

Shostakovich Conference

Mannes College of Music

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Transcribed and edited by Allan B. Ho and Ian MacDonald

The panelists were: Vladimir Ashkenazy, Dmitry Feofanov, Allan Ho, and Solomon Volkov. Other speakers included Joel Lester and, in the audience, Martin Anderson, Louis Blois, Tim Bond, Antonina Bouis, John Deredita, Maya Pritsker, and Terry Teachout. "???" indicates that the speaker in the audience did not identify himself. (The verbatim text has been minimally edited to remove redundant repetitions and clarify grammar where the original construction obscured meaning. Nothing essential has been altered.)

Lester: I'm Joel Lester, Dean of the Mannes College of Music, and I'm delighted to welcome you all to what I hope will be a most interesting event. The notion of absolute music, of Western concert music, emerged around the time of Beethoven's music and that was believed to be an art form that could say things without needing a text, and could say things without needing words to explain it. At the same time, there is no such thing, I think most of us would agree, as absolutely absolute music. (And we should have gotten Absolute Vodka to sponsor this, therefore.) *[Laughter.]* And nowhere, I think, in recent scholarship, in the last decade or so, has this issue arisen to the surface more directly than in the case of Shostakovich, with Solomon Volkov's *Testimony*, which was translated by Nina Bouis. I hope I pronounced it roughly...

Bouis: Very close.

Lester: Thank you. And then, of course, the current book *[Shostakovich Reconsidered]*. The authors are here and others [who are] interested. And all I want to say -- I don't want to hold up the events any further, but I'm delighted that Mannes, which is a school that has always believed that musicians are not merely finger athletes, is sponsoring this morning's event. *[Applause.]*

Ho: It's my pleasure to introduce the panel. I'm Allan Ho. I'm one of the authors of *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, the book that you see on the walls here. This is Solomon Volkov; maestro Vladimir Ashkenazy; and my co-author, at the end of the table, Dmitry Feofanov. I guess I'll start with a brief summary of the controversy surrounding *Testimony*. And then we'll open it up to questions, because what's most important is that you have the opportunity to ask us what you would want to know. Since its publication in 1979, *Testimony, the memoirs of Dmitry Shostakovich as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov*, has remained probably the most controversial book in the history of music. It was initially praised in the West for its insights into Shostakovich's life and works and, at the same time, it was soundly denounced by the Soviets as a forgery. And then what happened -- in 1980, a year after publication -- is that an article appeared in the *Russian Review*, written by a young American musicologist named Laurel Fay. This article was deemed to conclusively demonstrate that *Testimony* was not what it purported to be, was not the authentic memoirs of Shostakovich. And from that point forward there's been a shadow of doubt cast on *Testimony*, for nearly two decades. What we've done in the past six years is to investigate the claims and accusations against *Testimony*. And we've found them to be, one after another, bogus -- misrepresentations

of fact. At this point, I think that I will not say anything more and I'll turn it over to anyone on the panel who may want to say something.

Ashkenazy: It just so happened that I, quite by chance, by accident, met with the great publisher of this book, Martin Anderson, and then again, also by chance, I decided that I would write a preface for this book. Not that I'm a scholar of Shostakovich's music. But I felt that I know his music very well. I recorded most of his symphonies and now I just finished recording the Preludes and Fugues as a pianist, too -- a monumental job. I lived in the Soviet Union. I met him. I was present at several premieres of his works. And I thought I had inside knowledge of how we reacted to Shostakovich's presence in the Soviet Union, Shostakovich's image. And I thought I could convey our understanding of what we knew about his attitude to the Soviet system, his tremendous contempt for the system in which he lived. I thought I had at least some right to write a modest preface for the book. And for that reason alone I am part of this occasion and I'm honored to be part of this book, which, of course, I read before I wrote the preface. *[Laughter.]* So I'm familiar with the concepts, with the arguments.

One of the very interesting arguments which I propose in my preface, and I don't know if it's open to debate, perhaps it's hypothetical, is this: had the Soviets not denounced this book, would anyone have come up with the notion that this is a forgery? It's a very interesting point. Of course, you can't live those years again, can't go back in life. But I myself doubt very much that, had the impetus not been given by the Soviets, it would be [anything but] just another memoir. People might have found some, maybe, misrepresentations, but not substantial ones. Somebody wrote a memoir about myself a few weeks ago in Russia. They made also a few mistakes. I think they are so small mistakes I wouldn't even worry about it. Stravinsky's memoirs... several different books. You can say maybe that's right, maybe this is right. But in this particular *Testimony*, if one finds any kind of small interpretations by Mr. Volkov, that doesn't matter because the main thing, the image of Shostakovich, his mentality, what his music meant, the fact that they met and discussed everything, is beyond any doubt. And if the Soviets hadn't interfered, would anyone say anything -- that it's a forgery? I would like to know what people think.

That's basically all I want to say. When I read *Testimony*, I thought "Oh, at last, the world knows what Shostakovich was like. That's about time the people know about it." There was not a shred of doubt in my mind or in the minds of my colleagues, musicians from the Soviet Union. It was an absolutely genuine presentation of Shostakovich's mind, what he meant in his music, etc., etc., etc. So, as far as I'm concerned, it's 100%. That's all I wanted to say. -- So the argument is an interesting one. I'd like to know what people think. What would have happened if the Soviets hadn't come out with their great pronouncements? Do you know what the KGB was like? What the Central Committee of the Party was like? It was the Department of Disinformation. And they were very clever in that. They couldn't leave the "loyal musical son" of their country hanging in the air with such a terrible *Testimony*, could they? Anyway, that's all I wanted say now. But I think we'll be happy to answer any questions.

Anderson: Can you identify yourself before you ask a question please? Since it's being recorded.

Blois: Louis Blois of *DSCH*, the publication dedicated to the study of Shostakovich. May I stand? I'm glad to have you gentlemen here and thank you for the stimulating information that you've brought forth on the controversy surrounding *Testimony*. One of the nagging problems that has faced the scholarship on *Testimony* are the eight interpolations which were discovered by Laurel Fay in her 1980 article. Eight

interpolations, eight tracts in *Testimony* which were word-for-word duplications of articles which had previously been published by Shostakovich, dating as early as 1932. And this has been a problem with the scholarship, with claiming the veracity of *Testimony*, as a result of these word-for-word interpolations, which were not just small interpolations -- they went on for a number of pages. A second problem is that these interpolations, not only being word-for-word, they occur at the beginnings of chapters. So, therefore, this implies an editorial decision to place the interpolations at the beginning of the chapters -- rather than something that happened by way of happenstance, in the course of your dealings with Shostakovich. I've read *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, and Messrs Feofanov and Ho have attributed these interpolations to the phenomenal memory of Dmitry Shostakovich. And I wonder, Mr. Volkov, particularly, I wonder if you could address this in your own words. How do you explain the interpolations? If I may ask a third question: I wonder if you can explain your silence for the past twenty years on this matter? The ongoing controversy has been brewing with such fierceness. How come you have been silent for the past two decades on this matter? Thank you.

Volkov: Probably I should start with the third question, as I understand it. I'm not a very public person and, by the way, for this reason, this particular appearance at such a gathering is my first, and very probably last, one. I wouldn't be here today without the book *Shostakovich Reconsidered* first coming out, because I was raised in a very specific ethics. When I met Marianna, my wife, her mother, now deceased, used to say that "Your own praise stinks." And I believe in it, I like this. And when I came here to the United States and I heard about the American maxim "Never complain, never explain," I subscribed to it, and I still subscribe to it, I believe in it. And I don't think that going before the audience insisting that you are an honest man is a comfortable position -- and I don't like to find myself in such a situation defending my integrity and my honesty. So I don't regret that for these twenty years I maintained silence on my own. I could only add that there were very few, if any, direct appeals to me from somebody that I would think about as an objective scholar, to reply to. I must admit that I never read this famous -- or infamous, as you wish -- Fay's article, to the end. Because I stopped reading it when I saw that she's misrepresenting the facts, she's distorting the facts. And I saw very clearly that she is not out to get the truth, but she's out to get *me*, which is somewhat different. And I lost interest in the article immediately and I'm still not interested.

Because, to mention just one example -- and that, by the way, I remember very vividly, that is the moment I stopped reading farther -- I believe that in the Preface I stated very clearly that what I did in Leningrad in regard to Fleishman's and Shostakovich's opera *Rothschild's Violin* was the first staging of the opera. When I saw that Fay absolutely deliberately misrepresents what was absolutely unambiguously stated in my Preface, and that she willfully misrepresents it, I lost interest. I saw that this is not an objective investigation. And the same was true for any subsequent attempts to discredit the book. I never believed that the people who stood behind it were disinterested scholars. I couldn't, as a former Soviet citizen, discern to what extent the KGB and its Misinformation Department were involved. I only learned the many details of it subsequently, here, in New York. And this involvement was very, very substantial. And, yes, these people were out to get me. And behind them was the power of a great state, a super power at that time. Honestly, you know, reading an article that distorts the facts so blatantly, I wondered how anyone could accept this article?. So that was my position in regard to answering these charges. And, as I said, I still have no regrets about it. That's first...

Second, about these interpolations. I was not aware of them before Fay's article. I have a number of theories about how it happened. You see, there is one thing about *Testimony*

that I'm sure about and that's that while the book probably has many flaws, it's an absolutely honest book. But, at the time I was doing this book with Shostakovich, I was relatively young, much younger than now, and inexperienced in constructing a big book like that, in this genre. A relatively inexperienced writer. So now, after twenty years of working in the genre, probably I would edit it more carefully, I would construct it better, and so on. You should remember, as I said first, this was the first attempt of a young and inexperienced writer. Second, that it wasn't written in the comfort of uptown or downtown New York. It was done in the Soviet Union of the early '70s, in a very nervous atmosphere, in a hurry. And that's how, probably, you know, these... If I would have done more research *then*, in the Soviet Union, on this subject, probably I would have uncovered this. And then I would have decided, then I would have made my editing decisions more wisely. But the book exists as it is. And, once again, I consider this is an absolutely honest book. And that's my position. In this respect, your theory could be as good as mine.

Blois: Did Shostakovich, in the course of your interviews with him, did he hold a paper in front of him and read certain articles? Perhaps he read his articles to you in the process?

Volkov: No, no, no, no. That would have alerted me immediately to the fact that he's giving a prepared [text]. Absolutely not.

Blois: Do you agree, do you take the position that it was probably his photographic memory that allowed him to duplicate, word-for-word, from those parts?

[Volkov nods in agreement.]

??: And it was just an accident that these appear at the beginning of chapters? All of them?

Ho: Could I just contribute something here? What we did in *Shostakovich Reconsidered* is we researched whether or not it was possible, given Shostakovich's other documented feats of memory, for him to repeat himself. And, I think, if you've read the book, we have leading psychologists, including the president of the American Psychological Society, agreeing that this was for Shostakovich not only possible but plausible given his incredible memory. What is often misconstrued is that, of these 2000 words that are recycled in *Testimony*, people think that Shostakovich did it, one word after another, from beginning to end. But these occurred over numerous meetings. I ask you, is it possible for someone to remember one or two paragraphs at a time, and repeat that? The introductory comments that I gave you just a little while ago are almost verbatim what I said at the American Musicological Society, that I wrote in August. I don't have anywhere near the memory that Shostakovich did. So this is the point: people have misconstrued the amount of recycling.

You mentioned the recycling from an article first written in 1932. You didn't mention that this was reprinted in the late 1960s and that Shostakovich had read that collection to refresh his memory. You asked Solomon Volkov why hasn't he spoken out in two decades. I ask you, why hasn't Laurel Fay reported any of the information in here [*Shostakovich Reconsidered*] for the past two decades? Why hasn't Richard Taruskin mentioned that Galina Drubachevskaya confirmed that she knew about the Volkov-Shostakovich meetings? She read the manuscript of *Testimony*. He cited her article, but he didn't mention that she corroborated *Testimony* and vindicated Volkov. So, if you ask Solomon Volkov why he has not responded, I hope that you will ask Richard Taruskin, Malcolm Brown, Laurel Fay why they have not reported 99% of the information that's

included in our book. I raise the question: is it a cover-up to protect personal egos and professional reputations? Is it complacency, because they thought the case was solved in 1989? Is it incompetence? They are the only ones who can answer these questions and I hope, Mr. Blois, that you will pose these questions to them. Because their silence is unexplainable.

Blois: I agree. I agree that they have to do that.

Pritsker: I have something to add to your answer. You should know that Laurel Fay was working for the Schirmer publishing house for a long time, and I think she's still there. And in this capacity she came to Russia quite frequently. She became probably the only person who frequently visited the Soviet Union for a long time. So a whole lot of information came to her through VAAP, the agency of the authorship -- which was headed by a KGB agent, as you know -- and also through the Union of Composers. I knew that because I was living then in Moscow. I was a member of the Union of Composers as a musicologist, and I talked to Laurel. So I know her views. If she'd spoken against the situation, she probably wouldn't have been allowed back into Russia. She would have lost her position as a leading specialist in Soviet music at that time. I don't know about Richard Taruskin, but Malcolm Brown also visited frequently and he had very close connections with the head of the Union of Soviet Composers [Tikhon Khrennikov]. So this is probably part of the explanation.

Volkov: Maya, could you please identify yourself, so the people would know?

Pritsker: My name is Maya Pritsker. I have lived in this country for eight years. I lecture sometimes at Lincoln Center, I do preview lectures, and I am now head of the Art Department for the American Russian daily newspaper, *Novoye Russkoye Slovo*.

Ashkenazy: Talking of incompetence, apart from deliberate attempts by somebody like Fay to discredit Volkov, there's so much incompetence, so much ignorance about what our life in the Soviet Union was like. How many years do we need to understand what the Soviet Union represented, the way they worked, the way their outlook to the world was, and their attitude to everything: music, politics, etc.? It's about thirteen years since *perestroika* and *glasnost*, and it's still not enough. I don't know if 113 would be enough. Because people are people -- they don't want to change something in their minds. A few weeks ago *The Economist*, a famous British magazine, in a review of *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, said "Outside the disputed pages of *Testimony*, Shostakovich rarely explained his pieces with a 'program' -- certainly not at the rehearsal, where his interpretive hints were always strictly musical." What is [the writer] talking about? Does he think [Shostakovich] would come to the rehearsal of, say, the Tenth Symphony and say "You know, here, I mean [to convey] how difficult life was, how we suffered under the Soviet system"? He would go straight to the concentration camp. How can anyone write such a thing today?... So, it's a combination of somebody like Fay and some others, a deliberate attempt [to misrepresent] -- plus incompetence.

How are we going to fight incompetence? How are we going to explain what it was like? You had to live in the country to understand what it was like. People talk, for instance, about Richard Strauss, who was the head of the Kulturkammer [Reichsmusikkammer] in Nazi Germany -- before the war, then he was fired. His daughter-in-law was Jewish. Could he really say no to Hitler? She would go to the concentration camp. People forget about this and denounce Richard Strauss for that. People really need to understand that to live in a totalitarian country is not a piece of cake. Before you criticize anybody, you have to create a very clear concept of what things were like. And it's very difficult to create such a concept. But if you can't, don't

begin to criticize. Say "Look, I don't know enough. And I can't say this or that or that." Be modest enough and have humility. Anyway, that's what I wanted to say. I was just amazed -- I wrote to *The Economist* saying "how can you let your journalist write an article on a subject he's ignorant about?" Plus he distorts something in the book. He says that [Ian] MacDonald "believes that Shostakovich's music can only be understood programmatically." He never said that. He only said that in [Shostakovich's] case it's particularly important to know what he went through in his life. They published my letter -- a little bit censored, like in the Soviet Union. *[Laughter.]* I don't know the name of the journalist, because they don't reveal the names of their journalists. That's their policy. But I thought I should write a letter.

Teachout: I'm Terry Teachout from *Time* magazine/*Commentary*. I should begin by saying that I'm one of the people who questioned, in print, the documentary accuracy of *Testimony*. And having read *Shostakovich Reconsidered* carefully, I believe that the book is both accurate and authentic. Mr. Volkov, I would like to apologize to you for what I said in print. *[Applause.]* Now, having said that, one of the things that has struck me most about the debate that's arisen over this, and particularly the presentation that you made in Boston, is the seeming resistance of scholars to engage you with the facts that you present in this book. They don't seem to want to engage you at all, as far as I can tell from the reporting of the debate. Why is this? I ask all of you, what is the resistance to really engaging with the factual substance which you presented?

Feofanov: If I may tackle this one... I, of course, cannot say why Fay, Brown, and Taruskin do not want to engage in debating the issues rather than responding in a kind of ad hominem way by claiming that we engage in the technique of the "Big Lie" -- which, of course, is a veiled reference to Dr. Goebbels and his propaganda ministry. I'm not them. But we have our theories. The level of disinformation and misrepresentation which that camp engages in is mind-boggling. I dabble, in my second profession as a lawyer, in consumer fraud. And in my now home state of Illinois, there is a consumer fraud statute that prohibits people from suppressing, omitting, and concealing material facts in consumer transactions. If this were a court case, I would be very comfortable presenting it to a judge or jury, complaining that [Fay, Brown, and Taruskin] are engaging basically in consumer fraud, the "consumers" being you [readers and listeners]. Because they do suppress, omit, and conceal material facts, very important facts -- up to and including a smoking gun, which we discuss in our book in reference to Elizabeth Wilson, otherwise one of the good guys. The only guess that we could come up with is that their reputations are at stake, their tenured jobs are at stake, and they cannot accept the notion that they could have been wrong and maligned Solomon for twenty years for no reason. That's the best we can do.

Ho: I might add that they went way out on a limb. In 1989, Richard Taruskin wrote: "As any proper scholar could plainly see, the book was a fraud." For him now, as "America's most brilliant musicologist", to say that he's been wrong and he's been wrong for twenty years is not an easy thing to do. Laurel Fay largely established her career as a Shostakovich researcher on the basis of that 1980 article. To come forward now, while she's working on a Shostakovich biography for Oxford University Press, and say "I'm sorry. I was wrong" would be quite a turnaround. So I really think -- I don't know any of them personally and there's no personal animosity between any of us or any of them -- I really think it's just an awkward position to be in now, to recant the accusations they've made against Solomon Volkov and against *Testimony*. They have no facts with which to respond to our book. One of Richard Taruskin's most famous phrases is that Shostakovich was "perhaps Soviet Russia's most loyal musical son." That's generated a lot of controversy. People have complained that we took that passage out of context. I see that maestro Ashkenazy has the complete article with him, so anyone who wants to read the context may do so. Now, what's interesting is that at the AMS meeting in

October (1998), we threw down the gauntlet and we challenged Richard Taruskin to defend that statement, because some people were saying "Well, he only meant up to 1936" -- something we reject. We say clearly in our book that we reject the notion that Shostakovich was *ever* "Soviet Russia's most loyal musical son." And it caught Dmitry and I, and several other people at the AMS meeting, totally by surprise that Richard Taruskin did not try to back up his statement with facts. He said "I was being merely ironic" in writing that.

Feofanov: Now, of course, not a single one of his defenders understood it as such. Because they were all defending him and saying that Ho and Feofanov quoted him out of context, and he only meant until 1936. Now he says he's merely kidding. The level of intellectual dishonesty that was presented there and throughout the months that followed continues to amaze me.

Ho: Let me just identify the three people who wrote, in print, to say that Taruskin meant only up to 1936. They were David Fanning...

Feofanov: Our opponent in Boston.

Ho: ...Tamara Bernstein, and Malcolm Hamrick Brown. None of them read that passage as being ironic, so if the irony was lost on us, it was lost on them too. Now, the clinching thing is you have to read what Taruskin says right after "perhaps Soviet Russia's most loyal musical son." He says "and certainly its most talented one." Now, Taruskin would have us believe that he was being ironic in the first half of that sentence, which is not in quotes at all..."

Ashkenazy: No. [*Holds up the actual article to confirm the point*]

Ho: ...but not being ironic in the second half. [*Laughter.*] You see, when we challenge these people to, as Ian MacDonald says, put up or shut up, they say "I was just kidding."

Ashkenazy: Interestingly enough, the paragraph before this paragraph ends with inverted commas. He was quoting somebody. The paragraph before that reads: "Its rhetoric notwithstanding, the editorial [*Pravda* editorial about *Lady Macbeth*] was the first conclusive indication that the arts policies of the Soviet state would be governed henceforth by the philistine petit-bourgeois taste of the only critic that mattered [Stalin]. In a phrase that must have scared the poor composer half out of his wits, the chief official organ of Soviet power accused him of 'trifling with difficult matters', and hinted that 'it might end very badly.'" The next paragraph: "Thus was Dmitri Shostakovich, perhaps Soviet Russia's most loyal musical son and certainly her most talented one, made a sacrificial lamb, precisely for his pre-eminence among Soviet artists of his generation." No inverted commas here. I think he's an experienced enough writer to know that if he means irony he should put things in inverted commas.

Ho: What does this say about the man if we take him at his word -- that he was just joking about this?

Ashkenazy: It doesn't seem that he's joking.

Ho: Only a highly insensitive person would joke about calling someone "Soviet Russia's most loyal musical son".

Ashkenazy: It doesn't sound like a joke.

Ho: No, it doesn't.

Feofanov: He meant it.

Ashkenazy: I can only read it to you and you can make up your own mind. It's very easy to get this article, I'm sure.

Ho: *New Republic*, 1989.

Ashkenazy: I have copies made. 1989.

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