

SYMPHONY FOR THE CITY OF THE DEAD

Dmitri Shostakovich and the Siege of Leningrad

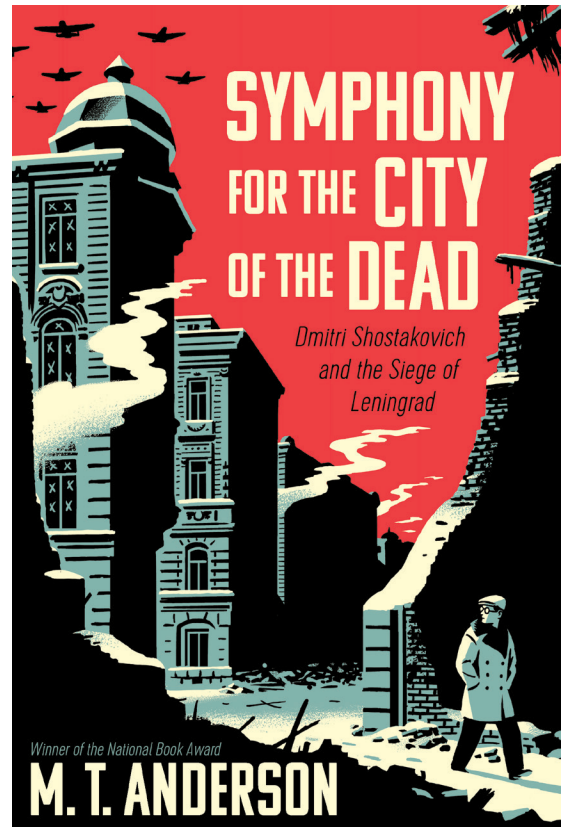
BY M. T. ANDERSON

ABOUT THE BOOK

In September 1941, Adolf Hitler's Wehrmacht surrounded Leningrad in what was to become one of the longest and most destructive sieges in Western history — two and a half years of bombing and starvation. More than a million citizens perished. Survivors recall corpses littering the frozen streets, the relatives of the dead having neither the means nor the strength to bury them. Desperate residents burned books, furniture, and floorboards to keep warm; they ate family pets and — eventually — even one another to stay alive.

Trapped between the Nazi invading force and the Soviet government itself was composer Dmitri Shostakovich, who would write a symphony that roused, rallied, eulogized, and commemorated his fellow citizens — the *Leningrad Symphony*, which played a surprising role in strengthening the Grand Alliance against the Axis powers.

Symphony for the City of the Dead is the true story of a city under siege: the triumph of bravery and defiance in the face of terrifying odds. It is also a look at the power — and layered meaning — of music in beleaguered lives.



Common Core Connections

A primary goal of the Common Core State ELA Standards is for students to become fluent in reading complex texts like *Symphony for the City of the Dead*. In this sweeping history, M. T. Anderson recounts and analyzes many facets of Stalin's reign, the Soviet Union's role in World War II, and the Siege of Leningrad, along with the life of composer Dmitri Shostakovich and the impact of his music. In keeping with the standards, the narrative imparts substantial content knowledge and introduces discipline-specific vocabulary from politics and the arts. The scope of the book is, in essence, all the major events of Russian history in the first half of the twentieth century, seen through the lens of one family.

In conveying ideas and knowledge, *Symphony for the City of the Dead* models the use of primary sources such as speeches, letters, newspaper and magazine articles, official reports, and more. M. T. Anderson shares the way he evaluates research materials from the opening chapter, where he assesses the origin of a well-known anecdote about the composer, to the author's note, where he discusses problematic sources. Finally, *Symphony for the City of the Dead* helps readers "understand other perspectives and cultures" by immersing them in Leningrad before and during World War II — its people, their culture, and their heroism.

HC: 978-0-7636-6818-1
Also available as an e-book

This guide was prepared by Kathleen Odean, who was a school librarian for more than fifteen years and now presents workshops on new books for young people, including one on Common Core nonfiction. She chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and is the author of guides to children's books, including *Great Books for Girls*, *Great Books for Boys*, and *Great Books About Things Kids Love*.



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COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

These questions correlate to Common Core ELA Reading Standards for Information: Key Ideas and Details RI.9–12.1, RI.9–12.2, RI.9–12.3; Craft and Structure RI.9–12.4, RI.9–12.5, RI.9–12.6; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RI.9–12.7, RI.9–10.8. ELA Speaking & Listening Standards: Comprehension and Collaboration SL.9–12.1.

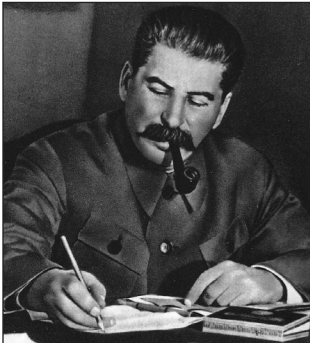


Photo credit: RIA Novosti

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After reading the book, go back and analyze the prologue. Why does the author choose to open with the story of the microfilm? What other topics does he touch on in the prologue that prove important in the book? What storytelling elements does M. T. Anderson use to pull readers in and entice them to read the story?
2. Describe times in Shostakovich's life as a composer when he was publicly admired and times when he was publicly derided. What caused the different public opinions about him? What effect did the ups and downs of his reputation have on his daily life and family? Talk about how he handled the changes, including his emotional responses.
3. Violence and deprivation permeated the Soviet Union during the period covered by this book. Identify the sources of violence and the forms it took. What were the goals of those perpetrating violence? How did the violence and deprivation affect cities and the country's cultural heritage? How did they affect families and daily life?
4. Describe the Soviet Union's role in World War II, including its shifting alliances with other nations. What was Stalin's relationship with Hitler, and how did Hitler deceive him? What factors brought about Hitler's loss to the Soviet Union? Discuss the price that the Soviets paid for their victory and talk about the aftermath of the war for the Soviet Union.
5. In what ways did Stalin undermine his own success, especially regarding the war against Hitler? What impact did his earlier purges have on the Soviet Union's ability to fight? How did the fear of those under him, who had seen so many colleagues killed, have a negative impact on their effectiveness during the war? Give specifics from the text in your discussion.
6. "What is the line between art and propaganda?" (page 239). Based on your reading of the book, discuss the similarities and differences between the two. Give examples of the ways music, including Shostakovich's music, was used as propaganda by the Soviet government. Does the artist's intention affect whether a piece of art is propaganda?
7. One of Shostakovich's friends said, "He learned to put on a mask he would wear for the rest of his life" (page 139). M. T. Anderson echoes this point in the author's note, describing the composer as "a man who learned to live behind a mask" (page 382). Note other examples of this metaphor as you read and discuss the way it relates to the composer's life, the lives of those around him, and the political situation.
8. "A symphony is built not just by the composer, the conductor, and the musicians, but by the audience" (page 281). This idea is raised more than once in the narrative. Discuss what the author means and give examples from the text of different audience reactions to Shostakovich's symphonies in different places, including the United States.
9. *Symphony for the City of the Dead* reveals the power of music in people's lives in the Soviet Union during a certain period. Discuss the different roles that music plays in your life and the lives of those around you. Compare its importance in your life to its importance to people in the book. What would your life be like without music?



Photo credit: DSCH Journal

10. Unlike many nonfiction authors, M. T. Anderson addresses the reader directly at times. In one example, he says, “It is easy for us all to imagine we are heroes when we are sitting in our kitchens, dreaming of distant suffering” (page 117). As you read, take note of similar passages or instances in which the author’s voice comes through in phrases such as “No need to worry at all. Happy New Year” (page 160). Discuss this approach and the reason the author takes it, tying your analysis to specific passages and their context. Analyze M. T. Anderson’s overall point of view toward Shostakovich and his music, grounding your analysis in the text.
11. Throughout the book, M. T. Anderson discusses problems with his sources and their reliability. Early on, he evaluates an anecdote about Shostakovich seeing Lenin (pages 24–26). Discuss this story and the way the author handles the uncertainty about its credibility. Relate this analysis to Anderson’s comments on page 140 about the authenticity of Shostakovich’s purported memoir and his further discussion in the author’s note (pages 381–383) about the trustworthiness of sources in the Soviet era. Discuss other examples in the text where the author deals with similar issues.
12. Contemporaneous photographs are primary sources that provide information about a time and place. What role do historic photographs play in this book? What kind of information do they add? What emotions do they evoke? Study several of the photographs carefully and discuss them in detail.
13. M. T. Anderson writes in the prologue that “at its heart,” the book is “a story about the power of music and its meanings” (page 7). Read the rest of that paragraph and talk about it. After finishing the book, discuss whether you agree with the author’s words. In what ways is the book about the power of music? How did music help people feel less alone?

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

These activities correlate to Common Core ELA Reading Standards for Information: Key Ideas and Details RI.9–12.1, RI.9–12.2, RI.9–12.3; Craft and Structure RI.9–12.4, RI.9–12.5; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RI.9–12.7, RI.9–10.8. ELA Speaking & Listening Standards: Comprehension and Collaboration SL.9–12.1, SL.9–12.2; Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas SL.9–12.4, SL.9–12.5. ELA Writing Standards: Text Types and Purposes W.9–12.1, W.9–12.2; Production and Distribution of Writing W.9–12.4; Research to Build and Present Knowledge W.9–12.7, W.9–12.8.

ACTIVITIES

1. Shostakovich had many friends in the arts: composers, poets, writers, directors, and more. Have each student choose one of the artists from any discipline mentioned in the narrative and do research on him or her, using at least two print and two Internet sources. Students should write a short paper on the person’s life and his or her artistic contributions, citing sources. They should also prepare a short multimedia presentation to share with classmates.
2. How similar were Stalin and Hitler? Have students consider the two dictators’ similarities and differences, drawing from the book and possibly other research. Working alone or with a partner, students should create a chart with columns to organize their thoughts on the question. On the chart, they should list similarities and differences, with source page numbers for each point. Have students gather in small groups to discuss the topic, referring to specific passages and facts.
3. The author, who also writes fiction, uses figurative language throughout the book. Have students choose a chapter and reread it carefully to find metaphors, similes, and other figures of speech in the narrative and in quotations. For example, the chapter “Friendship,” starting on page 151, describes how Communism and Fascism “met like fists behind the back” (page 152). M. T. Anderson quotes Stalin as saying, “London and Paris are playing poker again” (page 154). In a short paper, have students analyze the figurative language of the narrative and quotations, the comparisons made in the figures of speech, and their impact on the reader.

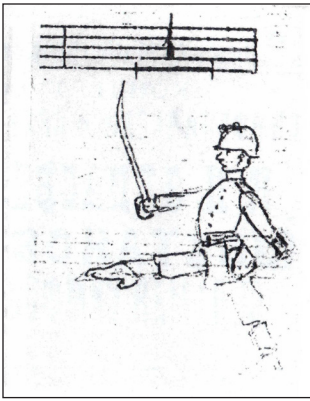


Photo credit: The Museum "Muses Were Not Silent"



Photo credit: RIA Novosti

4. The narrative introduces words and phrases about politics, music, and art that may be new to readers: *Bolshevik*, *proletariat*, *gulag*, *Futurism*, *formalism*, and more. Have students keep a list of new vocabulary as they read. Each student should choose a different term to research, using the book as well as other print and online sources, and report back to the class.
5. “The symphony meant many things to many people” (page 345). Have students reread passages that describe people’s reactions to and interpretations of the *Leningrad* Symphony. Then, as a class or individually, listen to a recording of the first movement, which is about twenty minutes long and contains the “invasion” march. Hold a class discussion about what students hear in the music and how they react emotionally, having them compare their responses to those discussed in *Symphony for the City of the Dead*. Talk about the imagery created by the “invasion” theme reasserting itself in the distance during the last few seconds of the movement.
6. In researching and conveying the story, M. T. Anderson relied on both primary and secondary sources. Have students find a primary source mentioned in the text, endnotes, or bibliography. Some of them are available online. Students should read all or part of their chosen document and write an essay on the difference between reading a secondary source, which assembles and analyzes information, and a primary source. The essay should connect the primary source to *Symphony for the City of the Dead*. Here are two online primary sources of interest:

“Muddle Instead of Music,” *Pravda* article about Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* (discussed in the chapter “Life Is Getting Merrier”): <http://www.arnoldschalks.nl/tlteisub1.html>

“Music: Shostakovich and the Guns,” *Time* magazine article on the *Leningrad* Symphony (at Chicago Symphony Orchestra archives): <https://csoarchives.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/time-magazine-article-1942.pdf>
7. Near the end of the book, M. T. Anderson quotes from conductor Gennady Rozhdestvensky, musicologist Richard Taruskin, composer Sofia Gubaidulina, poet Anna Akhmatova, and Shostakovich himself about his music and its impact (pages 375–377). Have students choose one of these quotations and write an essay reflecting on it. They should discuss whether they agree with the quote, referring to specific passages in the book. They could also address the author’s own statement that Shostakovich’s music “gave a voice to the silenced” (page 376) and discuss whether the book substantiates that idea.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



photo by Seungja Simms

M. T. Anderson is the author of *Feed*, winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, as well as *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation, Volume I: The Pox Party*, winner of the National Book Award and a *New York Times* bestseller, and its sequel, *Volume II: The Kingdom on the Waves*, which was also a *New York Times* bestseller. Both volumes were also named Michael L. Printz Honor Books. M. T. Anderson lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.