

PROGRAM 1

Sergei Eisenstein
(1898-1948)

Dmitri Shostakovich
(1906-1975)

The Battleship Potemkin

Widely considered to be one of the greatest films of all time, it is easy to forget that *The Battleship Potemkin* was created and directed by a relative neophyte within a span of about six months. Sergei Eisenstein received word from the Soviet Central Committee in the spring of 1925 that he was to put together a film, or series of films, commemorating the tumultuous year of 1905 on the twentieth anniversary of the failed Revolution of 1905. The 27-year old Eisenstein had completed a single film by this time, but jumped into the project with the zeal and confidence of a master. With collaborators, he developed a lengthy scenario entitled *The Year 1905*, detailing specific events from that year, of which the *Potemkin* episode formed a very small part (about 5%). As filming got under way, however, the *Potemkin* material blossomed into a full-length feature, and Eisenstein made to decision to put aside the rest of the scenario and rename it accordingly. The film was completed in time for the December commemoration. Subsequent viewings by astonished international audiences over the next few months sent shock waves throughout the cinematic world, instantly establishing Eisenstein's reputation.

The film employs many innovative features, but what left the greatest impression was Eisenstein's development of the technique known as "montage", the use of specific types of editing devices designed to maximize the emotional impact of the narrative. The idea was to juxtapose multiple shots to achieve meaning not contained in either shot alone. Eisenstein later explained his approach to montage: "Montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots...; each sequential element is perceived not next to the other but on top of the other." Eisenstein's use of montage is perhaps best displayed in the iconic Odessa Steps scene from *Potemkin*, with quickening cuts that create rhythmic dissonance against the images of marching soldiers, firing guns, and chaotic throng spilling down the flight of stairs. While some contemporary critics found the temporal incongruity of the technique jarring, most recognized the dramatic power it conveyed and filmmakers worldwide were thrilled with the creative freedom it afforded.

Eisenstein saw montage as a form of dialectical conflict – arriving at a synthesis from two opposing ends – aligning his artistic technique with Marxist philosophy and making even the abstract process of constructing the narrative reflect the political tenets of the Soviet Union. But this reflection also arises in more obvious ways. While there are a few key figures in the film (Vakulnichuck and Matushenko in particular), the story itself emphasizes the wisdom and power of collective action: there is no single heroic figure central to the plot, and Eisenstein is careful not to shoot the film from any

particular character's perspective. Indeed, when the shots pan wide over large groups of people, for example in the quarterdeck scene just prior to the mutiny, the crowd's movement seems akin to the limbs or cells of a single living organism. Disdain for religion and the bourgeoisie are expressed through a series of angry and violent reactions to each. Despite these aspects of the film, it is impossible to dismiss it as propaganda, as the crux of the film is not so much its political message as its portrayal of genuine, emotional drama.

The *Potemkin*, part of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, was commissioned in 1904, carrying about 700 sailors and crew and 18 officers. Growing displeasure with the Czarist government led the Russian Social Democratic Organization (the precursor to the Communist Party) to hatch a plan to stage a simultaneous uprising on all ships of the Black Sea Fleet in the fall of 1905, but the word of the plan was late to arrive to the sailors on *Potemkin*, who conducted their own mutiny on June 27, 1905, the focus of Eisenstein's film. Seven of the officers were killed during the rebellion, as was one sailor, Vakulnichuk. Strengthened and cheered by the citizens of the nearby port of Odessa, the sailors bravely faced the oncoming advance of two squadrons, depicted at the end of the film. With no country willing to re-supply the *Potemkin* as the sailors pursued their quest to overthrow the regime, they were forced to disembark in Constanta, Romania. Most of the mutineers remained in Romania until 1917; those 60 who returned earlier (including the leader Matushenko) were swiftly imprisoned or executed. Lenin later credited the *Potemkin* uprising with sparking the revolutionary zeal of the people, tracing a direct line from their actions to the Revolution of 1917.

The music used to accompany *The Battleship Potemkin* has evolved over time (and continues to today, with a new score by the Pet Shop Boys penned in 2004). Originally, the Central Committee had agreed to assign Prokofiev the task of composing a new score for the film. Eisenstein later commented on this failed collaboration, "The lofty peaks of musical genius and bureaucracy could not be reconciled. I had the good fortune to [eventually] share in this notable man's creativity [in *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*]. But in 1925, we only dreamed about this." For the premiere, for which the film was barely spliced together in time, a hastily prepared score was thrown together using bits of overtures from Litolff and Beethoven, with some Tchaikovsky as well. Edmund Meisel quickly put together an original score of his own for the German premiere a few months later, and this became the standard accompaniment for at least 25 years, until Nikolai Kryukov provided another score in 1950. For the jubilee re-release of the film in 1976 in the Soviet Union, a decision was made to produce a new score made from portions of Symphony No. 4, 5, 10, and 11 of Dmitri Shostakovich.

Shostakovich had scored over 30 films during the course of his career, but had never collaborated with Eisenstein directly, though the two artists knew and admired each other. (Shostakovich's music had also been used for a re-released version of Eisenstein's *October* in 1967, but the composer had no direct involvement in the project). Soviet musicologists found in these Shostakovich symphonies the drama and epic quality that could match Eisenstein's print. Most prominently featured is Symphony No. 11, a natural choice both for its vivid musical imagery, alternately menacing and funereal, and

for its own subtext: Shostakovich subtitled it “The Year 1905” and depicted specific events from the year in his score (though not the *Potemkin* episode). Overall, the new score lends itself well to live performance. Not only is the music glorious in its full acoustical form, but since it was not composed with the intention of direct depiction of actions on the screen, there is some room for creative interpretation of the score. Though there are visual cues and timings to keep the music and film generally in synch, there is less need to maintain exact frame-to-measure correspondence (except in a few places, such as the bugle calls). Nevertheless, the choices of the Shostakovich selections are quite brilliant, matching the on-screen action and heightening the emotional impact of the visual images in much the same way that Eisenstein’s own use of montage does.