

Michigan State University performs stirring rendition of *Babi Yar*, Dmitri Shostakovich's anti-fascist symphony

Nancy Hanover
1 May 2019

*I am
each old man
here shot dead.
I am
every child
here shot dead.
Nothing in me
shall ever forget!
The 'Internationale,'
let it thunder
when the last anti-Semite on earth
is buried forever.
In my blood there is no Jewish blood.
In their callous rage,
all anti-Semites
must hate me now as a Jew.
For that reason
I am a true Russian!*

[From "Babi Yar" by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, translation: George Reavey]

After nearly two years of preparation, the Michigan State University (MSU) Orchestra and Choral Ensembles performed Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony No. 13 in B-flat minor, based on Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem "Babi Yar" (1961), last Saturday in East Lansing, Michigan, and Sunday at Detroit's Orchestra Hall. It was conducted by Christopher James Lees and featured well-known baritone Mark Rucker, who also serves as professor of voice in the MSU College of Music.

Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar" is a poem that memorializes the Nazi massacre of 34,000 Jews at Babi Yar, just outside Kiev, Ukraine, on September 29-30, 1941, one of the single largest instances of mass murder carried out during the Holocaust. It took place soon after the invasion of the Soviet Union.

The rapidly intensifying political atmosphere today—including the rise of anti-Semitism and authoritarianism nationally and internationally—heightened the emotional and artistic significance for musicians and listeners alike. One of the most enduring and powerful musical protests against fascism and anti-Semitism, Shostakovich's Symphony No. 13 was performed in Detroit one day after another brutal anti-Semitic murder at Chabad of Poway, just north of San Diego, on the final day of Passover. The killer issued a statement that denounced Jews "for their role in Marxism and communism."

The contemporary resonance of MSU's production "Babi Yar, Remembering the Holocaust" was noted by several speakers who introduced Shostakovich's work. They referenced the fascist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, the terror bombing in Sri Lanka and the slaughter of 11 worshippers at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh

last October. Concert-goers included more than a dozen Holocaust survivors and a busload of older members of the Jewish Community Center, as well as many young musicians.

Socialist Equality Party campaigners distributed materials on the rise of the fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party and the fight against the extreme right and were warmly received by many. "It's not just in Germany, it's here—it's here," one older concert-goer repeated, with unmistakable alarm.

The concert began with Charles Davidson's "I Never Saw Another Butterfly" (1968), in slightly abbreviated form. The piece is written for orchestra and treble choir and based on poems by Jewish children who perished in the Holocaust. The children were among the 150,000 Jews imprisoned in the Terezin concentration camp (also known as Theresienstadt). After the occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, the Nazis converted the Czech town of Terezin into a Jewish prison. It was not an extermination camp, but about 33,000 would die of hunger and disease there. The Soviet army liberated the camp in 1945.

The evocative poetic lines of the children were displayed above the orchestra and chorus. "*The heaviest wheel rolls across our foreheads, To bury itself deep somewhere in our memories. We've suffered here more than enough, Here in this clot of grief and shame*" begins the poem "Terezin."

The piece is alternatively haunting and mournful and lively and hopeful, as the powerful choirs give voice to the children's contradictory feelings. Davidson, trained as a cantor and with a doctorate in sacred music, has created an ethereal and entrancing melodic sound in this now widely performed piece.

Sophia Franklin, a Music Education and Physics major at MSU, who sang alto in the 100-plus member chorus, later told a reporter from the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Our piece was about Terezin. It was a concentration camp, but designed by the Nazis to be the public 'face' of the camps for visits by the Red Cross. It looked like a nice camp, but really it was just as bad. People were disappearing. They [the Jews] knew there was something very wrong even though the murders weren't happening there. They were living in constant fear."

Echoing the thoughts of many of those in the hall, Sophia said, "I have learned about the history of the Holocaust in middle and high school. This has happened before. Can't we learn from that?"

In one of the concert's introductory lectures, MSU Assistant Professor Dr. Amy Simon explained that the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, in Operation Barbarossa, beginning a war of annihilation. Recognizing the genocidal implications, Simon said, approximately 100,000 Jews fled Kiev before the fascist occupation. Those who remained were the sick, the elderly and many children. These Jews were forced to walk to a ravine on the outskirts, now called Babi Yar, lined up

in groups and systematically machine-gunned to death.

After the wholesale slaughter of the Jews, who constituted the largest proportion of the dead, the killing would continue for months abetted by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). Tens of thousands of Communist Party members, Soviet prisoners of war, Roma and other anti-Nazis also perished there. It is estimated that the total number of dead thrown into the pit at Babi Yar would grow to more than 100,000 during the years of German occupation. Of the 6 million Jews who were exterminated by the Nazis, more than 2 million died in the Soviet Union as a result of mass executions similar to that at Babi Yar.

Yevgeny Yevtushenko's famous poem "Babi Yar" was written in protest. It begins, "*No monument stands over Babi Yar. A steep cliff only, like the rudest headstone. I am afraid. Today, I am as old, As the entire Jewish race itself.*"

The poem is a brilliant and defiant attack on both anti-Semitism and the Stalinist bureaucracy. The nationalist bureaucracy pandered to anti-Semitism and was hostile to its exposure; it opposed any remembrance of the genocidal treatment of the Jews, insisting there be no special mention of the Nazis' determination to eradicate Jewry. Yevtushenko's poem laments, "*O, Russia of my heart, I know that you, Are international, by inner nature. But often those whose hands are steeped in filth, Abused your purest name, in name of hatred.*" Unsurprisingly, the poem was officially denounced by Premier Nikita Khrushchev.

Kevin Bartig, MSU associate professor of music, who also spoke before the production, related the extraordinary first exchange between the poet and composer. Shostakovich, he explained, approached Yevtushenko for permission to set "Babi Yar" to music. The poet immediately agreed, and Shostakovich, relieved, then told him the piece was already composed.

Bartig recounted Yevtushenko's words when he first heard the composition, "Some of my poems were set before, but the music hardly ever coincided with the melody I heard in my inner ear when writing my poem. I hope it doesn't sound like conceit, but if I were able to write music, I would have written exactly the way Shostakovich did. By some magic, telepathic insight he seems to have pulled the melody out of me and recorded it in musical notation."

Wonderful and apt words! Sitting in the audience of this concert, one felt an emotional and seamless unity between the music and words—each heightening the power of the other.

Bartig noted that there were attempts to prevent the premiere of the 13th Symphony in 1962, but "it was a sign of the times, that the idea of censoring a performance—as would certainly have been the case a decade earlier [prior to Stalin's death]—would have been more of a provocation or scandal than allowing it to go on." This was during the period of the so-called Thaw in the USSR.

The music scholar noted, "The work is a meditation on repression, from anti-Semitism to the take-down of self-interested bureaucrats in the final movement. It was a risky project in the USSR. Even a few years earlier, Shostakovich might not have risked it. ...

"Stylistically, Shostakovich is himself as ever here using a tonal idiom, dressed up with the things that make his voice so distinctive: creating dissonances, exaggerated contrasts, and sarcasm." He concluded by noting, "The themes we confront in the 13th, which sadly remain relevant in 2019, make the work one of the most unsettling and powerful in the symphonic repertoire."

Explaining his decision to create the work, Shostakovich said, "I was overjoyed when I read Yevtushenko's 'Babi Yar'; the poem astounded me. It astounded thousands of people. Many had heard about Babi Yar, but it took Yevtushenko's poem to make them aware of it. They tried to destroy the memory of Babi Yar, first the Germans and then the Ukrainian government. But after Yevtushenko's poem, it became clear that it would never be forgotten. That is the power of art."

The piece is not easily classified. Requiring a bass soloist, men's chorus

and large orchestra, it has five movements. *Babi Yar* has been variously described as a choral symphony, a song cycle or a giant cantata. The first section, "Babi Yar," the Adagio, is a funeral elegy, opening with a solemn chime, dramatically invoking the Dreyfus affair in France (1894-1906), the savage Bialystok pogrom of 1906 and the story of Anne Frank. The emotional music moves from the spiritual to the literal, in the breaking down of Anne Frank's door. The use of the bass soloist, the impressive Mark Rucker in this case, a male chorus and the frequent effective use of chimes and bells is widely attributed to the influence of 19th century Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky.

The second movement, "Humour," is a livelier piece, but its message is just as pointed: oppression cannot silence the masses and their mocking of authority. It ends, "three cheers for humour—he's a brave fellow." The third ("In the Store") is an ode to Soviet women, endlessly forced to line up to secure provisions for their families, ending with a quasi-religious motif. The fourth movement ("Fears") evokes the menacing atmosphere under Stalinism, opening with a highly chromatic tuba solo that anticipates the composer's later experiments with twelve-tone dissonance. "Career," the final movement, condemns censorship and the ever-present Stalinist toadies with a lopsided opening waltz and beautiful woodwind solos, ending with a chilling final strike of the chime. It makes a bitter analogy to the Catholic Church's trial and imprisonment of Galileo.

Attending the Orchestra Hall event, Joseph Jankowski, a student at the Detroit Institute for Musical Education, told us, "I knew this would be powerful. But when the conductor lowered the baton, no one clapped. Then everyone started clapping and didn't want to stop—that was amazing.

"It was a beautiful portrayal and 100 percent relevant. Humanity-wise we face a serious issue today in this country and around the world. Events like this are extremely important because they should serve as a reminder that not all is as it should be. Large events like the Holocaust—even smaller events like Sandy Hook—we've allowed them to happen. We forget."

"It was amazing, absolutely amazing," said Edie, another audience member, "A person just feels more emotional about it all [in the setting of] such impressive music."

International Youth and Students for Socialist Equality (IYSSE) member James said he was deeply moved by both the music and poems: "In Charles Davidson's piece, the first poem, 'I'd Like to Go Away Alone,' began with heavenly violin strings that captured the feeling of hope. But when the alto choir sang 'Somewhere into the far unknown there, where no one kills another,' the vocals were a musical suggestion of such an un-worldly place."

He continued, "The lyrics captured the feelings of children who had to watch this tragedy as it happened. ... The gong and flute were used a lot to symbolize the blows that Nazi soldiers used against the Jewish prisoners of war. The orchestra members walked off in a single file line to symbolize what the Jewish people experienced at that time in these concentration camps."

James also noted, "The [Shostakovich] music really felt uneasy, as the poem portrays things. The baritone singing, 'Let the *Internationale* thunder as the last anti-Semites on earth are buried' had me in tears. I hope the working class has more access to cultural events like this one in the future. This was a great experience for me."

"The greatness of Shostakovich," Fred Mazelis notes in his WSWS article on the composer's legacy, was "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."

Many of those of us who attended the soul-stirring MSU performance would strongly concur. Indeed, the struggles of his time remain the struggles of our own.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact