

Wishful Thinking

"The idea that Shostakovich was a 'secret dissident' remains powerful - but the actual evidence suggests otherwise." writes Mitchinson. We don't get any actual evidence, but who else would think to revive the Disneyland connection?.

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The idea that Shostakovich was a 'secret dissident' remains powerful -- but the actual evidence suggests otherwise. Andante.com, July 04 In early 1966, Leonard Bernstein threw a birthday party for Dmitri Shostakovich in Lincoln Center's Philharmonic Hall. Although the great Soviet composer couldn't attend, Bernstein bounded onto the stage and announced to a crowd of squirming schoolchildren that, in honor of the occasion, he would be performing one of Shostakovich's "gayest and most amusing works," the Ninth Symphony. It's like a "witty comedy in the theatre, where you're treated to one joke after another - wisecracks, punchlines, surprises, twisteros." The final movement is "like sitting down to a big serious banquet and being served hot dogs and potato chips." A perky violin solo set against the brass section is "like Mickey Mouse leading a football cheer."

To judge from his book *Shostakovich and Stalin: The Extraordinary Relationship Between the Great Composer and the Brutal Dictator*, it's a good thing Solomon Volkov wasn't invited to the party. Instead of comedy, Volkov hears in Shostakovich's Ninth "tragedy, lyricism, irony, and grotesquerie." Instead of playful allusions to Beethoven, Volkov hears a "direct challenge to Stalin" and a "demonstrative act of creative insubordination." Instead of Mickey Mouse, Volkov hears something closer to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

Most audiences today listen to Shostakovich through Volkov's ears. It is a remarkable feat for a composer who never served time in a labor camp, never experienced internal exile and never suffered material privation of any kind in his adult years. Indeed, at the time of his death in 1975, Dmitri Shostakovich was widely considered, in the words of his Pravda obituary, a "faithful son of the Communist Party." He was Soviet Russia's most decorated composer, and his popular symphonies often came pre-packaged with dedications to make even the most hardened Communist bureaucrat smile: "October," "The First of May," "The Year 1905," "The Year 1917." Genuine dissidents such as Solzhenitsyn and Lydia Chukovskaya considered Shostakovich a coward and a villain. Shostakovich returned the compliment, allowing his signature to appear beneath a published denunciation of Andrei Sakharov. He had to be convinced not to sign a letter supporting the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia.

But in 1979, Solomon Volkov single-handedly destroyed this popular understanding of Shostakovich by publishing a manuscript that he alleged was the composer's memoirs, dictated to Volkov when he was a young Soviet journalist. Testimony, as the book was titled, was explosive. In its pages, Shostakovich was revealed to be a bitter opponent of Soviet power who tried to express his resistance in music. "The majority of my symphonies are tombstones," he allegedly told Volkov. "Hitler is a criminal, that's clear, but so is Stalin ... That is what all my symphonies ... are about."

Instead of Mickey Mouse, Volkov hears something closer to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. - Mitchinson, carrying on a metaphor from where Lenny left off

Testimony transformed Shostakovich's reputation in two ways. No longer considered a loyal servant of Soviet power, the composer was increasingly understood, in one popular phrase, as a "secret dissident." His music, meanwhile, was scoured for evidence of this dissidence, which was held to be the music's "true" meaning.

There was just one problem: Testimony was not the document Volkov claimed it was. In the

pages of *The Nation*, literary critic Simon Karlinsky noted that two lengthy passages appeared to be lifted verbatim from previously published Soviet sources. Laurel Fay, an independent scholar, quickly discovered five more such passages.

The discovery had an ominous significance. Shostakovich had apparently "authenticated" Volkov's manuscript by affixing his signature, along with the Russian word "chital" ["read"], to the first page of each of the manuscript's eight chapters. (See below for example.) By coincidence, the recycled passages discovered by Fay and Karlinsky, which were entirely innocuous in content, all appeared on these signed pages. Shostakovich, in other words, had apparently authenticated nothing that hadn't already appeared in the Soviet Union.

In 2000, Fay finally managed to confirm her suspicions by examining a photocopy of the manuscript acquired by the Shostakovich Family Archive in Moscow. As she reveals in *A Shostakovich Casebook*, a collection of essays published by Indiana University Press, not a single page "authenticated" by Shostakovich contains anything but previously published material. (Full disclosure: An essay I wrote for *Lingua Franca* is republished in *A Shostakovich Casebook*.) The manuscript's signed pages generally reproduce the exact word order, punctuation (including parentheses, commas, dashes and quotation marks) and paragraph breaks of the earlier published material. Sentences that date the original passages have been deleted by hand. Two inflammatory passages, which Volkov's supporters recently cited as evidence of Shostakovich's dissidence, did not originally appear on these signed pages, but were added later. In most cases, this word-for-word copying stops precisely at the end of the signed manuscript page - the very next word of the following (unsigned) page often veers off into uncharted anti-Stalinist territory.

One explanation, offered up in a 1998 book by Allan Ho and Dmitri Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, is that Shostakovich had a phenomenal memory, and often repeated himself in conversation. But how did Volkov, who did not record the conversations, manage repeatedly to reproduce the exact wording and punctuation from his scribbled shorthand notes? How could Shostakovich have confined his word-for-word repetitions to the precise length of one typewritten page? And finally, why did these passages always end up on the first page of each of Volkov's chapters?

Since a cloud of suspicion now hangs over *Testimony*, it is not surprising that Volkov keeps quotes from his conversations with Shostakovich "to a minimum" in the later book. Nevertheless, he adds, everything in *Shostakovich and Stalin* is "informed by these conversations and by the insight they afforded me into the composer's psyche, his worldview, and his way of being." It shows. *Testimony's* contradictions and controversies form the core of this book, and Volkov works hard to verify the claims he first advanced a quarter century before. *Shostakovich and Stalin* is *Testimony* with footnotes.

This labor of verification begins with the book's subtitle, which alludes to an "extraordinary relationship" between the composer and dictator. Volkov describes it as "unprecedented duel," in which Stalin was "obsessive" in his attempt to "micromanage" Shostakovich, and Shostakovich equally obsessive in his resistance, which he expressed in music. What do we know about this relationship? In concrete terms, Shostakovich and Stalin met on a single occasion, during a 1943 competition to write a new Soviet national anthem. (Shostakovich lost.) When Shostakovich was reluctant to travel to New York City for the First World Peace Conference in 1949, Stalin called him on the phone. A few letters written by the composer expressing gratitude or requesting a favor have recently appeared, but there is no evidence that Stalin ever replied.

But behind the scenes, according to Volkov, Stalin painstakingly orchestrated the finest details about Shostakovich's treatment. When Shostakovich's opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, was denounced in the notorious unsigned 1936 *Pravda* editorial entitled "Muddle Instead of Music,"

Volkov isn't content to say that Stalin initiated or approved of the attack - he insists that Stalin personally dictated it. When Alexander Fadeyev, a Stalin favorite, hurls a generic insult at artistic "leftists" as "people in glasses, with skinny legs and thin blood," Volkov is convinced that this is a "portrait of a completely recognizable, concrete figure, Shostakovich, [which] surely reflects the contents of a conversation between Fadeyev and Stalin."

But while Stalin had clear tastes in music, and wanted composers carefully "directed," his specific knowledge about Shostakovich was actually rather spotty. During an informal meeting the day after the Pravda attack, Stalin revealed that he wasn't even aware that Shostakovich had written one of the most popular songs of the day, "The Morning Greet Us."

Whether Stalin was obsessive or ignorant about Shostakovich, the effect was the same. Shostakovich lived in fear. Informed that he should submit future opera librettos to the Committee for Artistic Affairs, Shostakovich simply stopped writing operas. He poured his creative energy into symphonies and string quartets, patriotic song and film music. His public martyrdom in Pravda ensured a sympathetic audience, which was long accustomed to extracting Aesopian meanings from the most seemingly innocuous works. It didn't matter that Shostakovich publicly agreed in 1938 that his Fifth Symphony was a "creative answer of a Soviet artist to just criticism," or that it ended with ecstatic D major chords punched out over booming timpani. His ritual humiliation ensured that many listeners would hear only "forced rejoicing."

But it is certain that no one, including Communist Party officials, heard in Shostakovich's music anything approaching "insubordination." Consider: In 1945, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was sentenced to eight years in the Gulag for veiled criticism of Stalin in his private letters. That same year, if we believe Volkov, Shostakovich issued nothing less than a "direct challenge to Stalin" in his Ninth Symphony. His punishment? The following year Shostakovich was awarded the Order of Lenin and collected his third Stalin Prize in five years. (His first two had netted him 100,000 rubles each.) While the average Soviet worker earned approximately 5,000 rubles a year, Shostakovich was given almost a quarter of a million rubles in honorariums by the Union of Soviet Composers in 1946-47, independent of his other income. He asked for more. Shostakovich complained to secret police chief Lavrenty Beria about his "situation," and was soon informed that he would be offered even greater rewards: a spacious apartment in Moscow and a new dacha with 60,000 rubles to furnish it.

"All of my affairs are sorting themselves out splendidly," reported Shostakovich in a personal letter to Stalin in May 1946. "All of this has made me extraordinarily happy." Volkov incongruously describes this letter as "strikingly businesslike," and avoids mentioning other letters Shostakovich wrote to Stalin, including one written just after moving into his new Moscow apartment: "With all my heart I thank you for your concern about me. The main thing I very much want now is to justify - if only to a small degree - the attention you have shown me." (Historian Leonid Maximenkov first published these letters in Russian in 2002. They appear in English in *Shostakovich and His World*, a collection of essays published in 2004 by Princeton University Press.)

How to square the reality of such pampered treatment with Shostakovich's alleged insubordination? Volkov expands on a theory first sketched out in the introduction to *Testimony*, in which he claimed that Shostakovich should be understood as a yurodivy, a Russian "holy fool." As embodied in the works of Pushkin and Mussorgsky, the yurodivy is the "largely autobiographical embodiment of the figure of the artist, who - in the name of the downtrodden people - speaks dangerous but necessary truths to the face of the tsar. This was the role that Shostakovich assumed as his life model ... Shostakovich placed himself as a true successor to Pushkin and Mussorgsky's Russian tradition of artistic dialogue and confrontation with the tsar."

It is not enough, in other words, for Shostakovich to have regretted his collaboration, or for his audience to have sympathized with his predicament. Shostakovich's music must have a clear and unambiguous semantic significance, a "dangerous truth" that was intended by the composer, even if it somehow managed to elude the only intended recipient - Stalin himself. This idea leads to a whole series of interpretations, first made public in *Testimony* and by now almost commonplace. The famous "invasion" theme of the Seventh Symphony, ostensibly a musical depiction of the Nazi invasion of Russia, was conceived before the war as the "Stalin" theme. A movement from the 10th Symphony is a fiendish "musical portrait of Stalin." The 11th, ostensibly dedicated to the martyrs of the 1905 revolution, was actually a protest against the 1956 invasion of Hungary. A song cycle, *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, is a protest against Stalinist anti-Semitism. "He did not bother writing letters to Stalin," Volkov writes, "instead he wrote his Jewish cycle." For Volkov, listening to music is equivalent to reading a text.

But how can a listener tell the difference between a loud D major chord signifying joy from a loud D major chord signifying bitterness? And how do we know that Shostakovich actually intended the messages Volkov attributes to him? Follow the footnotes, says Volkov. How does the author know that the Tenth Symphony contains a musical portrait of Stalin? "Shostakovich himself told me this," he writes, "and later it was confirmed by Maxim, his son." In fact, in 1998 Maxim explicitly dismissed that notion in the *Los Angeles Times* as an unfounded rumor. "I think some musicologists set this idea forth. Others repeated it ... Father never said it was a portrait of Stalin." Volkov's source is a 1981 interview in which Maxim repeated the rumor without attributing it to his father. What's more, in that same interview, Maxim explicitly dismissed *Testimony* as a fake. "They are not my father's memoirs," he told German interviewers. Volkov "probably slotted numerous pages between the unnumbered pages of the interview. It's easily done."

Similarly creative footnoting can be found in his claim that Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony was conceived before the outbreak of World War II. Since there is no written evidence to back this up, Volkov cites a recent interview by Shostakovich's favorite student, Galina Ustvol'skaya, who allegedly heard from Shostakovich himself that, in Volkov's words, "the Seventh was almost complete before the war."

Here's what Ustvol'skaya actually said:

"Once, in 1939-40, Shostakovich ... told me that he had almost completed his Seventh Symphony. There remained only the addition of a coda and some corrections; he mentioned that he didn't know how best to name it: the 'Lenin' or the 'Leninskaya' [Symphony] - Dmitri Dmitrievich highly respected V. I. Lenin and always wanted to dedicate one of his works to him."

In other words, Ustvol'skaya is suggesting that the Seventh wasn't a work depicting the crimes of Stalin or Hitler. Rather, it was a work intended to glorify the founder of the Soviet state. Exactly how this helps Volkov's case is unclear.

Like Volkov's earlier book, *Shostakovich and Stalin* is a rich source of rumor from Russia's greatest literary gossip columnist. For this reason it is immensely valuable as a collective portrait of Russia's cultural intelligentsia, how it survived under the Soviet regime and how artistic expression came to fill in the gap created by political censorship. Volkov tells the stories that artists, writers and musicians whispered to each other when they believed the secret police weren't listening. In this context, it hardly matters whether Shostakovich actually intended his music as protest against Stalinism; this is how it was understood in a world filled with terror.

Paradoxically, one possible reason why Shostakovich has assumed such an exalted position among the intelligentsia is because of his cowardice. While it anguished the composer in his later

years, it consoles his survivors. Dissidents, after all, sacrificed careers, livelihood and often their lives in a seemingly hopeless quest, and their behavior implied a moral judgment of those unwilling to share in such a burden. The dissident was a stinging, silent rebuke. Shostakovich, on the other hand, is a reassurance. He embodies the quiet hope of all who compromised and collaborated with a monstrous regime that such actions didn't really matter in the greater scheme of things. Shostakovich "unabashedly followed the rules of the game," wrote the great Russian soprano Galina Vishnevskaya, "because he knew the time would come when the verbiage would fade away, when only his music would remain." It was a desperate hope, and Solomon Volkov probably hopes to hasten such a time. Instead, he manages to reduce Shostakovich's music to mere anti-Stalinist verbiage, cheap sloganeering that mocks the composer's accomplishments and the horrific compromises he made.

Paul Mitchinson will moderate a symposium on "Art and Culture in the Soviet Union" on Friday 20 August as part of "Shostakovich and His World," the 2004 Bard Music Festival (13-15 and 20-22 August) at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. More information, including a complete schedule of concerts, lectures and symposia, is available at www.bard.edu/bmf/.

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