Shostakovich: Music and Meaning

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) was the greatest of the Soviet composers. Unlike Prokofiev, who spent many years abroad, Shostakovich lived all of his adult life in the Soviet Union (1922-1991). His relations with the state were difficult. Artists do not work easily in a dictatorship.

Shostakovich talked very little about his music. His work evokes powerful emotions, but what Shostakovich means often remains unclear. Although much of his music appeared to glorify Soviet Communism, recent writers such as Volkov (1979) and MacDonald (1990) have suggested that many of his works carried subversive meanings. His life, like his music, has had many interpretations.

This posting considers some of the issues of interpretation. In a society wherein one is afraid to say what one thinks or feels, history becomes uncertain. And music is often ambiguous.

Early Life

Dmitri Shostakovich entered the conservatory in St Petersburg in 1919 at the age of thirteen and studied both piano and composition. His graduation piece, *Opus 1 Symphony No. 1* (1926) was well received. He was granted a professorship at the Leningrad Conservatory.

However, his later compositions were not as highly regarded. Dissonance did not attract the proletariat. Russia's new society had initially embraced modernism. However, the politicians soon decided that the new forms of art were not really revolutionary but rather were symptomatic of bourgeois decadence, and called for a return to the simple forms of the

people.

After his father died in 1922, the student Shostakovich earned money to support his family by playing music for the cinema (Fay, 2000, p. 28). His *Opus 35 Piano Concerto No. 1* conveys in its ending a sense of the madcap pursuits of these silent movies. The piano briefly quotes Beethoven's *Opus 129 Rondo: Rage over a Lost Penny*. Beethoven – ever the revolutionary – was one of the few classical composers still revered in Soviet Russia.

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This signed photograph was taken in the early 1930s – at the time of the first piano concerto. A confident young man beginning to make his mark. However, his early success was not to last.

Lady Macbeth

Dmitri Shostakovich first ran afoul of the Communist government for his opera *Opus 29 Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* which was first performed in 1934 to favorable reviews. The opera is a tale of oppression, lust and murder. Its tone veers betweeen satire and tragedy. Opera had always portrayed intense emotions. Modernism considered these high emotions in lowly people rather than aristocrats – Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* is perhaps a precursor to Shostakovich's opera.

The opera opens with Katerina Izmailova waking up from her lonely and loveless bed. The music is languid but "endowed with the lyric intonations of Russian folk song" (Taruskin, 1989):

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Katerina flirts with one of the workers in her husband's store. He later rapes her. The music of this scene is graphic:

> The rape music reaches its climax with an unmistakable *ejaculatio praecox*, followed by a leisurely detumescence. The salacious trombone glissandos that portray the behavior of Sergei's member achieved instant world fame when an American magazine dubbed them an exercise in "pornophony." (Taruskin, 1989, the reference is to a review in the *New York Sun*).

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macbeth-rape.mp3

Katerina and her lover go on to murder her father-in-law and her husband. At the end, justice is served and they are both sentenced to Siberia. Her lover rejects her and takes up with another convict. Katerina casts herself and her rival to their death in an icy river.

Stalin did not see the opera until 1936. He did not like it. Two days later an anonymous editorial in the newspaper Pravda denounced it as a “Muddle instead of Music.”

> From the first minute, the listener is shocked by deliberate dissonance, by a confused stream of sound. Snatches of melody, the beginnings of a musical phrase, are drowned, emerge again, and disappear in a grinding and squealing roar. To follow this “music” is most difficult; to remember it, impossible. Thus it goes, practically throughout the entire opera. The singing on the stage is replaced by shrieks. If the composer chances to come upon the path of a clear and simple melody, he throws himself back into a wilderness of musical chaos – in places becoming cacophony. The expression which the listener expects is supplanted by wild rhythm. …
>
> The composer of Lady Macbeth was forced to borrow from jazz its nervous, convulsive, and spasmodic music in order to lend “passion” to his characters. While our critics, including music critics, swear by the name of socialist realism, the stage serves us, in Shostakovich’s creation, the coarsest kind of naturalism. …
>
> The composer apparently never considered the problem of what the Soviet audience looks for and expects in music. As though deliberately, he scribbles down his music, confusing all the sounds in such a way that his music would reach only the effete “formalists” who had lost all their wholesome taste. He ignored the demand of Soviet culture that all

> coarseness and savagery be abolished from every corner of Soviet life. Some critics call the glorification of the merchants' lust a satire. But there is no question of satire here. The composer has tried, with all the musical and dramatic means at his command, to arouse the sympathy of the spectators for the coarse and vulgar inclinations and behavior of the merchant woman Katerina Izmailova … (from translation of review)

Many believed that the review had been written or dictated by Stalin himself. Volkov (2004, pp 105-106) points out that some of the criticisms, such as "create originality by cheap originalizing," were nonsensical and would never have got by the editors unless they had been too frightened to change them.

What Stalin and his colleagues wanted was music to inspire the masses. In a speech to the Union of Socialist Writers in 1932, Stalin had called on them to be the "engineers of human souls" (Ross, 2007, p 225). The party fostered the idea of socialist realism – art that portrayed the triumph of the people. Art should be representational, uplifting, and easily understood by the proletariat. Formalism was anathema. Art for art's sake was a reversion to bourgeois decadence.

Shostakovich was devastated. He withdrew his Symphony No. 4 from performance for fear it would further offend the politicians, and published no other music until Symphony No. 5 late in 1937.

The Great Terror

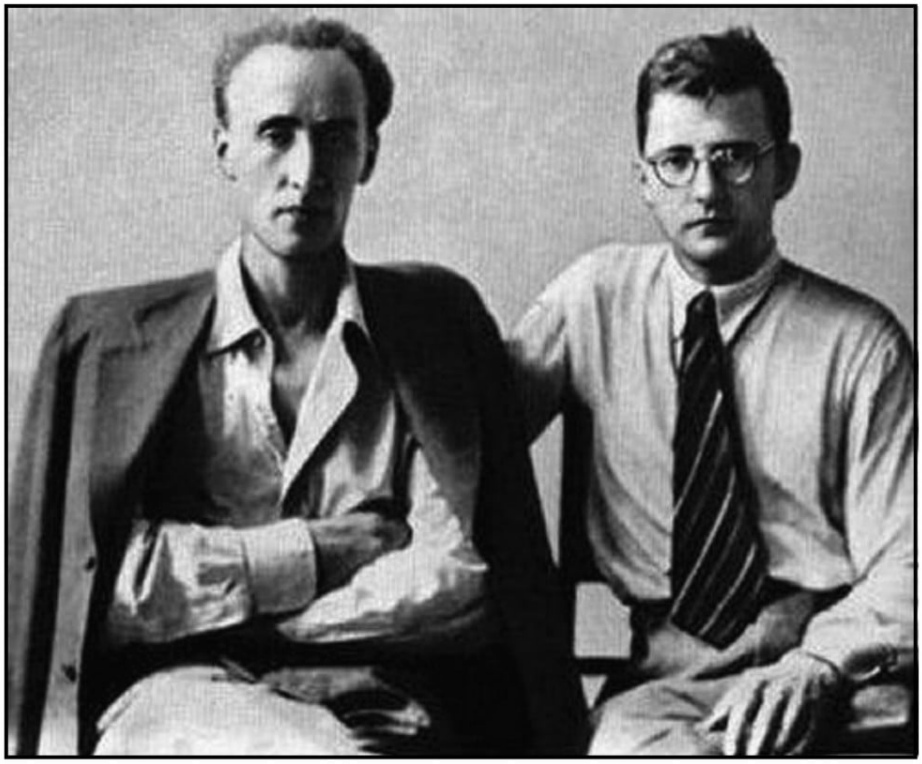
This was the time of the Great Terror (Conquest, 1968). Society was to be purged of those that impeded the progress of Socialism. Show trials brought politicians, generals and artists to confession and abasement. Exile to the Gulag or summary executions followed. Many of his friends and family were arrested and sent to labor camps. Shostakovich was

justifiably in fear for his life.

The composer Basner (quoted in Wilson, 1994, p 126) recalled that in the spring of 1937 Shostakovich was summoned to the security police, and interrogated about his relationship to Marshal Tuckhachevsky. The Marshal, a great music lover and competent violinist, had often invited Shostakovich to his house to talk about music and to play together. Shostakovich was asked if politics were discussed at these meetings. Shostakovich denied this, but the security officer then told him to return in two days: “By that day you will without fail remember everything. You must recall every detail of the plot against Stalin of which you were a witness.” Shostakovich assumed that he would be arrested, and slept on the landing of his apartment so that the police would not disturb his family. However, on his return to the ‘big house,’ he found out that the officer who had interrogated him had himself been arrested, and Shostakovich’s name was no longer listed among the suspects. Tuckhachevsky was executed on June 12, 1937.

Symphony No. 5

During this period of fear and death, Shostakovich composed his *Opus 47 Symphony No. 5*, first performed by the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra on November 21, 1937 under the direction of Yevgeny Mravinsky.



The symphony was a tremendous success. The largo moved the audience to tears and the finale had them on their feet. A member of the audience described the response:

> Many of the listeners started to rise automatically from their seats during the finale, one after the other. The music had a sort of electric force. A thunderous ovation shook the columns of the white Philharmonic Hall, and Evgeny Mravinsky lifted the score high above his head so as to show that it was not he, the conductor, or the orchestra who deserved this storm of applause, these shouts of 'bravo'; the success belonged to the creator of this work. (Wilson, 1994, p 126)

What the symphony means remains unclear. The politically correct interpretation was that it represented the life of the Socialist artist, overcoming his initial tribulations and finally realizing the full power of the people. Shostakovich agreed to the subtitle "A Soviet Artist's Response to Just Criticism." Taruskin (1995) summarizes an influential review of the symphony by Alexei Tolstoy:

> In the first movement the author-hero's 'psychological torments reach their crisis and give way to ardour', the use of the percussion instruments suggesting mounting energy. The second movement, a sort of breather, is followed by the most profound moment, the Largo. 'Here the *stanovleniye lichnosti* [formation of a personality] begins. It is like a flapping of the wings before take-off. Here the personality submerges itself in the great epoch that surrounds it, and begins to resonate with the epoch.' The finale is the culmination, in which 'the profundity of the composer's conception and the orchestral sonority coincide', producing 'an enormous optimistic lift.'

This interpretation is impossible to fit with the actual music. The crux of the symphony is the Largo, the movement that brought the audience to tears. The movement has the solemn rhythms and mystical harmonies of the Orthodox liturgy (Taruskin, 1995; Tilson Thomas, 2005). The following clip gives the last few minutes of the movement, ending on the sublime notes of harp and celesta:

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It is impossible not to hear this as a lament, a requiem for the people who had died during the Great Terror. At a time when religious services were not allowed, people found solace in music. Zoya Leybin describes the audience's response to the Largo:

> They could relate to this music. It had the Russian soul in it, had a power. And people felt connected. They couldn't pray, so music became religion. (in Tilson Thomas, 2009).

In a poem dedicated to Shostakovich, Anna Akhmatova (quoted by Bullock, 2010) described music as the friend that would never betray or deny her:

Something miraculous burns within her

And in her eyes, lines come into sharper focus.
She is the only one to speak with me,
When others are afraid to approach.
When the final friend had averted his gaze
She was with me in my grave
And sang like the first storm,
Or as if all the flowers had begun to speak.

The last movement of the symphony begins with an enthusiastic march. However, this soon ends and echoes of the preceding movement return. Taruskin (1995) quotes Mravinsky

> somewhere in the middle of the movement the quick tempo spends itself and the music seemingly leans against some sort of obstacle and then forces itself onward.

During this interlude, Shostakovich quotes some phrases from his Opus 46 setting of a Pushkin Song called *Rebirth,* a work that was not published or performed until much later (Ross, 2007, p 235; Bullock, 2010). One cannot tell whether the music was just in his mind, whether he wished to bring the text of the poem to mind, or whether he was relating Pushkin's lines to Stalin's suppression of the arts. The poem begins

A barbarian artist with a lazy brush
blackens out the painting of a genius
tracing senselessly over it
his own illegitimate drawing.

The poem then goes on to tell how over the years the paint flaked away to reveal the masterpiece. We must look below the present surface to find the original beauty.

After the interlude, the symphony goes on with a march that has led to many conflicting interpretations. According to Volkov, Shostakovich considered the exuberance of this final march as forced:

> It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying,

> ‘Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing,’ and you rise, shakily, and go marching off, muttering ‘Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing.’ (Volkov, 1979, p 183)

Volkov’s book has been considered by some as a fraud, a compendium of Shostakovich’s writings strung together with Volkov’s ideas (e.g. Fay, 2004. Taruskin, 1995). Nevertheless, some of the bitterness is undoubtedly true. And it is impossible not to consider this quote when listening to the finale.

Different conductors have used different tempos for this ending. In his documentary on Shostakovich, Aranovich (1981) juxtaposed without judgment the slow solemn rhythm of Mravinsy to the franticly rushed tempo of Bernstein. Slow is much more powerful:

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Yet this does not mean that Volkov’s interpretation is correct. The message underlying the symphony’s ending is not triumph but it is also not despair. Other interpretations consider the coda as much more personal, repenting Shostakovich’s need to survive or his inability of to defeat evil with his art. I think that it conveys the resilience of humanity despite the current tragedy. We shall survive. This interpretation is not common (but see a review *A Pillar to Help Humanity Prevail* by Jeff Wall)

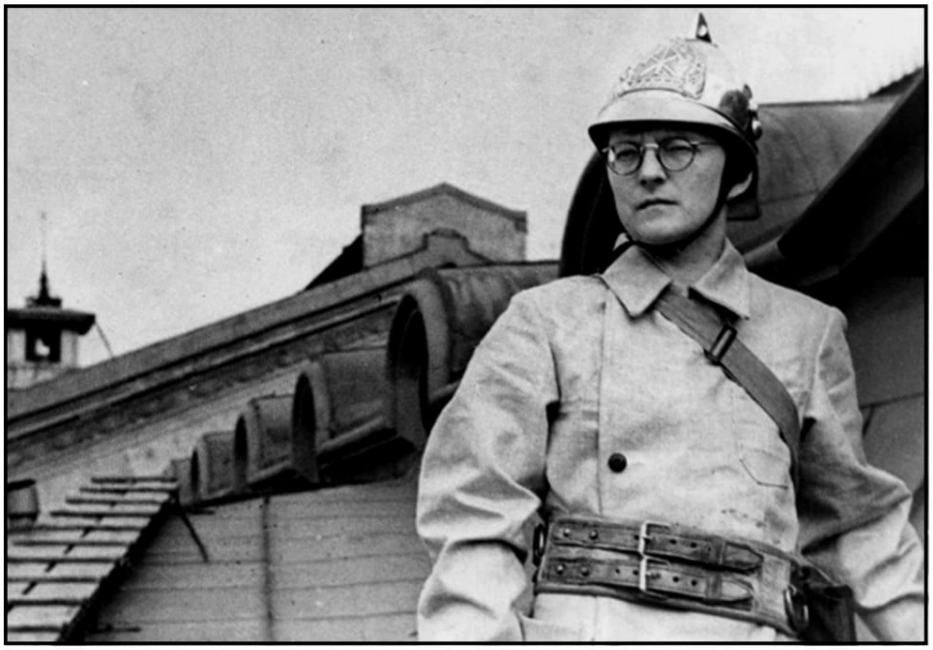
The wonder of music is that it resists only one interpretation. Margarita Mazo recalled:

> For many of us, listening to a new piece by Shostakovich was a sacred experience. Was he a dissident or was he not? Was he a Communist or was he not? He was so much more complex than that. Besides, can you tell music with words? Can you say with words what this music is about? If so, then why do

you need music? (quoted in Mitchinson, 2002, pp 318-9)

Leningrad

Shostakovich remained in Leningrad during first part of the war. He served in the fire brigade during the siege. A propaganda photograph shows a very uncomfortable Shostakovich in full uniform atop the roofs of Leningrad.



At that time Shostakovich composed his *Opus 60 Symphony No. 7 Leningrad, which* was performed in 1942 in the besieged city, with loudspeakers defiantly broadcasting the music to the Germans. The symphony illustrates how Shostakovich played with the meanings of his music. The opening movement of the Leningrad symphony provides an enthralling march that begins like the Pied Piper and ends as a "gargantuan, vulgar rant" (Ross, 2007, p. 247). The selection gives the middle of this transition:

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Initially we cannot help but be swept up by this militaristic *Bolero* even when we know it represents the German invasion. Emotions are fickle – they can give force to bad ideas as well

as good. And music is the mother of emotion.

Volkov claimed that this movement was composed before the German invasion and that the music represented Stalin rather than Hitler, but Fay has pointed out that this may have been a misinterpretation, since the dates on the initial autograph versions of the score are clearly after the invasion (Fay, 2000, note 7, p 313).

Formalism

Despite the success of his wartime music, by 1948 Shostakovich had once again fallen into disrepute for his formalist tendencies. The criticism is hard to understand. Particularly in his symphonies, Shostakovich's music is easy to appreciate. His melodies are memorable and moving, his orchestration always exciting.

The criticism of formalism can be invoked against abstract painting, but it is difficult to apply to music. Music is formal by nature. Music can be composed programmatically, but the much of music's appeal is that it freely plays with the emotions independently of thought.

Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin's second-in-command, singled out Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Myaskovsky, and Khachaturyan as "the leading figures of the formalist trend in music, a trend which is fundamentally wrong." Soviet classical music should convert the songs of the people into classical forms:

> Any listener will tell you that the works of Soviet composers of the formalist type differ fundamentally from classical music. Classical music is marked by its truthfulness and realism, its ability to blend brilliant artistic form with profound content, and to combine the highest technical achievement with simplicity and intelligibility. Formalism and crude naturalism are alien to classical music in general and to Russian classical music in particular. …

> The neglect of programme music is also a departure from progressive traditions. It is well known that Russian classical music was as a rule programme music. …
>
> Melodiousness is beginning to disappear. A passionate emphasis on rhythm at the expense of melody is characteristic of modern music. Yet we know that music can give pleasure only if it contains the essential elements in a specific harmonic combination. (Zhdanov, 1948)

In his criticisms Zhdanov was harking back to the ideas that initially empowered 19th-Century Russian music. Revolutionary theories can be quite reactionary.

Shostakovich was dismissed from the Conservatory and required to repent his misdeeds before the General Assembly. He retreated into himself, and over the next few years composed mainly chamber music. Stalin did not listen to string quartets.

World Peace

However, as the most famous of the Soviet composers, Shostakovich was selected as a member of the Soviet delegation to the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace held at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York in 1949 (Saunders, 2000). Shostakovich played a piano transcription of the second movement of his Symphony No 5 and read a speech written for him by the politicians. The conference was a free-for-all. Protesters, supported by the CIA, marched outside the hotel with signs demanding Shostakovich’s defenestration:

At one of the conference sessions, Shostakovich was confronted by Nicolas Nabokov, a composer and first cousin of the novelist Vladimir. Though born in Russia, Nicolas had been an American citizen since 1939, and was at the time of the conference in the pay of the CIA. He publicly asked Shostakovich whether he agreed with a recent *Pravda* article denouncing Hindemith, Stravinsky and Schoenberg. Ashen-faced, Shostakovich murmured that he supported the *Pravda* statements. To do otherwise would have risked his life. For Nabokov not to have realized this was cruel. Nothing is as oblivious as righteousness.

Jewish Themes

Shostakovich composed music that mixed the emotions. He was therefore fascinated by Jewish music (Scheinberg, 1995). He was intrigued by how Jewish people built a cheerful melody on sad intonations: “Why does he sing a cheerful song? Because he is sad at heart” (Fay, 2000, p. 169). During and after the war, Shostakovich befriended the composer Moishe Vainberg (or Mieczysław Weinberg), a Jewish refugee from Poland. They enjoyed discussing each other’s compositions, and learning each other’s musical traditions

In last movement of his *Opus 67 Piano Trio No. 2* (1944), Shostakovich uses a Jewish theme:

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Some have suggested that this trio commemorates the Holocaust (e.g. Dubinsky, 1989, pp 111-157). News of the concentration camps was becoming available at the time of the trio's composition. Some have interpreted the last movement of the trio as representing Jews being asked to dance before they were executed. Although this idea fits the music, the trio was not specifically written to honor the victims of Nazism, but as a requiem for Shostakovich's friend Ivan Sollertinsky.

Shostakovich directly considered the Holocaust in his *Opus 113 Symphony No. 13 Babi Yar* (1962). The symphony is a choral setting of poems by Yevgeny Yevtushenko written to commemorate the massacre of the Ukrainian Jews at Babi Yar. The poems and the symphony were discredited by the Soviet government for placing the sufferings of the Jewish people above that of the Russians. Mravinsky refused to conduct the symphony. Though Stalin was dead, Soviet Russia continued to suppress the arts.

Coda

Toward the end of his life, Shostakovich was bitter. The photograph on the left by Ida Kar shows Shostakovich in 1959. The anxiety is palpable. Shostakovich was angry about the way artists such as Akhmatova had been treated in Soviet Russia. He was depressed that he had not been free to compose as he wished. The bitterness comes out in Volkov's *Testimony*. Although much of the book comes from prior publications, some of it was indeed based on Volkov's interviews with the elderly composer between 1971 and 1974.

Laurel Fay points out that

> Soviet history was always a work-in-progress; people, ideas and facts that became unpalatable were routinely "airbrushed "out of existence in later Soviet sources. Only rarely was anything so erased later on restored. Shostakovich himself was obliged to reinvent his past on occasion. By the time

> successive generations encountered the “expurgated” pages of their history, they often had lost track of what had been excised, and why. (Fay, 2000, p. 5)

Perhaps only fiction can get at the truth. Julian Barnes’ *The Noise of Time*, a fictional retelling of Shostakovich’s life, is slated for publication early in 2016.

Shostakovich died of lung cancer in 1975. His last work was *Opus 147 Sonata for Viola and Piano*. The final movement of the sonata is similar in length to the last movement of Beethoven’s last sonata. However, where Beethoven is transcendent, Shostakovich is austere. The following clip gives the beginning of the last movement. The piano accompaniment makes allusion to Beethoven’s Moonlight sonata, but the violin theme is very Russian.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/shostakovich-viola-adagio-first-4-minutes.mp3

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