

Clarifying a confused debate

The legacy of Dmitri Shostakovich

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A quarter century after his death, interest in the works of Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich has never been greater, while the debate over the relationship of this music to the history of the twentieth century continues to rage.

Shostakovich's extraordinary 15 symphonies and 15 string quartets, many believe, rank him with Beethoven in terms of both the magnitude of the output and its depth and originality. In addition to the symphonies and chamber music, Shostakovich also produced concertos, song cycles, ballets, film scores, music for solo piano and two operas.

In the years immediately after the 1917 Revolution Shostakovich had studied with Alexander Glazunov at the Petrograd (later Leningrad) Conservatory, and through Glazunov he absorbed the idiom and tradition of such Russian masters as Rimsky-Korsakov, who had been Glazunov's teacher, as well as Tchaikovsky and especially Modest Mussorgsky. Shostakovich's interest in Mussorgsky can be seen in the fact that he produced orchestrations of two of Mussorgsky's operatic masterpieces, *Boris Godunov* (in 1940) and *Khovanshchina* (in 1959).

But Shostakovich was far from a simple follower of the nineteenth century Russian masters. While he usually stayed within the framework of traditional tonality and rejected the twelve-tone school pioneered by Arnold Schönberg, his work is completely infused with a twentieth century sensibility. Among the greatest influences on the young Soviet composer were Gustav Mahler, the late Romantic composer who was the greatest symphonist of the first decade of the twentieth century, and Igor Stravinsky, the Russian composer who emigrated after the Russian Revolution, who first came to the attention of the musical world with his three great ballets, *The Firebird*, *Petroushka* and *The Rite of Spring*, composed in quick succession between 1910 and 1913. Both the melancholy, introspection and emotional depth of Mahler and the satiric and even grotesque elements in Stravinsky can be heard in Shostakovich's work, but transformed into his own unique style and musical language.

The appeal of this music is evident from a look at recent programs at major concert halls in New York City. Over the last few months—despite the attention lavished on Aaron Copland and Kurt Weill in this centenary year of their births—various musical organizations have scheduled an astonishing number of Shostakovich's works.

Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk, the opera first performed in 1934 and not heard for decades after it was officially denounced by Pravda in 1936, was given an effective production at the Metropolitan Opera.

At the same time, the San Francisco Symphony came to New York's Carnegie Hall to perform Shostakovich's 11th Symphony, subtitled "The Year 1905," a programmatic work on the struggle against czarism and its suppression that year. The New York Philharmonic performed Shostakovich's 14th Symphony the week of March 30. Later this spring it will present the famous Leningrad Symphony, the Seventh.

The most ambitious series of programs, entitled The Shostakovich Project, was presented by the acclaimed Emerson String Quartet. All 15 quartets were presented in a series of five recitals at New York's Lincoln

Center. This was followed by "The Noise of Time," a theater-concert piece that was presented for a total of six performances by the London-based Theatre de Complicite. This unusual production was divided into two halves: a multimedia evocation of Shostakovich's life and times, using poetry, projected images, the reading of letters, snatches of music and radio broadcasts, followed by the performance by the Emerson Quartet of Shostakovich's final 15th Quartet.

This musical and extra-musical activity reflects a growing consensus on the depth and originality of Shostakovich's music. There is anything but consensus, however, when it comes to an analysis of its meaning and significance.

The debate on his legacy began more than 20 years ago, with the publication of "Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich, as Related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov." A young Soviet musicologist who befriended the composer in his last years, Volkov left the USSR soon after Shostakovich's death. "Testimony," purporting to reveal Shostakovich's real views in his own words, appeared in 1979.

Up to this point Dmitri Shostakovich had generally been portrayed as an honored and respected figure, the leading creative musical voice of the Soviet Union. He had been officially criticized both in 1936 and 1948, but the post-Stalin leadership and its cultural establishment did not dwell on those events. For the last 26 years of his life, it appeared that Shostakovich had made his peace with the Moscow bureaucracy, which spuriously claimed to represent the working class and socialism. Shostakovich's name was regularly attached to official statements lending support to Soviet foreign policy and expounding on the Stalinist doctrine of "socialist realism."

Those more thoroughly acquainted with the nature of the regime and its cultural policy had good reason to suspect that the official portrait was not the whole story, but the most widespread view remained that of Shostakovich as a loyal and contented spokesman for Soviet society.

"Testimony" challenged this prevailing conception. The composer, as reported by Volkov, maintained that he was not a pliant tool or loyal spokesman for the authorities. On the contrary, he expressed bitterness about Stalin and his successors. "Stalin was a spider and everyone who approached his nets had to die.... Stalin and Hitler were spiritual relatives," Shostakovich declared, according to Volkov. He suggested that his apparent support for official policy was obtained under duress. Moreover the composer said he had smuggled oppositional themes into many of his major works.

The exultant finale of the Fifth Symphony, one of the most famous classical compositions of the twentieth century, was, according to "Testimony," "forced rejoicing, created under threat." The Seventh Symphony, composed in 1941 and indelibly associated with the siege of Leningrad by the Nazis and the darkest days of the Second World War for the Soviet people, was planned before the war, by Volkov's account. The famous "invasion theme" had nothing to do with fascists: "I was thinking of other enemies of humanity when I composed the theme," Shostakovich

is reported to have told his young friend.

Volkov's book came under immediate attack. The Stalinists, not surprisingly, responded with thunderous denunciations and charges that it was a forgery. It was not only in Moscow that the book was criticized, however. In 1981 Laurel Fay, an American musicologist, wrote an article for the *Russian Review*, published by the strongly anti-communist Hoover Institution, in which she charged that parts of the book had been plagiarized from previously published Russian-language articles by Shostakovich.

Volkov was also reported to have maneuvered himself into a photo at Shostakovich's funeral so that he could be pictured between the composer's widow and daughter. There seemed strong grounds for skepticism about his memoir of the Soviet composer. And Volkov has never answered the charges leveled by Fay.

Nevertheless, with the passing years it has become clear that, whatever the embellishments or distortions contained in "Testimony," it is not a fabrication. It does not present a fundamentally false picture of Shostakovich. The accumulated evidence, including accounts from the composer's former colleagues after the collapse of Stalinism in the USSR, suggest that, like many of his fellow artists and intellectuals, he regarded the ruling bureaucracy with a mixture of hatred, fear and contempt.

Some of Volkov's critics, including Fay in a new biography of the composer published late last year, no longer claim that "Testimony" is a total fraud. Whatever one's evaluation of the book, there are not many today who make the assertion that Shostakovich was a happy Soviet citizen.

The debate on Shostakovich, however, shows few signs of quieting down. It has shifted to a great extent from a dispute on the authenticity of "Testimony" to a broader debate on the meaning of Shostakovich's music and his historical role. The dissolution of the USSR nearly 10 years ago has only fueled the argument, which has become more than ever bound up with assessments of the Cold War and the history of the USSR and of culture in the Soviet Union.

Most critics and classical music listeners tend to agree on the lasting power of Shostakovich's music, and the question that is now posed is: how did he accomplish all of this during the decades of Stalinist dictatorship?

Did the composer "learn" from the official criticism, conform to the doctrine of socialist realism and thus find the right road? Or did he capitulate to the regime and see his music suffer thereby? Is he perhaps overrated? Was he a secret dissident as portrayed by Volkov, whose work developed in conscious struggle against the regime, and moreover against the ideals of socialism itself? Or did his music really have nothing to do with Soviet history and politics, rather existing on its own personal plane?

Several schools of thought have emerged, roughly corresponding to the assessments implied in the above questions. They are all wide of the mark, some more so than others.

The claim that the composer was a willing and loyal defender of the regime is credited only by a handful of Stalinist apologists. One Internet web site, for instance, claims that "Shostakovich was a patriotic Soviet citizen and lifelong socialist.... Despite two brief periods of friction much dramatized in the West, he was by far the most often, and most highly, officially honored member of the Soviet musical establishment in its history."

This depiction is patently false. Countless colleagues and friends attest to the shattering impact on Shostakovich of the "two brief periods of friction." These were not, of course, simply cases of sharp musical criticism. Stalin himself attended a performance of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* on January 26, 1936, and left before the conclusion. On January 28, *Pravda* denounced the opera as a "Muddle Instead of Music." The official organ of the Communist Party said the composer was playing a game that "may end very badly." This language, with its thinly-veiled threat, was universally understood in musical and intellectual circles to

have been approved if not dictated by the man who was already deeply feared and was about to launch the infamous Moscow Trials of 1936-38.

At the age of 29, the young composer saw not only his career threatened with destruction, but his life and the fate of his family also imperiled. Shostakovich reportedly packed a suitcase in preparation for arrest, and slept in the hallway outside his apartment so that when the NKVD came his children would not see him taken away. The fear which descended in this period did not lift for many years—indeed, in some respects it never lifted at all.

In 1948, with Stalinist cultural czar Andrei Zhdanov leading the pack, the official denunciation of Shostakovich, along with Prokofiev, Khatchaturian and Miaskovksy, was more detailed, drawn-out and brutal. Shostakovich read a humiliating speech of self-abasement to the official meeting of Soviet composers convened to condemn his "formalism."

Any attempt to portray Shostakovich as basically unaffected by these experiences, as satisfied with Soviet society and cultural life under Stalin and his successors, is preposterous and hardly needs rebuttal. At the other extreme, however, a group of insistent and prolix musicologists has discovered a Shostakovich that is apparently the polar opposite: a lifelong enemy of Bolshevism who, instead of writing music glorifying Stalinism, wrote what can only be described as anticommunist program music.

Using "Testimony" as a starting point, some critics and music historians, most notably the British writer Ian MacDonald, have taken Volkov's thesis to somewhat absurd conclusions. Whereas Volkov claimed that some of the composer's major works contained symbolic references to the tribulations of the Soviet people under Stalin, MacDonald has analyzed virtually every single composition of Shostakovich over a period of more than four decades, and everywhere found coded messages of resistance to "Communist" tyranny. Thousands of pages have been written on this subject, complete with detailed analysis of scores, mechanically equating musical themes and their treatment with specific political positions.

The motive of all this appears to be to exonerate Shostakovich posthumously of all charges that he collaborated with the Stalinist regime—to show that he was forced to act as a mouthpiece for the authorities, and also that he was expressing his hostility to them through his music.

A careful and objective examination of the music and its context reveals that there is some truth to these conclusions, but by turning them into a mechanical caricature, MacDonald and his cothinkers have created a completely formal and lifeless portrait that robs the music of its meaning. It is almost as if Shostakovich decided to compose in order to carry out a crusade against the Soviet Union.

MacDonald has begun with a preconceived ideological agenda, that of separating Shostakovich from the whole history of the Russian Revolution. The music is dissected in order to fit this conception. Anything that suggests that Shostakovich may have once had some hopes for the Revolution must be explained away. Thus MacDonald makes the highly dubious claim that positive comments about Lenin in a letter authored by Shostakovich in 1923, when he was 17 years old, were written only because the budding composer knew that his letters were being read by the secret police.

This tendentious approach is connected to the superficial capitalist triumphalism of the 1990s. MacDonald writes in the aftermath of the collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy, and he has set himself the task of proving that the great composer could not possibly have had anything to do with the horrible 1917 Revolution, which is now considered to be the cause of all of Russia's problems.

Of course these musicologists can point to some extent to the alleged musical interpretations of Shostakovich himself in "Testimony." But MacDonald's diatribes against socialism go far beyond anything in Volkov's memoir. Assuming that at least some of Shostakovich's reported

comments on his music are accurate, there is a big difference between these remarks on some of his major works, and the rigid and thoroughly speculative programmatic analysis put forward by MacDonald. Moreover, the composer's own feelings, while certainly deserving of consideration, are not necessarily a rounded understanding of his own music. If one were to be satisfied only with Beethoven's or Wagner's explanations of their music, by way of example, why bother with biographies and musical analysis of their work?

Music critic Alex Ross, writing in a recent issue of *The New Yorker*, has made an apt distinction between Shostakovich's probable motives in speaking to Volkov, and a fuller understanding of his career. As Ross puts it, "'Testimony' does tell us what Shostakovich was thinking about at the end of his life, but Shostakovich at the end of his life was a desperately embittered man, whose pronouncements on his own work are not always to be trusted. 'Testimony,' in other words, may be authentic, but it may not always tell the truth."

To understand Shostakovich in the early 1970s, when he spoke to Volkov, it is necessary to understand his life over the tumultuous decades leading up to that. He had been psychologically scarred and politically disoriented, not only by his own personal difficulties, but by what he had seen around him. His demoralization, and not any political convictions, is what led him to join the Communist Party in 1960, and later to sign public condemnations of Andrei Sakharov and other liberal dissident figures. Apparently he had become both so disillusioned and despairing that he adapted himself and for the most part did what was asked of him as a prominent public figure.

At the same time, especially as the hopes associated with the Khrushchev period gave way to the "stagnation" and even moves toward the "rehabilitation" of Stalin under Leonid Brezhnev, Shostakovich undoubtedly became more and more repelled at the compromises he had made over a long period of time. He appears to have sought through his reminiscences with Volkov to put the best face on this record by interpreting his music in such a way as to show his hostility toward the regime.

Politically speaking, he was a shattered man. Many with far greater political understanding and experience than he had had also made their confessions. Shostakovich had done something similar in the musical sphere (although he had been obliged to confess, not to fabricated acts of terror, but only to musical sins). Whereas lifelong revolutionaries like Kamenev, Zinoviev and Bukharin had paid with their lives despite their capitulations to Stalin, Shostakovich had lived to regret his role.

If this explains at least in part the genesis and the content of "Testimony," it still leaves us pondering what bearing these bitter and demoralizing experiences had on the work of the composer. And here the various critics of Volkov and MacDonald's views also have difficulty in explaining the musical contributions of Shostakovich.

Richard Taruskin, for instance, has pointed out, quite accurately, that MacDonald "followed up on Mr. Volkov's suggestions by fashioning anti-Stalinist readings of astounding blatancy and jejune specificity for all of Shostakovich's works." By casting Shostakovich as "an omnipotent anti-Stalin, able at the height of the Stalinist terror to perform heroic acts of public resistance," MacDonald and similar writers have established a "clamorous cult" around Shostakovich, Taruskin complains. This, however, leads Taruskin to question, not simply Volkov and MacDonald, but the greatness of the composer himself. The "'Testimony'-inspired enthusiasm" for Shostakovich, writes Taruskin, "may prove ephemeral as the cold war, and the passions it aroused, fade into the past." Elsewhere Taruskin, as well as other critics, have penned some disparaging or dismissive remarks about some of Shostakovich's most famous compositions, including the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies.

Though less crudely than his antagonists, Taruskin is also making an equation of sorts between Shostakovich's "political" record and the merit

of his music. Where MacDonald equates the "good" Shostakovich with great music, Taruskin suggests a compromised Shostakovich translates into compromised music.

Laurel Fay has put forward a slightly different view. Less skeptical of the power of the music, she makes the strange assertion that Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony "helped to demonstrate that, in the hands of a supremely talented composer, Socialist Realism was not inherently inimical to the creation of enduring works of art."

Fay is making the serious error of equating compositions which proved acceptable to the Stalinist bureaucracy with "socialist realist" music. But musicians were able to work in more abstract forms than writers or artists, making it more difficult for the authorities to prescribe the "correct" music than the "correct" literature and art. The regime demanded tonal and accessible music. That does not mean, however, that all those who wrote tonal music, like Shostakovich, or Aaron Copland and Kurt Weill, for that matter, were exponents of socialist realism.

There are also critics who reject the attempt to mechanically equate political opposition to the greatness of Shostakovich, but only by completely divorcing the music from its social and political context. Bernard Holland put forward this view in a recent column in the *New York Times* entitled, "Great Music Isn't Necessarily Made by Great People."

Holland claims the problem "begins with a need to find that a maker of beautiful things is also a moral person. Artists are not necessary good people at all.... It is hard to call Shostakovich's life tragic, at least any more tragic than your own. Terrifying and stressful a lot of it was, but tragedy requires an imposing person brought down by fate and bad decisions. Shostakovich was more a victim; I don't think he rises to the needed stature.... Indeed, the wrenching anguish in so many of his pieces ... is perhaps a composer wondering how much he really likes himself."

The proposition that great art is not necessarily the product of "good people" is a banality which tells us next to nothing. The issue isn't whether Beethoven, Mozart or Shostakovich were "good people," a phrase that can mean almost anything. We need to know how their art reflected the world in which they lived, whether they were able to distill into their music powerful human emotions, historically specific as well as universal human experiences.

This brings us to the basic issue which is being ignored by virtually all of the warring musicologists in the Shostakovich debate. The greatness of Shostakovich is not a function of his political views or his personal courage. It is bound up with his ability—not necessarily consciously—to reflect the great struggles of his time, to find the musical language, in abstract, personal and emotional terms, through which to express not only his personal travail, but that of many millions of others.

No music or art exists in a vacuum, and the suggestion of Mr. Holland that Shostakovich was simply expressing his feelings about himself tells us very little. It could perhaps be argued that Richard Strauss was able, to some degree, to isolate himself during the years of the Third Reich and to continue to compose some enduringly beautiful music. Shostakovich had no such option. He was inescapably caught up with the big political events of the day. Holland's claim that the composer's life, in which he saw close family members and many of his closest artistic friends and colleagues perish at the hands of Stalinism, is no "more tragic than your own," is frankly somewhat callous and ignorant. Yes, there was tragedy involved, the tragedy of the dashed hopes associated with the Russian Revolution. This is not the only explanation of Shostakovich's greatness, but it cannot be ignored in any consideration of his work.

It is precisely because Shostakovich's career is so inextricably linked to the history of the Soviet Union that the great majority of critics have such difficulty with the subject. They are otherwise knowledgeable, but not on this score, and many of them tie themselves into knots attempting to explain the man and his music.

Most of the competing assessments of Shostakovich all tend to take one

thing for granted. Whatever their other differences, they equate Stalinism with Bolshevism, and generally regard Stalin as the logical follower of Lenin and the leader of “communism.”

If Stalinism were the same as Bolshevism, then of course there would have been no reason for the Stalinist regime to wipe out all the Bolsheviks—even many who no longer articulated any opposition. This historical fact is crucial to an understanding of Shostakovich's creative life, because the composer was part of the generation that suffered so much and whose early hopes for the future were crushed by the parasitic bureaucracy represented by Stalin. It is this disillusionment, and how Shostakovich was able to express often contradictory moods and feelings out of the experience, that gives his music a special significance.

To read much of what has recently been written on Shostakovich, one would never guess that the Russian Revolution had a vast and positive impact on the arts, including music, in its first decade. Experimentation was encouraged, along with the aim of bringing music to the masses. Tickets for the opera, symphonic and chamber concerts were distributed free or at nominal charge to workers, students and soldiers, who replaced the former elite audiences of pre-revolutionary times. A conductorless orchestra (a precursor of sorts of today's world famous Orpheus Chamber Orchestra) was formed in Moscow in 1922, an artistic council of players replacing the conductor, with issues of interpretation and technique resolved through rehearsal.

At the same time, after the successful end of the Civil War and the threat of foreign intervention, contacts with advanced and progressive trends in the West were resumed. Composers who visited the Soviet Union in its early years included Paul Hindemith, Alban Berg and Darius Milhaud. Berg's *Wozzeck* and Ernst Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf* were performed in the USSR in the late 1920s. Jazz also flourished.

This was the atmosphere in which Shostakovich came of age, musically speaking. He achieved immediate fame with his First Symphony, completed as his graduation piece from the Leningrad Conservatory when he was 19 years old. Shostakovich assimilated the latest trends in music. He worked with both modernist techniques as well as more accessible and traditional ones. He also collaborated with other figures, such as the well known dramatist Vsevolod Meyerhold, for whom he composed music for a production of Mayakovsky's play *The Bedbug* in 1930.

The composer did not join the Communist Party until he was well into his 50s. He was not involved in the bitter political struggle between the Stalinists and the opposition within the Bolshevik Party. He was certainly never a Trotskyist. Eleven years old at the time of the Russian Revolution, he had been reared in a liberal and progressive family, a family which had rejected religious superstition and embraced the values of the Enlightenment. The young composer was undoubtedly influenced by the great hopes aroused by the Revolution. It is not surprising that he may have preferred not to dwell on these hopes when he spoke to Volkov 50 years later, but there is sufficient evidence in “Testimony” of the impact of these years. He speaks favorably, for instance, of Aleksandr Voronsky, the revolutionary art critic and supporter of the Trotskyist Left Opposition. Marshal Tukhachevsky, the leader of the Red Army who perished in the purges in 1937, was extremely close to Shostakovich up to the time he was executed by Stalin. Many of Shostakovich's colleagues, such as Meyerhold, had been close to Trotsky during the 1920s.

The significance of the denunciation of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* can only be appreciated against this backdrop. The shallowness of so much that has been written in relation to the subject is apparent when one considers the circumstances—both Shostakovich's career up to that point, as well as the political context—under which the opera was attacked.

In January 1936 Bolshevik leaders Kamenev and Zinoviev, the men whom Stalin relied upon during Lenin's final illness to isolate Trotsky and prepare his consolidation of power, were already in prison. About six months later they were displayed at the first of the Moscow show trials,

where they recited their bogus confessions and were then shot on Stalin's orders. In the next year the Stalinist terror reached its peak, with the arrest or execution of all the major figures who had led the Revolution.

Lady Macbeth had been a huge success in the USSR for nearly two years when it was suddenly denounced. While it is true that the bureaucracy was stepping up its criticism of experimental and avant-garde techniques such as those employed in this opera, more than Stalin's musical evaluation was involved. It is also likely that the opera's treatment of the police and of police repression, among other themes, struck Stalin as highly inappropriate in this period immediately before the Moscow trials.

Shostakovich escaped with his life. Undoubtedly his musical prominence helped him. At the same time, he was shattered by the experience, and spent most of the rest of his life trying to stay out of political trouble while continuing his composing.

He may have adapted himself to the status quo politically, but it would be very wrong to conclude that this meant at the same time a capitulation to the doctrine of socialist realism. This dogma was part of the reaction against the ideals and principles of the Russian Revolution. Dictating that only “optimistic” themes could be developed by the artist, it became a weapon used by the bureaucracy to strangle any independent thought and artistic creation. Above all socialist realism demanded dishonesty instead of creative integrity. It demanded that the artist churn out works devoid of sincerity and independent expression. From this standpoint, socialist realism was just as much a parody and antithesis of Marxism, just as much in opposition to the ideals and principles of the Russian Revolution, as the contradiction-in-terms of “socialism in one country.”

Shostakovich found a way to create music which by no means can be reduced or equated to socialist realism. He fought to maintain his independence as a creative artist. He above all insisted on authenticity of feeling, not duplicity. This did not mean, however, a turn away from composing for a broad audience. The Soviet composer found this audience not by devaluing his work, however, but by writing music of great passion, complexity and emotional depth. There were others who composed trite pieces to meet the immediate needs of the regime. Shostakovich was not one of them.

Musicologist Joseph Horowitz perhaps comes closest to bringing out the nature of Shostakovich's art among the many who have written on the subject when he declares that “The Soviet pressure cooker shattered Shostakovich's nerves and, doubtless, shortened his life. But Stalinism may be said to have more inflamed than suppressed his creative gift. With its mournful austerity, its vicious ferocity, its programmatic clues, his music conveyed his own denunciations: of state tyranny of the persecution of Jews, of the suppression of the human spirit. He suffered and testified.”

“Like Beethoven in his paeans to liberty, Shostakovich was a moral bulwark or scourge,” Horowitz writes. There is indeed some parallel, although Horowitz does not comment on it, between Beethoven's embrace of the French Revolution and Shostakovich's relationship to the Russian Revolution, and their subsequent disillusion with Napoleon and Stalin.

To call Shostakovich a “moral beacon,” as Horowitz does, may perhaps be an overstatement. His music, however, stood for more than the composer as an individual. It did have a moral aspect.

Horowitz writes of “the pact Shostakovich forged with a great audience.” The basis of this pact was a shared experience: that of the early hopes of the Russian Revolution, their rapid disappearance under a regime with many political similarities to that of Hitler, and yet the determination of the Soviet people to defend their country, and to defend what remained of the achievements of their Revolution, against the Nazi invaders. There were limits to Shostakovich's demoralization during these years. He was able, in such works as the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies, to articulate the feelings of those who felt it was necessary to fight Hitler without loving Stalin.

There is something else that made the Soviet audience “great.” In addition to the longstanding Russian musical tradition, there was the influence of the October 1917 Revolution described above. It produced a profound cultural awakening within the masses, an awakening that could inspire and sustain great art. The existence of a mass audience for classical music, as well as poetry and other art forms, reflected this awakening, and was the cultural equivalent of the economic conquests of the Revolution that Stalinism at this point had not yet destroyed.

The Fifth and Seventh Symphonies are monumental works, partly programmatic in the case of the Seventh, which evoke images of struggle, suffering and triumph. The Sixth and Ninth Symphonies, on the other hand, while lighter works, which met with some disappointment in official Soviet circles because they did not conform to the “heroic” image then attached mechanically to the composer, are no less beautiful and rewarding.

It is nothing short of amazing that Shostakovich was able to produce the Fifth through the Ninth Symphonies, as well as the first five string quartets, in the tragic years between his first denunciation in 1936 and his second in 1948. This was only possible because he fought in the only way he knew how, and this does give his work an “oppositional” aspect.

Between 1948 and Stalin's death in 1953 Shostakovich, though under constant official pressure, continued to compose. Some of his greatest works date from this period, even though he held back their performance in many cases because he feared the official reaction. The Fourth and Fifth Quartets were written in the late 1940s but not performed publicly until after Stalin's death. The same is true of the famous First Violin Concerto. The Tenth Symphony, one of the composer's greatest works, was completed in the months following Stalin's death, but its origins probably date from 1951, during the same period in which he was composing his 24 Preludes and Fugues for Piano.

Certainly not everything that Shostakovich wrote was a masterpiece. There were also some, but not many, works composed on order for the bureaucracy, like Song of the Forests, one of the few pieces which could more justifiably be said to conform to socialist realism. The Eleventh and Twelfth Symphonies, programmatic works entitled “The Year 1905” and “The Year 1917,” were written in 1957 and 1960 respectively. While still conveying the composer's enormous talent, they lack the depth of many of his other compositions, and sound as if they were less deeply felt by Shostakovich himself.

In the last decade of his life this contradictory figure, torn by doubts and depression, composed his last three symphonies and his last quartets, all masterpieces. The 13th Symphony, entitled “Babi Yar,” is based on the poems of Yevgeny Yevtushenko indicting anti-Semitism. The Fourteenth, another symphony for vocal soloists, is dedicated to British composer Benjamin Britten and utilizes the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca, Guillaume Apollinaire and Rainer Maria Rilke, on the subject of early or unjust death. The Fifteenth and final symphony is one of Shostakovich's most affecting and at the same time mysterious compositions. Including musical quotations from Rossini and Richard Wagner, Shostakovich also weaves in many autobiographical gestures, including the use of the DSCH motto (the notes D-E flat-C-B, corresponding to the abbreviation of the composer's name).

The 50 years of composition between Shostakovich's First Symphony and his final works, including the Fifteenth String Quartet (1974) and Viola Sonata (1975) are, in terms of the quantity and quality of this work, without any parallel in the twentieth century. Shostakovich the man cowered in the face of Stalinism. Given his lack of political perspective, that is not surprising. But he did not capitulate to socialist realism, nor did he succumb to despair and turn away from his audience. He expressed the enormous contradictions of his time, and he wrote music that will live forever.



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