

Write Now!

What I Learned about Writing from the Shostakovich Symphony Number 5



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I recently had an opportunity to share my fondest memories from high school with some former classmates. These memories centered around creation, synergism and a fabulous piece of music: the Shostakovich Symphony Number 5. We were part of an excellent wind ensemble that year. But even for us, the Shostakovich was a bit beyond our grasp. We were all keen to learn it, however, so we persisted.

For the next few months, the whole group worked towards our shared goal of mastering this piece of music. Unfortunately, by December, we were not far enough along in our progress. So our music teacher made the call: we were to stop working on it. There simply wasn't time to get it ready in time for our spring competitions. We were disappointed, but knew the decision was right.

Later that spring, we were on a tour and warming up before a concert. Suddenly, three of our trumpet players started playing the opening segment from the Shostakovich. We all stopped what we were doing and stared. It was back—and we wanted to play it.

For the next several weeks, we worked like mad on that piece of music. At that point in my life, I had never experienced anything quite like it, the way that whole group pulled together. We improved, but it never quite jelled. We kept at it anyway.

And then it happened.

We were in the warm-up room at our competition, running through the pieces we were to perform. And the Shostakovich finally came together. We finished playing and just stared at each other. We had done it--and we knew it! I will never forget that moment.

After that amazing year, the members of the wind ensemble went our separate ways. I, for one, became a writer. But the experiences with the Shostakovich have served me well. It was the first time that I was a part of the transcendent act of creation—but it was not to be my last.

For me, writing is every bit as miraculous as when that piece of music finally—and magically--came together.

Something else that I took from that experience was that it didn't "just happen." Indeed, we probably all worked harder than we had ever worked. And there were plenty of

times when we did not think it was going to happen for us. But we hung in there through our struggles.

As a writer, that was a valuable lesson to learn. There have been many times when I've walked along that precarious ledge of creation, reaching for something that is maybe just beyond my grasp. As a result, the process of writing has never been easy for me. In fact, it's the hardest work I do. (And I'm frankly suspicious when someone tells me that writing is "fun.") But when I finish, and when the words finally come together and suddenly "click," the experience takes me to a different world.

There's one other thing I'd like to share. Sometimes, when new writers begin the process of writing, they often look at what others have written and feel that they will never measure up. If that is you, I would like to encourage you with something else I learned from my life as a musician. If you are looking at, or listening to, someone else's creation, it may appear from the outside to be "effortless." I'm here to tell you that that is a false perception. Almost any act of creation requires effort—sometimes years' worth of false starts, bad notes, and some seriously boring preparation.

But if you persist, you'll have an opportunity to participate in one of life's most wondrous experiences: creating something that is beyond yourself.

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