Judge Dennis Davis | The Babi Yar Symphony

– I do apologise for the fact that you're not going to see me, but I'm sure all the music will be heard and all the text, which I'm using, which is far more important. My topic tonight is the "Babi Yar Symphony" by Shostakovich. Last couple of hours ago, you listened to Trudy talk about the background to the Babi Yar massacre. Let me just make one or two points in relation to this. We know that in 1941 the massacre took place. Extraordinarily, we know that close to 34,000 people were killed alone in the first two days. We also know that two years later, in 1943, whilst retreating over the same ground, the Germans decided to cover up any signs that this had ever happened. The bodies were dug up by hand, burnt, and evidence was destroyed. But this wasn't only for the benefit of the Nazis. It became apparent that plenty of Ukrainians had assisted in this monstrosity. And whether they were forced to or not, whether they willingly collaborated, is really not the point. The point was that effectively it was all covered up. Now, why this is relevant to me this evening is because in the early, in the late 50s, about 1960-odd, a young poet by the name of Yevgeny Yevtushenko was taken to see the site. And the fact that there was no memorial on display had horrified him almost as much as the atrocity itself. The nightmare of Babi Yar had basically been suppressed, had been discussed only in corridors, as it were, and he, who certainly was committed to fighting antisemitism wherever it was found, as well as exposing the horrors of the Soviet Union's past, this was something which was absolutely an atrocity of the worst kind.

Now, I'm not going to talk about Yevtushenko this evening, for the simple and obvious reason that you are going to get a lecture from David Peeler, but I have to deal with it because it's central to the Shostakovitch "Symphony Number 13." Now, Yevtushenko produced this poem in 1961, in which he effectively attacked Soviet indifference to this Nazi massacre. It was read in public. It became extraordinarily controversial within a very period. The point however was that once Yevtushenko had published his poem, it attracted the attention of no less than Dmitri Shostakovich. And I want to put up the first, if I could, Lauren, the first little bit of text, please, because this is Shostakovich's words himself talking about the symphony and about his reaction to Yevtushenko's poem. "I often test the person by his attitude towards the Jews. In our day and age, any person with pretensions of decency cannot be anti-Semitic. The Jews are a symbol for me. All of man's defensiveness is concentrated in them. After the war, I tried to convey that feeling in my music. It was a bad time for Jews then. In fact, it is always a bad time for them. We must never forget about the dangers of anti-Semitism and keep reminding others of it, because the infection is alive and who knows if it ever will disappear. That is why I was overjoyed when I read Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar." The poem astounded me. They tried to destroy the memory of Babi Yar, first the Germans, then the Ukrainian government, but after

Yevtushenko's poem, it became clear that it would never be forgotten. That is the power of art. People knew about Babi Yar before the poem, but they were silent. But when they read the poem, the silence was broken." And effectively he decided to instantaneously set this to music.

Now, the one thing about this, which I should draw your attention to, is of course, this little extract comes from that rather controversial book by Volkov called "Testimony." And you may argue that, "Ah, well, Shostakovich didn't say this," but I think that this part of the text of "Testimony" is probably accurate for a reason that let me share with you. Because Yevtushenko himself was interviewed about the Shostakovich symphony, and about how it came about that Shostakovich used the Yevtushenko poem for his "Symphony Number 13." This is what he said: "We were not acquainted at the time. He telephoned me and asked, as he put it, for 'my kind permission' to write music to my poem, "Babi Yar." I was stunned by his call and I answered, 'But of course, please.' He replied joyfully, 'Wonderful!' 'The music is already written, come and hear it.'" Yevtushenko continues: "The most thrilling performance was the very first one, when Shostakovich himself sang it for me, sitting at the piano. He played and sang all the parts, the soloists, the chorus and the orchestra. His eyes were filled with tears. He decided all by himself to set the text to music the way he'd done. It amazed me. If I'd been able to write music, this is exactly the music I would've written for this poem, for he had combined seemingly incompatible things: requiem, satire, and sad lyricism. When people heard the symphony, they cried, became indignant, and which happened very rarely, they laughed. After we met, I began to visit him often at home. We became friends." It is astonishing that Shostakovich would've engaged in this really controversial project, because, let me explain why I say that. Yevtushenko wrote the poem around about 1961, 62. '62 it was published. At that particular point in history, there'd been a thaw in the Stalinist sort of totalitarian regime. Khrushchev for a while had actually been relatively relaxed about criticism, and indeed Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" had been basically personally allowed by Khrushchev to be published. But by '62, things have changed. Khrushchev himself attacked the decadence of modern art, and he quoted a Russian poem about it, saying, "The grave cures the hunchback." Yevtushenko himself had thought that it was no longer the grave, but life itself. And therefore, the reception of Yevtushenko's poem was already becoming extremely controversial. How ironic it was that Shostakovich decided to essentially reduce the poem to music in circumstances where he must have known that there was considerable controversy. And here's the thing, think about it, I've already discussed with you, or some of you might have listened, the Shostakovich "Fifth Symphony," the symphony which he wrote in response to the criticism launched against him by Stalin for "Macbeth," particularly Macbeth, and the fact that he therefore had to withdraw the "Fourth Symphony." That was the first time that Shostakovich

really felt that his life could come to an end. And those of you who you've read Julian Barnes's "Noise of Time" will know exactly what I'm talking about, if you hadn't listened to my earlier presentation on the Shostakovich "Fifth" Some years later, Shostakovich wrote "Symphony Number Eight," which is really regarded perhaps as a Stalingrad symphony. And again, there was huge criticism about this particular symphony and he came under real attack. So it was quite extraordinary that the most neurotic of composers, a man who clearly everybody suggested was terribly nervous, would again stick his neck out and publish, write this "13th Symphony" on a topic which already was coming under attack, by the virtue of the criticism of the Yevtushenko poem. And indeed the background to the symphony is remarkable. Mravinsky, the conductor of almost all of the earlier Shostakovich symphonies declined to be involved. He was not prepared to conduct such a controversial work at all. And then it meant that one had to look for someone else. And the younger Kirill Kondrashin, he was asked to conduct it. And even though he was aware that the official attitude to this particular symphony was decidedly negative, he decided he would go ahead. And what he knew very well was that great pressure was going to be put on musicians to actually participate in the "Babi Yar" symphony. He thus chose to have two basses. You'll see there's a single bass, a singer soloist. He managed to get two. And in fact, the first one, the real choice, was a man called Victor, and I'm going to pronounce this improperly, so I do apologise, Nechipailo. But he, at a rehearsal, asked Shostakovich why Shostakovich was writing about anti-Semitism, when, quotes, "There was none in the Soviet Union." Shostakovich was furious, said of course there was. And the result was that Nechipailo decided that he wasn't prepared to sing it. The fact that he suddenly managed to get a singing role in "Don Carlos" at the Bolshoi was another matter. But Kondrashin had essentially got a second bass, a Vitali Gromadsky, and he was the person who sang the first solo at the very first performance. But that wasn't the only thing, I might add. Kondrashin was asked to take a phone call in the middle of the final rehearsal from the Russian Minister of Culture, Popov. Popov asked if the symphony could be performed without the most politically sensitive first movement. No, said Kondrashin, it couldn't. Was there anything that might prevent the conductor from performing that night, continued Popov, in his threatening manner. Kondrashin refused and the symphony actually took place. But what is interesting about that concert, which took place with the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatoire was this, that the planned television broadcast was cancelled. The entire square outside was cordoned off by police who didn't want the performance to be an opportunity for opposition demonstrators. The hall, however, was packed, save for the significantly empty government box. No government representative attended. But it was, therefore, an extraordinary concert. And to a large degree, it was an extraordinary success. What is also interesting is that Yevtushenko did cave in to some pressure, because he slightly rewrote the poem, finally agreeing to the authorities'

demands to include some lines about the role of the Soviet people in the war, and to make it clear that it was not only the Jews who suffered, but Russians and Ukrainians as well. Shostakovich had felt somewhat let down by this acquiescence. And it is suggested that it was Kondrashin who essentially put pressure on Yevtushenko to save the symphony, which otherwise might have been banned. So much, therefore, for the extraordinary background to a symphony of such a remarkable kind.

Now, the second point I want to make in relation, having given you the background, is to point out to you that there are five movements in this particular symphony. It takes over an hour to complete, but only the first movement is about the "Babi Yar" poem. In other words, what Shostakovich did was to set Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar" poem as a single movement cantata. It was supposed to be a standalone piece. But he then continued to develop and took further Yevtushenko poems and put together what was therefore a five-movement symphony with a solo bass and a male chorus. And in effect, therefore, the symphony is not just a case of the "Babi Yar" poem, but a range of other poetry in relation to Yevtushenko. Now, I'm going to, although I'm sure that David is going to take you through the text of "Babi Yar," I need, however, to just give you the text because I want you to understand what is actually being sung. And two of the clips have got subtitles, but not the third. So let me just start off by showing you what in fact the text of the first movement, the "Babi Yar" movement, is, and then we'll talk a little bit about the music. So we can get to see, there we go. This is the text of the "Babi Yar" poem, which was set to music by Shostakovich. "Over Babi Yar there are no monuments. The steep precipice is like a crude gravestone. I am terrified. I am as old today as all Jewish people. Now I imagine that I'm a Jew. Here I wander through ancient Egypt. And here, on the cross, crucified, I perish. And still I have on me the marks of the nails. I imagine myself to be Dreyfus. The Philistine, my informer and judge. I'm behind bars, I'm surrounded, persecuted, spat on, slandered. And dainty ladies in Brussels frills, squealing, poke their parasols into my face. I imagine myself the boy from Belostok. Blood flows, running over the floors. The rabble-rousers in the taverns commit their outrage, reeking of vodka and onions, half and half. Kicked by boot, I lie helpless. In vain I plead with the pogrom-makers. Accompanied by jeers, "Beat the yid, save Russia!" A grain merchant batters my mother. Oh, my Russian people, I know you are innately international. But often those whose hands were vile in vain used their purest name. I know the goodness of my land. What base lowness, without a quiver of a vein, the anti-Semites proclaimed themselves." Now, that's the text of the "Babi Yar" poem. And it is also, therefore, the text of the first movement. And I'm going to go now to talk to you about the first movement of the five. I can't possibly lecture on all five. I don't have enough time. I'm going to deal with three of the movements and try to explain them to you. Now, this is the text of movement one, the "Babi Yar" poem. When you listen, I'm going to play you the first five

minutes of a recording of "Babi Yar." I want to explain that movement to you. I want you to think, just to observe, that there are three separate musical themes, as it were, which Shostakovich employs in this regard. The first, perhaps before I even say that, is he chose the key of B-flat minor. It's a very dark key. It's a key of great sadness. It's very rarely used by composers. But that's the key in which the "13th Symphony" opens. There are three themes that he introduces within the first five, six minutes of the hour, and they repeat themselves in amazing, transformative ways throughout the symphony, as I will try to explain as we go along. But will you, please, when you listen, and I know, I want to make an apology immediately, when we do these lectures on Zoom, I can't get you the clarity of sound that we would do if we were sitting all together, but bearing that in mind, if you wouldn't mind listening carefully to the first five minutes. It starts with a bell, very much reminiscent of Mahler, who used bells as well. And so it's a bell, and then a very, very dark start, which is effectively the "Babi Yar" theme. "Over Babi Yar there are no monuments." "There are no monuments," said Yevtushenko. And the first theme articulates that. It is desolate, and apart from the bell, which comes tolling in at various sequences throughout the symphony, you have this dark theme. Then the choir comes in. It's a totally male choir, which of course, given the nature of that, itself has a certain kind of almost ponderous sadness to it, in keeping with the key which opens the symphony. And we could call that the theme of memory. It's, if you'll notice, it has very kind of a small grouping of notes, which are sung by the, first by the choir, and then by the bass soloist. And it's effectively a sense of recapturing some sense of memory of Babi Yar, where, "There are no monuments," and where, "The steep precipice is like a crude gravestone." And then there's a third theme that comes in. It's a kind of an oom-pah-pah theme. And that's the theme of menace, it's the theme of thuggery. It's the theme in which Shostakovich seeks to give musical content, as it were, to the, "Blood flows." "The rabble-rousers in the tavern commit their outrages "reeking of vodka and onions, half and half." Of drunken louts, of people of absolute psychopathic tendencies who are there merely to create mayhem. And so the third theme, this oom-pah theme, is a theme which Shostakovich tries to capture the menace of that which has caused the massacre in the first place. Now these three themes, which you will find played in the first five minutes, it's all you'll have to hear, five minutes of the symphony, come up over and over again in different guises, in different transformative measure. And I'll try to explain that when we get to the second, the second movement of the symphony. But here, one little apology, the recording I am playing comes from the Proms, and it is conducted by Valery Gergiev, which I'm embarrassed about, bearing in mind his friendship with Putin. And I chose it only because it's got nice subtitles and because I didn't have to then extract the whole symphony. I'll come back to the best recordings a little later in my lecture. But with that apology, let's listen to the first five minutes and the three different themes, which Shostakovich announces

within the first five minutes.

(Movement 1 of the 1962 symphony "Babi-Yar" plays)

– Okay, Lauren, can we move on? Lauren? Thanks. I just wanted to point out again, you'll have noticed three themes that come through. The "Babi Yar," the toning, and those first notes in the darkest of keys. The second, where the choir comes and then the soloist, which you could call a type of remembrance, even though there's no memory of Babi Yar. And the third, the menacing theme of the thugs, the oom-pom-pom-pom, which is basically the third. And then the way he intermingles them, it's actually an extraordinary crafting of the music to capture three themes to reflect a poem, which is taken and essentially expanded into this extraordinary symphony, arguably the last great symphony of the 20th century. Let us now move on, if I may, to talk to you about the second movement. And let us just put the text of the second movement up. The second movement is called "Humour." And what he's trying to do here is take another of the Yevtushenko poetry, and essentially try to show the power of the buffoon to make tyrants tremble, the inability of leaders, as it were, to muzzle kind of humour, even if it's black humour. The court jesters are able to say what others might not be able to, the ability of laughter to essentially produce resistance. "Rulers of the world commanded parades. But humour, humour they could not. To the palaces of the eminent, who, well groomed, all day reclined. Come the vagabond Aesop. And before him all appeared impoverished. In homes where a hypocrite left traces of his puny feet. And this banality, Hadji Nasr-ed-Din swept aside with his jokes like a chessboard. They wanted to buy humour, only he couldn't be bought. They wanted to kill humour, but humour thumbed his nose." Now, Shostakovich now basically puts this to music. And observe what he does. We'll listen to the first three or four minutes of it, he takes that third menacing theme, and he totally transforms it, as it were, into a theme that reflects the power of humour. It's not as menacing as previously, it has a slightly more oom-pah-ish sound to it, which is different, but it's the same notes done differently in order to reflect the different poem. So here we can have a look at the clip, the second of the clips, in relation to the music, the second movement called "Humour," a different poem by Yevtushenko, put to music, illustrating, as it were, a different resistance to totalitarianism. Yeah, that's the one.

(Movement 2 of the 1962 symphony "Babi-Yar" plays)

– All right, Lauren, we can carry on. We can stop this, thank you. Again, I just wanted you to note just how it takes the third of the three themes that I spoke about, and changes it from the way we were introduced to it in the first movement, the "Babi Yar" poem, in order to give a different content to the way in which he's seeking to set the second poem, "Humour," to the idea of the fact that humour is one of the great attacks that we can have against totalitarian regimes. I

should not have to tell any Jewish audience that it's extraordinary how Jewish humour has lasted throughout the vicissitudes of our history in the manner in which it has. Then there are two more movements before we get to the last, the third movement, again, a further poem by Yevtushenko. And this particular poem, which he relates to, is about women, actually. It's a tribute to women. It's called "In the Store." And what it tries to show is the way in which oppressed and powerless women, in particular, have to deal with the exigencies and depression of Russian society, the shortages, the way they've managed to hold together families under extraordinary circumstance, showing strength and dignity in this particular process, including during the war, for which they very rarely got rewarded. The fourth movement, "Fears," is an extraordinary movement. It might well be the most shattering of all. It's basically, again, Yevtushenko talking about the oppressive culture of Stalin's political crackdown, the Great Terror of the 1930s, when ordinary people lived through the secret fear of anonymous denunciation, the secret fear of a knock on the door in the middle of the night. This was a particular poem that Yevtushenko actually wrote specifically for the "Babi Yar" symphony. And it's set to music. It, as I say, Shostakovich commissioned it, and it really is a menacing movement with atmosphere, again, appropriating the three themes, but in a manner which only puts fear into one's heart. And then finally we get to the final movement, called "Careers." And I want to put the text of "Careers" up for you, if I may, before we actually listen to it. This is what he talks about. "The clergy maintained that Galileo was a weak and senseless man. Galileo was senseless, but as time demonstrated, he who is senseless is much wiser. A fellow scientist of Galileo's age was no less wise than Galileo. He knew that the earth revolved, but he had a family. And he stepped into a carriage with his wife, having accomplished his betrayal, considered himself advancing his career, whereas he undermined it. For his assertion of our planet, Galileo faced the risk alone, and became truly great. Now this, to my mind, this is a true careerist! Thus, salute to the career when the career is similar. Shakespeare and Pasteur, and Newton and Tolstoy. And Tolstoy. Leo? Leo! Why was mud flung at him? Talent is talent, brand them as one may. Those who cursed him are forgotten, but the accursed are remembered well. All those who yearned for the stratosphere, the doctors who perished fighting cholera, they were pursuing a career. I take as an example their careers. I believe in their sacred belief. Their belief is my courage. I pursue my career by not pursuing it." In other words, what Shostakovich was trying to recall here through the poem was the fact that those who are careerists, ultimately, essentially are opportunists in a totalitarian society. But those who essentially do not become careerists, who ultimately use their talent for talent's sake, that's a different matter entirely. And what he's doing is condemns those who are silent in order to preserve their careers, beginning with the example of Galileo, who dared to speak out against scientific censorship, and now, of course, is remembered as a genius. And so he basically composes his final movement in a way

almost reflective of himself, saying, "I had to, as it were, put away my career to some extent in order to give vent to my talent and in a sense to ensure that truth would be outward out." And bearing in mind that as I've indicated at the beginning, Shostakovich took three major risks, one with the "Macbeth" opera, two with the 8th "Stalingrad" symphony, and now this one for all of the reasons that I've advanced. It is quite astonishing that someone so neurotic would essentially have embraced the Yevtushenko poem and essentially, as it were, set his face against careerists who dominated both the Stalinist and Khrushchev eras. Now, I'm not going to play the whole of the final movement. I'm going to give you the last four and a half minutes. And you'll notice here the "Babi Yar" theme, the one that started the symphony in that dark minor key, comes back. The bell tolls. There's then a beautiful celeste sound. And the music subsides into complete quietness, almost as if to say that, "I've done my bit, I've essentially not been a careerist, I'm able, as it were, to come to terms with myself in my protests against totalitarian regimes." So here is the last few minutes of this extraordinary work, which, as I say, ends so quietly, but which recalls the "Babi Yar" theme, the tolling of the bell again, and effectively reverts back to the beginning, but in a transformed fashion.

(Movement 3 of the 1962 symphony "Babi-Yar" plays)

– Thanks, Lauren. I don't know about you, but it is for me an utterly astounding work. And I just want to end with a couple of points before I deal with the Shostakovich quote on, well, let me deal with that first. Shostakovich wrote, "The majority of my symphonies are tombstones. Too many of our people died and were buried in places unknown to anyone. I'm willing to write a composition for each of the victims, but that's impossible. That's why I dedicate my music to them all. The rarest and most valuable thing is memory. It's been trampled down for decades. How we treat the memory of others is how our memory will be treated." So, very interesting insight. And when you think about the fact that this symphony, which is one of the great contributions of 20th century symphonic music, really does in fact perpetuate memory, by taking up various forms of Yevtushenko poetry and turning them into this remarkable symphony, all based on three themes, transformed, transfigured and shaped to accord with the various poetry. It's a remarkable achievement of music.

Let me finish by saying that I hope you'll listen to it, if you haven't before. There are a couple of very remarkable recordings. Let me give you three. There's Riccardo Muti and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. There is Vasily Petrenko and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. He's now the conductor of, I think, the Philharmonia Orchestra in London. I heard him do a remarkable Mahler's "Sixth" very recently. But it's a fantastic recording. And there is also a remarkable recording by Bernard Haitink with the Concertgebouw Orchestra. All three are just fabulous, and they reflect, it seems to

me, the depth of this music. And therefore, I hope that you'll listen to it, because in some ways it gives us the ability to treat memory as we should. And as Shostakovich has said, "How we treat the memory of others, is how our memory will itself be treated." Thank you very much for listening. I just want to check if anyone wants to ask anything. Now, thank you very much to those of you who've complimented me. I am interested, Michael, when you said you had the opportunity to hear Yuri Temirkanov conducting "Babi Yar" in Baltimore with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, with a request that there'd be no applause. I think that's right. I think it's almost something where you want to walk out quietly into the night and reflect upon the glorious music, which is essentially based on these poems in the way they are. And having listened to Trudy's lecture, of course, of the traumatic events of Babi Yar, I cannot think of any piece of music, which in a sense gives me some level of comfort that the memory will be perpetuated and that the music reflects the angst and the desperation of those times. Thank you very much.