

Shostakovich versus the Central Committee: the power of music

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ABSTRACT – The centenary of Shostakovich’s birth, celebrated in 2006, generated considerable interest in his life and music. During the Cold War his music was rarely played in the West, and it was not until after his death in 1975 that it re-emerged. The publication of his memoirs in the UK, in 1979, gave new insights into his life in Soviet Russia. Music, like art and literature, has the power to shock and can reflect anger and frustration at contemporary social issues. Much debate has focused on whether Shostakovich was a victim or mouthpiece of Communism. In order to fully appreciate his music, it is essential to understand his personal and professional life under Josef Stalin – in particular his public humiliation by the Central Committee, and by professional musicians who were Communist Party members.

KEY WORDS: Central Committee, lifelong smoking, Dmitri Shostakovich, Joseph Stalin

Tsarist Russia: the Bolshevik Revolution

Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich was born in St Petersburg, at that time the capital of Russia, on 12 September 1906 – troubled times in Imperial Russia. On 9 January 1905, Bloody Sunday, a procession of 150,000 workers petitioning for better pay and working conditions were met by the militia, who shot dead at least 200 and injured many more, leading to the revolution. In May the Russian Baltic fleet was defeated by Japan at the battle of Tsushima and disillusioned sailors on the battleship *Prince Potemkin of Taurida* mutinied. By the autumn the country was paralysed by strikes, and Tsar Nicholas II reluctantly signed the October Manifesto, effectively handing power to the people by transferring future legislation from the palace to the State Duma. The soldiers and police who remained loyal to the Tsar, however, brutally suppressed further riots and the lesson that Lenin and Trotsky learnt, in exile, was the need to gain their support.

Despite this Dimitri, known in the family as Mitya, enjoyed a happy and comparatively privileged childhood. Shostakovich is a Polish name; his great grandfather and grandfather were both arrested for involve-

ment with the Polish uprisings, and were sent into exile – Mitya’s father, raised in Siberia, survived to graduate from university and became a chemical engineer. Thus father and son inherited revolutionary sympathies, although neither was an agitator. Music and books were part of family life. Dmitri senior had a fine singing voice. The young Dmitri was taught the piano by his mother, Sophia, the daughter of a wealthy business man and a proficient pianist, trained at the St Petersburg Conservatoire. Dmitri was sent to music school aged 9, to further develop his talents while continuing his general education. At the age of 11 he composed ‘Funeral march in memory of the victims of the Revolution’ which reflected the turbulent times as well as his own sensitivity.

During the first world war, life for the wealthy in St Petersburg (now renamed Petrograd) was little changed. Huge losses on the front and the shortage of food, however, led to disaffection and the scene was set for the October Bolshevik revolution of 1917. During a street demonstration in Petrograd, the 11-year-old Dmitri witnessed the killing of an innocent boy by a Cossack’s sabre, leaving an indelible emotional scar.

In 1919, aged 13, Dmitri joined the St Petersburg Conservatoire, where his unusual talents were noticed by the director, Alexander Glazunov. Aged 16 he left school and joined the Conservatoire as a full-time student of piano and composition. To help support his family following his father’s death Dmitri

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Richard White graduated from Cambridge in December 1949 and was inspired to adopt paediatrics as a career. Professor (later Sir) Douglas Hubble emphasised to him the need for paediatricians to specialise, and his move to Birmingham in 1965 gave him the freedom to develop the interest that he already had in nephrology. When asked about his interest in Shostakovich, White responded: ‘My first serious exposure to Shostakovich was in 1976, when I enjoyed his first symphony. His compositional style fascinated me, and in the ensuing years I recorded many of his works on audio-tapes. Programme notes for City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra concerts referred to his victimisation by Stalin, and I realised that, in order to understand his music fully, I must learn more about his life in Communist Russia. My reading was a revelation, and greatly enhanced my enjoyment of his music.’

dutifully played the piano for silent films in a local cinema. Despite his identification with the revolutionary spirit, he was careful, at this stage, not to experiment with avant-garde composition.

The emergence of Stalin

Lenin's New Economic Policy (1921) allowed for orthodox religion and freedom of artistic expression, but by 1924 party members criticised music which, they alleged, expressed the ideology of the 'decadent bourgeoisie'. Stalin quickly exiled or murdered his political rivals and created a totalitarian state. He exterminated peasant farmers and confiscated their land, then attacked dissidents, artists, writers, musicians and Jews, particularly between 1936 and 1939, and again between 1949 and 1952, when many senior doctors were imprisoned and tortured.

In 1922, Mitya developed pulmonary tuberculosis, necessitating rest in a Crimean sanatorium. He recovered sufficiently to return to the Conservatoire, and in 1924, aged 18, Shostakovich worked on his graduation project – his first symphony. This was premiered by the renamed Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra on 12 May 1925 and was an outstanding success. Highly original and innovative, it was acknowledged worldwide as a work of genius.

Unfortunately storm clouds were already gathering. Increasing student power brought the politics of envy, and Dmitri was voted out of the Conservatoire. Fortunately, he now had ample paid work as a pianist and commissions to compose new works, including the overtly political second and third symphonies, now rarely performed. He soon joined Meyerhold's modernist movement, and was attracted by jazz and the then fashionable foxtrot, viewed by the officials as symbols of Western decadence.

Lady Macbeth: muddle not music

Still in his twenties, Shostakovich composed two operas. *The Nose* was an outrageous, satirical opera based on Gogol's comic tale of a self-opinionated civil servant whose nose left him in search of higher rank. The police chief in the opera was probably a coded portrayal of Stalin. It was described in the Soviet press as 'an anarchist's hand bomb'. It was banned soon after its premiere in 1930. The second opera was *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, which he dedicated to his wife of two years, Nina. The heroine, Katerina Ismailova, murders her father-in-law and her husband, to liberate herself from a desperate existence, and takes on a lover. Both are arrested and imprisoned; her lover deserts her for another woman, and she finally commits suicide by drowning in Wagnerian style. It was first performed in Leningrad in 1934, and ran triumphantly for two years, until Stalin attended a performance in Moscow in January 1936. Two days later an unsigned article appeared in *Pravda*, the state newspaper, criticising the opera as 'muddle, not music'. The violent and erotic nature of the work was considered alien to the new Socialist realism, in which beauty and happy endings were required. The formation of the USSR Composers' Union, all Communist Party members, ended any freedom of expression and brought

musical composition under state control. Shostakovich was branded an 'enemy of the people'. This criticism affected him profoundly and it later emerged that he contemplated suicide. To Stalin's surprise, however, other musicians rallied to his support, daring to question the *Pravda* article.

At this time he was working on his fourth symphony, a lengthy Mahlerian opus intended for a massive orchestra. It was a dark and brooding work which, although it depicted the success of Soviet industrialisation, also reflected decades of suffering of the Russian people. In the light of the *Pravda* article, Shostakovich withdrew the symphony on the eve of its premiere, delaying the first performance by 25 years. In truth, however, it marked the dawn of a new creative period, in which the composer developed a deepening awareness of the gulf between official expectations and his personal need to express the suffering, fears and hopes of the Russian people.

The fifth symphony: a turning point

In the mid-1930s, British and European composers concerned with the rise of Nazism and Fascism in Europe began to write protest music. Among these was Vaughan Williams, whose fourth symphony of 1935 erupted angrily, in astonishing contrast to his previous works. Shostakovich was forced to contemplate his future under Stalin. He retired to the peace of his country dacha, where he wrote the first three movements of his fifth symphony. A conventional work, it was subtitled 'A practical, creative answer of a Soviet artist to just criticism'. Privately, of course, he never accepted the official condemnation of his operas, and the symphony undoubtedly contained coded messages. Indeed, one can feel the tension in the first movement. Its mood continues to fluctuate between darkness, military pomp and tranquil beauty but ends in calm, followed by a scherzo, full of optimism, although even here there are hints of sarcasm. The third movement is a serene piece, in which Valery Gergiev, the renowned music director of the Kirov Orchestra, believes Shostakovich used to reflect his generally happy childhood, although he returned briefly to the reality of life in Stalin's Russia. The movement returns to calm, and, in a master stroke, Shostakovich finishes with sustained chords in a major key, offering hope before leading naturally to the finale. The triumphant finale was in line with official dogma, and restored Shostakovich's position as the leading Russian composer, but it was composed against a background of continuing brutality. His elder sister had just been exiled to central Asia and her husband arrested, and his mother-in-law was sent to a concentration camp in Kazakhstan. Marshall Tukhachevsky, Stalin's agent in Leningrad, who was musically literate and had supported Shostakovich's composition, had been executed for alleged conspiracy. Understandably, Dmitri feared for his own life. In later conversations with Solomon Volkov, he admitted that 'the rejoicing was forced, created under threat'.

The symphony was first performed in Leningrad on 21 November 1937, under the baton of Yevgeny Mravinsky, who continued to champion Shostakovich's music throughout his long directorship of the Philharmonic Orchestra, and who later premiered the

sixth, eighth, ninth and 10th symphonies. The music and its composer received a 30-minute standing ovation, and many of the audience were in tears. The fifth symphony was a turning point in Shostakovich's career. He had mastered the technique of expressing fear, anger and joy, and had learnt how to secretly mock the authorities.

The sixth symphony of 1939 was originally conceived as a grand choral tribute to Lenin, but in the event, it proved to be of little consequence. Dmitri now wrote mainly uncontroversial music, and began exploring the more intimate medium of chamber music. The excellent piano quintet won the 1941 Stalin prize.

The siege of Leningrad: the seventh symphony

Following the 1941 German invasion of Russia, Shostakovich, still in Leningrad, applied for armed service but was rejected because of his extreme myopia and chest problems, and instead undertook duty as a firefighter. He continued working as a composer and teacher, and organised concerts for the besieged troops and civilians until the government ordered him and his family to Kuybyshev, on the outskirts of Moscow, for their own safety. During this period he wrote his seventh symphony, the 'Leningrad', which was premiered in Kuybyshev, with the Bolshoi Orchestra, in March 1942. The score was smuggled out of Russia on microfilm to be performed to great acclaim in the UK in June 1942, under Henry Wood. The first movement contains the so-called Nazi invasion theme, a memorable if perhaps rather banal tune, repeated 11 times, at increasing volume and with greater disharmony. Although generally regarded as the propagandist material expected by the Central Committee, Shostakovich later said '...it's not about Leningrad under siege, it's about the Leningrad that Stalin destroyed and that Hitler merely finished off'.

The eighth symphony, which followed in November 1943, is a more introspective work depicting anger at the needless death and destruction brought about ostensibly by war, but equally during the Great Terror. The finale is a serene movement, ending in complete calm and expressing hope for the future. Surprisingly, this work found acceptance by Soviet critics, who perceived that the anguish expressed could be justifiably blamed on the Nazis.

The ninth symphony, the last in the trilogy of war symphonies, was expected to be a large-scale tribute to the victorious 'leader', with a choral finale, as in Beethoven's ninth. But, in 1945, Shostakovich produced a work of less than 25 minutes, of mainly jocular and mocking character, and Stalin was incensed when he heard it.

Shostakovich fears for his life

Shostakovich was now living in Moscow, as professor at the Conservatoire, and also continued lecturing in Leningrad. Stalin set about reasserting Communism as a political force throughout Eastern Europe, to the exclusion of Western influence. Writers, such as Zoshchenko and Solzhenitsyn, were

denounced by the Central Committee for their 'bourgeois degeneracy', and attention soon turned to composers who, in 1947, had supposedly failed to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the October Revolution. For a time Shostakovich publicly toed the party line, to the bewilderment of Western critics, who had acclaimed him as a genius and saw this as a betrayal of true art. Later, he spoke of his constant fear of exile or execution.

Shostakovich published no more symphonies until after Stalin's death, earning money from film music and other non-controversial compositions. But he also continued composing serious works that he would withhold until better times. Four of these works deserve special mention: his fourth string quartet, the second piano trio, a song cycle entitled 'From Jewish folk poetry', dedicated to the soprano Galina Vishnevskaya, and his first violin concerto, premièred by David Oistrakh. These all contained Jewish melodies, reflecting his outrage at the overt anti-Semitism and the atrocities carried out by Hitler and Stalin.

Intimacy of the string quartet: a musical signature – DSCH

During this period he turned increasingly to the intimacy of the string quartet, in which, like Beethoven, he could express private rather than public feelings. He greatly admired Beethoven, champion of the oppressed, for example in *Fidelio*. Shostakovich now devised his musical signature, a four-note motif representing D for Dmitri, and SCH for his surname, in German spelling. In the German musical notation, S is E flat, while H is B natural. Thus we have the sequence D, E flat, C, B. This was initiated in the first violin concerto, but it is more clearly illustrated in the opening of a later work, the eighth string quartet.

Post-Stalin: the great 10th symphony

Within three months of Stalin's death on 5 March 1953, Shostakovich had completed his great 10th symphony, which incorporates the DSCH signature in the third and fourth movements. It was premiered by Mravinsky on 17 December the same year. In style it broadly mirrors the fifth, the opening movement being a long, brooding moderato while the aggressive scherzo again recalls the Great Terror. Shostakovich later told Volkov that this movement was his personal portrait of Stalin. The third movement is interplay of a Ländler, incorporating the DSCH signature, and a wistful five-note horn motif of Mahlerian character. The finale builds up to a triumphant ending. This symphony initially provoked debate, but eventually it was acclaimed as a masterpiece in Russia and the West, and Shostakovich was once again reinstated as the leading Russian composer. His joy was soon overshadowed, however, by the death of his wife, Nina, who died from cancer aged only 43. He was left with two teenage children, and began to drink excessively.

In February 1956, Nikita Krushchev, Stalin's successor, referred to 'the accumulation of immense and unlimited power in the hands of one person'. He pointed out that, during the Great Terror, 70% of Central Committee members were shot on Stalin's orders. During this 'cultural thaw' Shostakovich composed his

brilliant second piano concerto, premiered by his son Maxim on his 19th birthday. Shostakovich also wrote his 11th and 12th symphonies (commemorating the 1905 and 1917 revolutions), and the first cello concerto, dedicated to Rostropovich. Of perhaps greatest significance was the eighth string quartet, dedicated '...to the victims of Fascism and war'. It was written in just three days, following a visit in 1960 to Dresden, where he witnessed what he called 'the frightful and senseless destruction' caused by allied bombers. The five movements are unified by the DSCH motif, and the whole work is deeply personal.

In December 1961 the fourth symphony emerged after 25 years followed by the premiere of his 13th symphony, known as 'Babi Yar', which consists of five poems by Evgeny Yevtushenko, scored for bass soloist, chorus and orchestra. Babi Yar was a ravine near Kiev, where more than 70,000 Jews were shot during the war, and the first poem is an outspoken condemnation of anti-Semitism. Within a short time the opera *Lady Macbeth*, now revised and renamed *Katerina Ismailova*, was performed after an interval of more than 27 years.

Undiminished creativity despite failing health

Shostakovich never enjoyed robust health and throughout his career he tended to convert his anxiety and tension into psychosomatic symptoms. In 1965 he was treated for cardiac ischaemia, and suffered increasing weakness in his right hand and leg diagnosed, surprisingly, as a form of poliomyelitis but which were much more likely to be due to a cerebral thrombosis. It limited his ability to perform in public, and was almost certainly a legacy of his heavy smoking, which he stopped on medical advice. He had a severe heart attack in 1966, was hospitalised in 1969 and 1970, and experienced another coronary thrombosis in 1971. Worse was to come when in 1972 carcinoma of the lung was diagnosed and was treated with intensive cobalt radiotherapy.

In 1968 Shostakovich was appointed First Secretary of the Composers' Union, which necessitated joining the party, and his final years were of undiminished creativity, despite his physical frailty. The 14th symphony of 1969, dedicated to his friend Benjamin Britten, is dominated by the theme of death in a series of songs for soprano and bass with strings and percussion. Although widely interpreted as indicating preoccupation with his own mortality, he said to Volkov in 1974: 'I don't protest against death in it, I protest against those butchers who execute people'. He also wrote his second cello and violin concertos, and seven more string quartets. In 1974 *The Nose* had its Moscow premiere, 44 years after its composition. His 15th and final symphony, of 1971, in which he reverted to purely orchestral four-movement form, quoted widely from previous works, also from Rossini's *William Tell* overture, and included the DSCH signature in the scherzo. Interestingly, in the finale he also quoted from Wagner, with references to Siegfried's death in *Götterdämmerung*, and a hint of the prelude to *Tristan and Isolde* – again suggesting preoccupation with death.

Shostakovich's last work, the viola sonata Op147, is a tranquil piece dedicated to the memory of Beethoven, and the finale is

based on the *Moonlight* sonata's opening theme. He never heard it performed. His last six days were spent in hospital, with increasing respiratory distress, and he died on 9 August 1975, shortly before his 69th birthday, bitter maybe, but at peace, and certainly not broken. He was buried in the Novodevichy cemetery, Moscow, with Sergei Prokofiev, Mstislav Rostropovich and Boris Yeltsin for company.

Dmitri Shostakovich – the man

Finally, what of the man himself? Shostakovich was extremely myopic; and behind his thick, horn-rimmed spectacles was a boyish face. He was of an intense and nervous disposition, smoked incessantly, and was a workaholic but with a good sense of humour and a sharp wit. He was a lifelong soccer fan. He read all the Russian writers and poets, and even Shakespeare. After the death of Nina, his impulsive second marriage was disastrous and ended three years later, but finally he married Irina who, although the same age as his daughter, organised his work schedules and domestic life brilliantly, and remained his constant companion until his death. His son Maxim, a skilled pianist, made his conducting debut with the 10th symphony in 1965. While conducting in Germany in 1981, he claimed asylum and departed to the USA with his pianist son, Dmitri.

Unquestionably Shostakovich was one of the greatest 20th century composers. On his 60th birthday he was awarded the Order of Lenin, but treasured his Oxford Honorary Doctorate more. Despite his vilification by the Composers' Union and the Central Committee, he loved his native Russia and its people, for whom he wrote much of his music, and, unlike his compatriots Rachmaninov, Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Rostropovich, he never entertained thoughts of emigrating to the West. The nature of his 11th and 12th symphonies suggest that he remained a socialist in principle but he was violently opposed to Stalin's style of communism, and his brutality.

The Soviet writer and commentator Ilya Ehrenburg said, after hearing the premiere of the eighth symphony, 'Music has a tremendous advantage; without mentioning anything, it can say everything'. This is what ultimately prevailed in Shostakovich's contest with the Central Committee.

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