As mentioned, Myaskovsky spent some time during the First World War in the Estonian capital, Tallinn. In December 1917, a few weeks after the October Revolution, he was transferred to the general staff of the fleet in St. Petersburg (the city was still called this by its inhabitants, although it had officially been renamed Petrograd). In the extremely brief period from 20th December 1917 until 5th April 1918, far away from the horrors of war, he completed not only his ***Symphony No.4 in E minor***, Op. 17, but also his *Fifth Symphony.* He composed partly in his spare time, but also sometimes 'as duty officer […] on the night watch in unheated rooms of the Admiralty' (S. Gulinskaya). The *Fourth* is one of the works that the composer particularly liked; he had started to conceive it while still in Tallinn. He dedicated the symphony to Vasily Yakovlev, whose acquaintance he had made during military training in St Petersburg, and who similarly moved into a musical career, working as a respected musicologist.

Unlike Myaskovsky's earlier symphonies, this work moves towards a conclusion in the major. He claimed to have planned the symphony originally as 'quiet, simple and humble', and the beginning indeed expresses this spirit, adding an anguished idea based on the simplest imaginable germ cell: two notes forming a rising interval of a second. The most important word in the tempo marking, *Andante, mesto con sentiment, is 'mesto'* ('sad'); the tempo itself is of little relevance, as slow and fast passages constantly alternate, forming a contrast that becomes ever more dramatic, even vehement. It is understandable that this movement has often been interpreted as an echo of the composer's wartime experiences. Myaskovsky described the opening of the second movement as 'cold and without feeling' – *Largo, freddo e senza expression*; it begins with a powerful fugato, but its extensive passages of lyrical writing are far removed from that. The composer once said, not unexpectedly, that he had been inspired by the atmosphere of Russian cradle songs when writing this movement. The finale, *Allegro energico e marcato*, is the first properly fast movement in the symphony; fundamentally in rondo form, it is slowly but surely built up to a radiant conclusion with a robust instinct for drama.

In his 'Autobiographical Notes', Myaskovsky observed that 'the war enriched my store of internal and external impressions, and at the same time somehow provoked a certain lightening of my musical thoughts'. The *Fourth Symphony* is an excellent example of this.
No less than four years (1927-31) passed between Myaskovsky's *Tenth* and *Eleventh Symphonies* – by his standards, an unusually long time. Apart from composing three short orchestral works, Op.32, he was then principally occupied with string quartets, piano music, songs, and music for wind band. This pause in his orchestral output is puzzling. Whilst Soviet musicologists liked to claim that Myaskovsky had adjusted himself in a positive sense to the new era, other scholars believe that he underwent a personal crisis. It is certain that he left the Association for Contemporary Music (ASM) in 1931 – followed by Kabalevsky, Shebalin and others – and that the period of great artistic freedom in the young Soviet Union was gradually coming to an end; in 1932 the association of avant-garde composers (and other artists) were forcibly dissolved by the government, and the principles of Socialist Realism were established, with which all composers were expected to align themselves. Just before that in 1931, Myaskovsky wrote his ***Symphony No.11 in B flat minor***, Op.34, which he dedicated to the composer Maximilian Steinberg, son-in-law of Rimsky-Korsakov. The symphony was not, however, premiered until 16th January 1933 in Moscow, by which time he had partially revised the score, especially the finale. He described the work as a portrait of subjective emotions.

At first glance the work appears to be classically constructed, although it contains some interesting details. The formal unity of this three-movement symphony is achieved not least by its essentially monothematic structure: the basic thematic material is presented in the first movement's slow introduction (Lento) and is then developed further, in an almost nervous manner, in the *Allegro agitato.* The essentially sublime beginning of the *Andante* is unexpectedly followed by a sonorous woodwind fugato, *Adagio, ma non tanto*, whilst the finale, *Precipitato – Allegro*, offers another formal surprise: a series of variations on several themes, one of which comes from the second movement, combined with sonata form; it was especially the development section that was extended during the revising of the symphony. The work is, admittedly, in the minor key, but it contains extensive positive passages and serves as a good example of Myaskovsky's 'easy'style, of the works that are easily understood and uncomplicated**.**
© Per Skans 2002

Again as mentioned before, Myaskovsky spent some time during the War in Tallinn, and a few weeks after the Revolution, was transferred to St. Petersburg, where in that brief period away from the horrors, he completed not only his *Fourth Symphony*, but also his ***Symphony No.5 in D major*****,** Op.18, and it is striking that the two works bear consecutive opus numbers. When the world-renowned conductor Nikolai Malko gave its first performance in Moscow on 18th August 1920, the audience, enchanted, demanded an encore of the third movement. The piece soon became a huge international success in a way that listeners of today – who are no longer used to Myaskovsky's music being performed regularly – might find sensational. Soon after the Moscow performance, the symphony was heard to great public approbation in Madrid, Prague, Vienna, Chicago and Philadelphia; and when Stokowski conducted it in New York, Sergei Prokofiev told his friend Myaskovsky that the demand for tickets for this acclaimed concert was so great that, despite their prominence, he, Joseph Szigeti, Alexander Siloti and Alfredo Casella could only obtain standing places !

Three factors in particular help to explain the success of this symphony. Firstly, it was wholly in accord with the spirit of the era. Before and during the war years, international audiences had waited in vain

for Russian symphonies in the traditional style; the major works that had appeared – for instance those of Skryabin – had little in common with these traditions, and other composers were unable to make a significant impact there. Secondly, it is an extremely fresh work (it is, incidentally, Myaskovsky's first symphony in a major key). Finally, some passages are clearly influenced by folk music – even though it was written more than a decade before this was to become an artistic principle, one of the basic tenets of Socialist Realism. Along with the *Fourth Symphony*, this work was often described as the 'birth of Soviet Russian symphonism'.

The symphony begins peacefully, as is suggested by the tempo marking, *Allegretto amabile*: pastoral themes and archaic phrases alternate, with an impressive climax towards the end of the development section. Myaskovsky regarded the second movement, *Lento (quasi andante)*, followed by an *Andante*, as especially successful. It begins with a melancholy berceuse, after which follows a restless second theme. Next comes what is perhaps the strangest section of the entire symphony, in which two themes are combined in a highly dramatic fashion in a long and technically brilliant fugato. The scherzo, *Allegro burlando*, is based on Myaskovsky's recollections of the times he spent on the Austrian front; the main theme is a Ukrainian Christmas melody (*kolyadka*) from Galicia that he noted down in the vicinity of Lvov; it is here combined with two related melodies. The finale, *Allegro risoluto e con brio*, presents a great variety of thematic material, including the powerful subsidiary theme of the first movement. The theme finally emerges majestically from among the others and provides a grandiose, hymn-like conclusion.

After the *Tenth Symphony*, four whole years had passed (1927-31) before Myaskovsky wrote his *Eleventh*. That work appeared in 1931 but, even while he was working on it, ideas were forming for its successor; work on the new symphony continued so seamlessly that these two pieces also bear successive opus numbers. The ***Symphony No.12 in G minor***, Op.35, bore the dedication 'For the fifteenth anniversary of the October Revolution': despite experiencing ill health, Myaskovsky composed the piece during the winter of 1931-2, completing it on 31st January 1932. The premiere was given on 1st July of that year by the orchestra of the Bolshoi Theatre, with an interesting choice of conductor: the Englishman Albert Coates, who had some Russian roots; he had worked in Russia before the First World War, and had now returned.

Myaskovsky was not at all happy with his interpretation, especially because the conductor paid little attention to his tempi. After Myaskovsky had sat through the rehearsals, with ever increasing grumpiness, he was almost happy to be prevented by a severe bout of 'flu from attending the concert. After the premiere he made some corrections to the score, and the piece was published in time for the anniversary to which the dedication referred - in November (the October Revolution was always celebrated in November according to the Gregorian calendar introduced after it had taken place).

The three movements of the work, which was originally called 'Kolkhoz Symphony', were an attempt to adapt not only to the new, emergent artistic atmosphere (the principles of Socialist Realism had only just been 'cooked up' and were published shortly after the completion of the symphony) but also to the political slogans of the era. The movements served as three images of a Russian village: first of all before the October Revolution, then during the struggle for a new life, and finally after the victory over the Kulaks. The Kulaks, rich farmers who owned large tracts of land, were completely wiped out at the beginning of the Stalinist era, to a large extent by physical extermination; this fact, however, came only gradually to the attention of the Soviet people. The musicologist Levon Habokian stresses that it is only fair to concede that 'this artistic compromise gradually came to fill him [Myaskovsky] with shame' and this also explains the puzzling atmosphere of the *Thirteenth Symphony* composed immediately afterwards.

The first movement is characterized by a rather rhapsodic atmosphere that is unusual in symphonic context. In this movement, Soviet musicologists thought that they could detect a portrayal of 'subjugated peasants' before the Revolution; they never explained, though, how in these circumstances the dance-like high spirits of the *Allegro giocoso* in the latter part of the movement should be understood. Martial brass writing characterizes the *Presto agitato*, the scherzo of the symphony, in which the struggle for a new life is depicted, full of dramatic succinctness. The finale is marked *Allegro festive e maestoso* and has the character of a joyous folk festival; isolated, gloomy reminiscences of the past (in the form of quotations from the first two movements) cannot prevent the arrival of the jubilant conclusion.

© Per Skans 2002

***alto* = a label of Musical Concepts: www.altocd.com**
(ALTO Distribution, Magnus House, 8 Ashfield Rd, Cheadle SK81BB, UK)