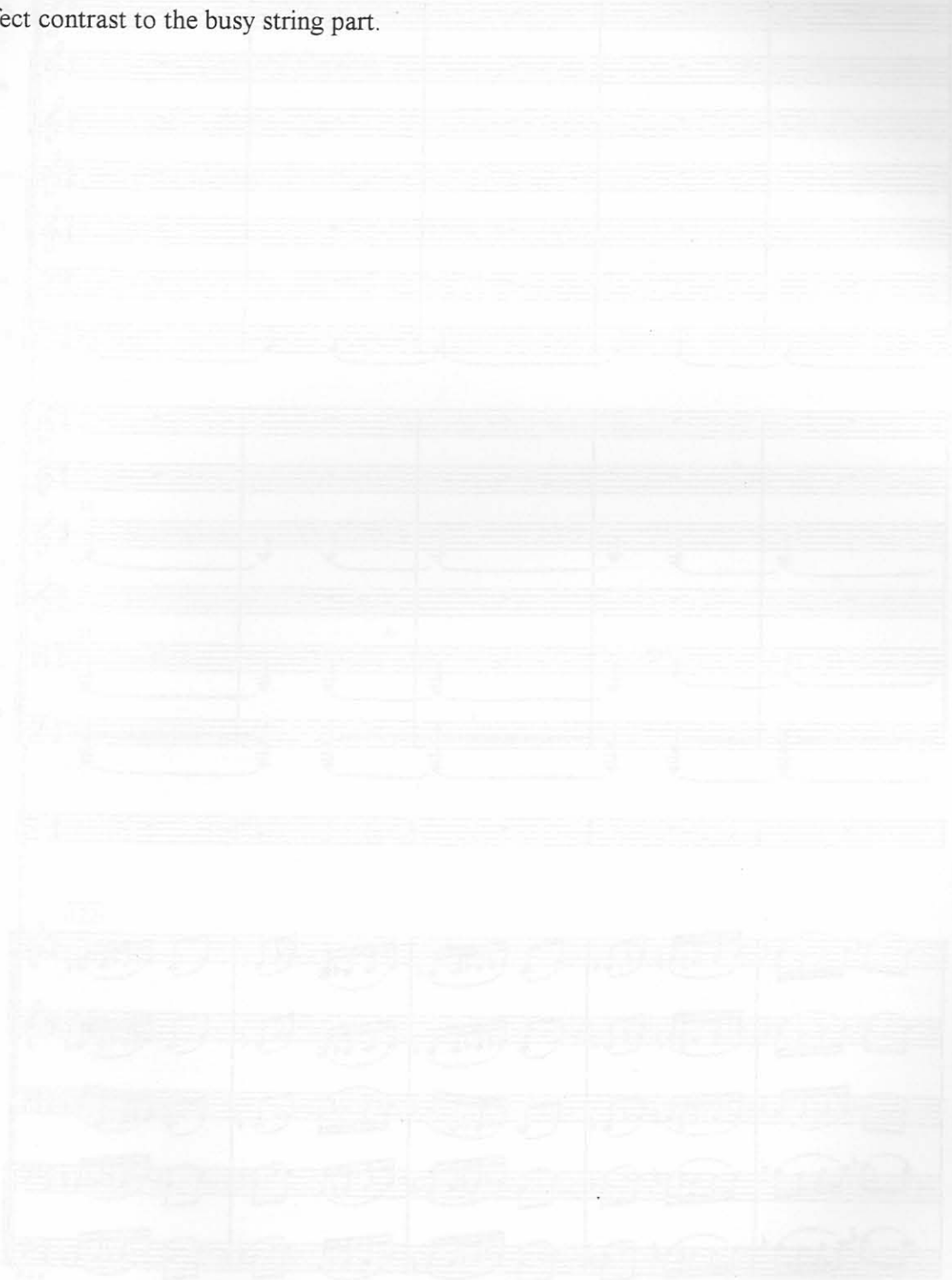
 $\text{♩} = 160$ 

First system of musical notation (measures 610-619). Instruments: Picc., Fag., C-fag., Tr-ni, and Archi. The Picc. part has a first ending bracket labeled 'I' and a first measure marked 'p'. The Fag. part has a third ending bracket labeled 'III' and a first measure marked 'p'. The C-fag. part has a first measure marked 'p'. The Tr-ni part has a first measure marked 'f marc.' and a first ending bracket labeled 'I solo'. The Archi part is marked '610'.

Second system of musical notation (measures 619-627). Instruments: Picc., Fag., C-fag., and Tr-ni. The Picc. part has a first ending bracket labeled 'I'. The Fag. part has a third ending bracket labeled 'III'. The C-fag. part has a first measure marked 'cresc.'. The Tr-ni part has a first measure marked 'cresc.' and a first ending bracket labeled 'I'. The system is marked '619'.

Third system of musical notation (measures 627-633). Instruments: Picc., Fag., C-fag., Tr-ni, V-c., and C-b. The Picc. part has a first ending bracket labeled 'I' and a first measure marked 'f'. The Fag. part has a third ending bracket labeled 'III'. The C-fag. part has a first measure marked 'f'. The Tr-ni part has a first measure marked 'f'. The V-c. part has a first measure marked 'div.' and a first ending bracket labeled 'I'. The C-b. part has a first measure marked 'f'. The system is marked '209' and '627'.

Shostakovich combines the contrabassoon with the brass section as it accompanies the strings in the fourth movement of Symphony No. 10 (Ex. 11-6). This is one of a few examples where the deep support of the contrabassoon is lent to the brass section. The timbres of the trumpets, trombones and tubas are unobtrusively enhanced by the addition of the contrabassoon to create a perfect contrast to the busy string part.





## Example 11-6: Symphony No. 10, fourth movement, mm. 289-298

 $\text{♩} = 176$ 

177

Picc.

Fl.

Ob.

Cl. plet.

Cl.

Fag.

C-fag.

Cor.

Tr-be

Tr-nl

c Tuba

Timp.

177

Archi

288

Picc.

Fl.

Ob.

Cl. p. ec.

Cl.

Fag.

C. fag.

Cor.

Tr. be

Tr. ni  
Tuba

Timp.

Archl.

284



A trio of auxiliary instruments are briefly united in a unique combination in Shostakovich's symphonies in octave doubling in the first movement of Symphony No. 13, "Babi Yar" (Ex. 11-7). Once again, this example highlights the changes made in the text from the original poem written by Yevtushenko (see Appendix B and also Example 8-12). The text has clearly been altered in the second paragraph as follows:

Original version translated from the Russian text	Altered version translated from the music score
<p>Above Babi Yar the wild grass rustles, the trees look threatening, as though in judgement. [mm. 309-314]</p> <p>Here everything silently screams, and, baring my head, I feel as though I am slowly turning grey. [mm. 317-331]</p>	<p>Above Babi Yar the wild grass rustles, the trees look threatening, as though in judgement. [309-314]</p> <p>Here everything silently screams, and, baring my head, I feel as though I am slowly turning grey. [317-331]</p>
<p>And I become a long, soundless scream above the thousands and thousands buried here, I am each old man who was shot here. I am each child who was shot here. [324-337]</p>	<p>I think of the heroic deed of Russia that Fascism blocked on its way, with its own body. [324-337]</p>

The lugubrious colours of the cor anglais, bass clarinet and contrabassoon share an octave unison passage from mm. 314-324. The octave doubling is also scored for the horns, which leads the author to conclude that Shostakovich used the stark open quality of the octave to portray the desperate emotion of helplessness in the words "everything silently screams", and "I feel as though I am slowly turning grey". The bass clarinet, bassoon, contrabassoon and double bass continue the octave unison ensemble in m. 325, together with the bass soloist (m. 324) and horns. Shostakovich subtly substitutes the cor anglais with the bassoons and includes the *pizzicato* double bass from m. 325, indicating a change in tone, specifically where the text has been changed. It is interesting to note that the transformed version is much shorter than the



original and one wonders if Shostakovich made many changes to the music and orchestration to depict the more “patriotic” meaning.

Example 11-7: Symphony No. 13, first movement, mm. 309-333

$\text{♩} = 58$

Cor.

Tr-ni  
e  
Tuba

Coro

305 Ба́бь-им Я́ром ше-лест-ли-ких трав, де-ре-вья-смот-рят гроз-но, по-су-

C.ingl.

Cl.b.

C-fag.

Cor.

Tr-ni  
e  
Tuba

Coro

314 - дей-ски. Здесь мол-ча все-кри-чит, шап-ку

23

C.ingl.

Cl.b.

C-fag.

Cor.

Tr-ni  
e  
Tuba

Coro

319 с-няв, я чув-ствую, как мед-лен-но се-де-ю.

24

C. lugl.

Cl. b.

Fag.

C-fag.

Cor.

Basso solo

Coro

C-b.

324

espress.

*p* espress.

*p* espress.

*mf* espress.

Я ду-маю о по-дви-ге Рос-си-и, фа-шизм прегра-

pizz.

25

Cl. b.

Fag.

C-fag.

Cor.

Taba

Arpe

Basso solo

V-le

V-c.

C-b.

329

div.

arco

д-нав-шей путь со-бой, до са-хой на-и-



## 11.5 Conclusion

## CHAPTER 12

The use of the contrabassoon is unusually uninteresting. In spite of being scored for nine symphonies its primary function is to add weight to the bass line in the orchestral *tutti*.

### 12.1 Answering the research questions

The goal of Shostakovich's use of the woodwinds in his symphonies attempted to answer the following main research question:

- What are the characteristics of Shostakovich's use of the woodwinds in his symphonies?

The research sub-questions were the following:

- What are specific elements, technical and artistic, of Shostakovich's compositional style for the woodwinds?
- Is there a developmental trend in Shostakovich's use of the woodwinds in his symphonies?
- How accessible are the woodwind parts in Shostakovich's symphonies from the woodwind player's perspective?

Shostakovich's symphonies mostly reveal the orchestration of the woodwinds as unadorned and basically conservative. He treats the woodwind department like a group of highly individual but somewhat proper musicians whose work alternates between solo and ensemble playing. He shows a skilled knowledge of each instrument's capabilities and exploits it to perfection. The woodwind parts are always very accessible, although at times demanding and technically challenging. Shostakovich typically makes use of the full register qualities of the woodwind, often exploiting the extreme high register.

Shostakovich's skill of orchestration is evident in the technical and aesthetic attention he gives almost each individual woodwind instrument. The only two exceptions are the alto flute and the contrabassoon that did not receive the attention of the other woodwinds.