

Alex Ross: The Rest Is Noise

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Ruined Choirs: Shostakovich

by Alex Ross

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Addendum 2004: This article contains quotations from Testimony, the purported memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich. In light of Laurel E. Fay's latest researches, published in The Shostakovich Casebook, it is no longer possible to place any faith in Solomon Volkov's book. Writing in 2000, I stated that the composer's signature appeared on the first page of the manuscript. This, it turns out, is not the case.

On a January evening in 1936, Joseph Stalin entered a box at the Bolshoi Theatre, in Moscow. His custom was to take a seat in the back, just before the curtain rose. He had become interested that month in new operas by Soviet composers: a week earlier, he had seen Ivan Dzerzhinsky's "The Quiet Don," and liked it enough to summon the composer for a conversation. On this night, the Bolshoi was presenting "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk," a dark, violent, sexually explicit opera by Dmitri Shostakovich. Stalin enjoyed himself less. After the third act—in which tsarist policemen are depicted as buffoons who arrest people on hastily fabricated pretexts—the Leader conspicuously walked out. Shostakovich, who had been expecting the same reception that Stalin gave to Dzerzhinsky, went away feeling, he said, "sick at heart." Two days later, Pravda published an editorial under the headline "muddle instead of music," which condemned Shostakovich's opera outright. "From the first minute," the anonymous author wrote, "the listener is confused by a deliberately disordered, muddled stream of noise." The composer was playing a game that "may end very badly."

In 1936, Shostakovich was twenty-nine years old, and he was the brilliant young man of Soviet music. His First Symphony, which he completed at the age of eighteen, had been taken up by orchestras around the world. He had dedicated himself—industriously, if not enthusiastically—to works on Communist themes. His first opera, a setting of Gogol's "The Nose," typified the impertinence of art in the early Bolshevik years, and his second, "Lady Macbeth," was hailed—before Stalin saw it—as the prototypical Soviet music drama. For the benefit of the proletarian establishment, Shostakovich declared of his opera, "I wanted to unmask reality and to arouse a feeling of hatred for the tyrannical and humiliating atmosphere in a Russian merchant's household." At the same time, his satire of the police must have struck a sympathetic chord with audiences who were living under Stalin. It's impossible to say whether Stalin himself took offense at the police scene, or the graphic bedroom sequences, or the spasms of dissonance produced by the orchestra. Perhaps he simply felt, with his genius for destruction, that this young man needed a comeuppance.

Shostakovich lived the next two years of his life in a state of abject fear. Pravda's denunciation of "Lady Macbeth" coincided with the beginning of the Great Terror, and Shostakovich was immediately declared "an enemy of the people." He is said to have slept in the hallway outside his apartment, so that when the N.K.V.D. came to take him away his young family would not have to witness the scene. He finished his Fourth Symphony, a surreal, desolate piece in a Mahlerian vein, and withdrew it when cultural officials warned him that he was still on the wrong path. In April of 1937, he set to work on a new symphony, in a simpler style; two months later, Mikhail Tukhachevsky, a Marshal of the Soviet Union, who had been a supporter and friend of Shostakovich's for many years, was shot for his part in a nonexistent conspiracy. As the N.K.V.D. rounded up Tukhachevsky's circle, Shostakovich was called in for questioning. In an impeccably Gogolesque turn of events, the composer found that his appointed interrogator had been arrested, and that no one else was interested in his case.

When the Fifth Symphony had its première, in November of 1937, it sent the audience into convulsions. During the third movement, the proudly sorrowing Largo, many broke into tears. During the finale, people around the hall got to their feet, as if royalty had entered the room. The ovation afterward lasted for forty minutes. The game had not ended badly, for the moment: Shostakovich had written a piece that had aroused the love of the masses, and he had done so in a clear style that passed muster with socialist-realist aesthetics. The Fifth went on to achieve enormous popularity in the West. Shostakovich, in the remaining forty years of his career, proved to be one of the few twentieth-century composers who could hold audiences in thrall, and interest in him has only intensified since his death. This season, in New York, he is everywhere: “Lady Macbeth” is currently playing at the Metropolitan Opera; many of the symphonies have appeared on programs around town; and the Emerson Quartet has just recorded and performed the fifteen string quartets. Back in 1982, when the Fitzwilliam Quartet played the cycle at Alice Tully Hall, there were many empty seats. When the Emerson repeated the feat last month, the hall was full, and people were begging for tickets.

But something funny has happened to this composer on his way to immortality. Audiences are listening to him more intently than ever, but they are being urged to listen in a very different way. Shostakovich, once pegged as a propagandist for the Soviet system, is now exalted as its noblest musical victim. He has been canonized as a moral subversive, a conscientious ironist, a “holy fool.” The ending of the Fifth Symphony, which was once described as a paean to Stalin’s Russia, is now described as a sub-rosa denunciation of it. Such a hundred-and-eighty-degree rotation of meaning is curious, to say the least, and the arbitrariness of the change—the music is still said to represent Stalin but, now, critically—suggests that the new interpretation may be no more valid than the old one. The Fifth has become a hall of musical mirrors in which our own unmusical obsessions are reflected. The notes, in any case, remain the same. The symphony still ends fortissimo, in D major, and it still brings audiences to their feet.

When I began listening to Shostakovich, in college, I came across a record of a Soviet radio broadcast of one of the composer’s public speeches. I put it on, expecting to meet the masterful personality behind the Fifth Symphony. Instead, I heard a man speaking hurriedly in Russian while an interpreter, sounding like a voice-over man in a driver’s-ed film, intoned such deathless phrases as “We are all a vital part of the times we live in” and “Soviet art rests foursquare on the ideas and principles proclaimed by the great Lenin.” This was an introduction to the enigma of Shostakovich, who made an art of saying nothing memorable in public. After any performance of his music, he would declare, “Brilliantly done.” When he was shown something by another composer, he would say, “A remarkable work.” He mastered Soviet doublespeak, and artfully mocked it in his correspondence: “1944 is around the corner,” he wrote to his friend Isaak Glikman. “A year of happiness, joy, and victory. This year will bring us much joy. The freedom-loving Peoples will at long last throw off the yoke of Hitlerism, and peace will reign throughout the world under the sunny rays of Stalin’s Constitution. I am convinced of this, and therefore experience the greatest joy.”

This façade was shattered in 1979, with the publication of “Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich, as Related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov.” Volkov, a young Leningrad musicologist, had interviewed the composer in the early seventies and smuggled his manuscript out of the Soviet Union. In “Testimony,” Shostakovich rages against Stalin and offers provocative reinterpretations of several of his most familiar works. The book introduced many readers to Shostakovich’s biting wit, and they began to hear the same tone in his music. A revisionist school of interpretation developed, as critics went hunting for subversive messages in Shostakovich’s ostensibly socialist-realist symphonies. The quartets were likewise glossed as “private diaries” of the composer’s anguish under Soviet domination. It was in this light that the Emerson played the cycle; the program notes quoted from such great dissident figures as Osip Mandelstam, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Joseph Brodsky, implying that Shostakovich belonged in their company. The Emerson also participated in “The Noise of Time,” a production by the Théâtre de Complicité, in which Shostakovich’s music under-scored a multimedia collage of his tormented life.

Not everyone has bought into this outspoken posthumous dissidence. A year after “Testimony” appeared, an American scholar, Laurel Fay, wrote an article questioning the book’s authenticity. A second camp was formed—one that declared that Shostakovich had never strayed too far from the Party line, and that to call him a “dissident” made a mockery of the term. The musicologist Richard Taruskin declared that several of Shostakovich’s major works conformed all too well with Soviet ideology. In his book “Defining Russia Musically,” he wrote that the satire of the merchant class in “Lady Macbeth” coincided chillingly with Stalin’s murderous campaign against the kulaks. Fay recently published “Shostakovich: A Life” (Oxford), which paints the composer as a fearful, accommodating figure.

In the last few years, the war for the mind of Shostakovich has only escalated. Polemics and counter-polemics are flying over the transom. Allan Ho and Dmitry Feofanov, two Volkov admirers, have responded to Fay’s attacks on “Testimony” with a seven-hundred-and-eighty-seven-page volume entitled “Shostakovich Reconsidered,” and buried in it is a good case for the memoir’s authenticity. The authors observe, for example, that the composer’s signature appears on the first page of the Volkov manuscript, on which it is written, “Looking back, I see nothing but ruins, only mountains of corpses.” Shostakovich, therefore, could have been under no illusions about the kind of project he was engaged in. Unfortunately, “Shostakovich Reconsidered” is a pedantic, fanatical mess of a book, a kind of hardbound Web site, in which fresh information is lost in reams of third-hand factoids and musicological daydreaming. All participants in the debate, in fact, have graphomaniac tendencies. Ian MacDonald, another critic of the revisionist persuasion, has posted a fifty-thousand-word review of Fay’s biography on the Internet. Fay is preparing a response to “Shostakovich Reconsidered”—an article about a book about an article about a book. “Muddle Instead of Music” would be a good title for an omnibus anthology of the whole affair.

Here is a possible compromise: “Testimony” does tell us what Shostakovich was thinking about at the end of his life, but Shostakovich at the end of his life was a desperately embittered man, whose pronouncements on his own work are not always to be trusted. “Testimony,” in other words, may be authentic, but it may not always tell the truth. By the early seventies, when Volkov conducted his interviews, Shostakovich was wracked by illness and clouded by medication. He had acquired a poor reputation among those who were trying to resist the excesses of the Soviet regime, and, in 1973, he enraged the dissident community further by signing a letter of denunciation against Andrey Sakharov. The composer may have wished to improve his image in the eyes of the younger generation, of whom Volkov was a representative. So he went back over his published work and argued that what had seemed doctrinaire was in fact subversive. This is what he said of the Fifth Symphony:

I think that it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat, as in “Boris Godunov.” It’s as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, “Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing,” and you rise, shaky, and go marching off, muttering, “Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing.” What kind of apotheosis is that? You have to be a complete oaf not to hear that.

It is strange for an artist to hector his audience in this fashion. Shostakovich was usually as vague as possible when he spoke about his music, and his belated, belligerent specificity about the meaning of the Fifth seems to protest too much. Nothing in the score supports such a reading. And even if the composer had wanted a sardonic ending, attempts to perform it sardonically have proved unconvincing. A hundred orchestral musicians cannot play their hearts out in a major key and sound insincere about what they are doing.

Shostakovich’s revisionist account of the Fifth has caught on because the circumstances of its creation make us uncomfortable. It’s hard to accept that a composer wrote his best-loved work under the gun of a totalitarian regime. Listening to the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies side by side—one sprawling, dissonant, and spooky; the other strict, conservative, and uplifting—leaves no doubt that in 1936 and 1937 Shostakovich did make an abrupt and partly involuntary stylistic swerve. Yet most of us prefer the straitjacketed Fifth to the wildly gesticulating Fourth. Most of us, like it or not, share Stalin’s taste for the tonal and the tuneful. The revisionist

interpretation, conveniently, gives us the luxury of listening on two levels—the intellectual and the emotional. First, we ponder the theory that Shostakovich set out to write a meretricious grand finale, hedging it in with ironies and ambiguities. Then we connect emotionally with the unironic, unambiguous power of the sound. We nod our heads sagely at the program notes, and sway in our seats to the thudding of the drums. If we are inspired, we can jump to our feet at the end—sardonically, of course.

This raises a question about the famous première in 1937, at which people stood up in awe while the music was still playing. If, as the revisionists claim, all good Russians understood the coded message “Your business is rejoicing,” why didn’t they remain seated? More likely, they were getting to their feet because the music was rejoicing, in spite of everything—proudly, darkly, improbably. Shostakovich deployed an arsenal of preëxisting musical devices to give his finale maximum impact. He looked back, in particular, to the transcendent finale of Mahler’s Third Symphony, which is as cosmically free of irony as anything ever written. Mahler’s coda is in the same key as Shostakovich’s, and it has the same repetition of triads, the same device of timpani repeatedly pounding a two-note figure (D and A), even the same touches in the orchestration (trumpets piercing the general mass of sound). It’s telling that conductors slow the drumbeat in the last three bars of the Fifth, in defiance of Shostakovich’s score but in accordance with Mahler’s—they are getting the two symphonies confused. This is not to say that Shostakovich’s ending is an altogether happy one. By adding a fiercely pulsating A in the strings and the winds, he gives his celebration a seething edge. But it is a celebration all the same.

Evidence for the ultimately triumphal character of the Fifth crops up in, of all places, “Shostakovich Reconsidered.” That book excerpts some lectures by Maxim Shostakovich, the composer’s son, who has long been an authoritative conductor of the symphonies. “The Fifth Symphony is his ‘Heroic’ Symphony,” Maxim writes. He quotes his father as follows: “The hero is saying, ‘I am right. I will follow the way I choose.’” The interpretation that Shostakovich offered his son contradicted what he told Volkov—the ending, he implied, was sincere and in his own voice. The symphony, in other words, is the conventional Romantic story of an individual overcoming adversity. That Soviet propagandists co-opted it as a glorification of Stalin shouldn’t stop us from hearing glory of a different kind. The hero of this symphony has the freedom to imagine joy, if not to experience it. Call it an angry joy—a lunge for a better world.

The Fifth Symphony is a statement of awesome confidence, but it emerged from conditions of fear. During the remainder of Shostakovich’s career, fear took its toll. The success of the Fifth, and the even greater wartime success of the Seventh Symphony, the “Leningrad,” made the composer a potent propaganda resource for the Soviets, and he began to feel trapped in his position. After the war, he failed to produce the Beethovenian “Victory” symphony that Stalin had been expecting, issuing instead a largely frivolous Ninth Symphony with a vaudeville finale. A second campaign against formalism erupted in 1948, and Shostakovich suffered another sickening fall from grace. A new trend emerged in his dealings with the regime: instead of lying low, as he had done after the “Lady Macbeth” crisis, he went out of his way to humble himself in public. At the 1948 proceedings against formalism, during which most of the accused composers avoided personal appearances, he read aloud a speech that was stultifying in its banality and disconcerting in its masochism. He later claimed that the text of this speech had been forced on him, but other participants in the affair were apparently able to speak in their own voice. Prokofiev, for one, sent in a reply that was prickly and condescending in tone.

Shostakovich suffered under the Soviet system, but so did many other people. After a point, the fact of oppression fails to justify his actions. During the Khrushchev thaw, he became, if anything, more deeply implicated in the Communist hierarchy. He recited every speech that was put in front of him, he signed manifestos and denunciations without reading them. In 1960, he joined the Party, an unnecessary action, for which he gave conflicting explanations (one being that he was drunk). There were elements of defeatism in his philosophy. “Don’t create illusions,” he would tell his colleagues. “There’s no other life. There can’t be any.” The text of “Testimony” is laced with hopelessness: life is miserable, it says, nothing can change, one must

grow hard, death waits at the end. Shostakovich condemns two “patented saviors,” two men of “false religiosity,” who thought they could save the world. They are, incredibly, Stalin and Solzhenitsyn.

In the late sixties and early seventies, Shostakovich did write many works in which resistance to authority was a running theme: the texts of his vocal works spoke of poets murdered by tsars, rebels dancing on the scaffold, exiles expressing the conscience of a country. In his Fourteenth Symphony, he set a poem by Apollinaire entitled “The Zaporozhian Cossacks’ Answer to the Sultan of Constantinople,” in which the “evil butcher of Podolye” is denounced in tones distinctly reminiscent of the Scherzo from the Tenth Symphony—the piece that “Testimony” calls a “portrait of Stalin.” But such music was more the projection of a dissident career than the enactment of one. It offered no hope for action and change. For genuine dissidents, such as Solzhenitsyn and Brodsky, Shostakovich was part of the problem. In an interview, ironically, with Solomon Volkov, Brodsky attacked the effort to locate “nuances of virtue” in the gray expanses of Shostakovich’s later life. Such a career of compromise, Brodsky said, destroys a man instead of preserving him. “It transforms the individual into ruins,” he said. “The roof is gone, but the chimney, for example, might still be standing.”

Ruins, however, can be beautiful to behold. Shostakovich was never able or willing to write another convincingly “heroic” symphony, but he found other avenues of expression, most significantly in chamber music. He wrote his first string quartet in 1938, in the wake of the Fifth Symphony, and the quartet medium became for him a refuge from the anxiety of symphonic public speaking. In the new realm, he could explore the technical limits of his musical language, which is based on an intricate array of Russian modal scales, and also test the psychological limits of his narratives, in which seemingly simple and innocent ideas are revealed as their opposites. A banal melody is often heard over a changing and blackening array of accompaniments, so that its meaning is altered and destroyed; in the same way, a plain chord twists around and falls apart as long lines of eighth notes snake through it. Shostakovich is a master manipulator of mood: he can show panicky happiness slipping into inchoate rage, and then crumbling into lethargic despair. In the hands of the Emerson Quartet, which played with unprecedented brilliance, the quartets seemed, even more than the symphonies, a complete emotional world.

The Emerson ended its series with a recital of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Quartets. These works have a pared-down, thinned-out quality, as if a gust of wind had blown random pages off the musicians’ stands. When the quartet played the Fifteenth again, as part of Théâtre de Complicité’s “The Noise of Time,” the piece acquired a positively unreal and deathly aura: the members of the ensemble wandered about the stage, with silent figures shadowing and mimicking them. The Emerson’s performance, staggering as it was, may have made too much of the obvious gloom of the Fifteenth, which, like so much of Shostakovich’s later work, also has its share of quotations, quirks, and private jokes. The vacant tread of the opening, in the muted, claustrophobic key of E-flat minor, is descended from the Andante of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony, while the second theme, in open-air C major, brings to mind the lofty first theme of Bruckner’s Seventh Symphony. Such out-of-nowhere quotations in late Shostakovich produce a feeling of free-floating movement and deep musical space. Even as it comes to the end of the line, the music begins all over again, with the basic building blocks of tradition.

Shostakovich’s career was a spectacular one, mixing scenes of triumph and terror. But it is not enough to match up the events of the life with the events of the music, because the music is still more triumphant and more terrifying. You can hear the agony, and you can think about the agony in Shostakovich’s life, but Shostakovich wrote agonized music from the beginning to the end of his career, no matter who was running the country. Russian composers long ago perfected techniques of agony, formulas of lamentation. Tchaikovsky’s musical suffering led biographers to emphasize the suffering in his life, and, when the biography was exhausted, enthusiasts embraced a spurious rumor that the composer had committed suicide. Something similar has happened with Shostakovich. The strong feeling in his music has led people to imagine

a man who was engaged in a great battle with the system. But the hard facts reveal a smaller, weaker figure—a man who strived at all costs to create conditions in which he could work in peace.

Perhaps the most revealing observation Shostakovich ever made about himself came in a letter to his favorite pupil, Boris Tishchenko, less than two years before his death. He told Tishchenko that he had been thinking about Chekhov's story "Ward 6," the tale of a doctor who halfheartedly performs his duties at a squalid provincial hospital. "When I read in that story about Andrey Yefimovich Ragin," Shostakovich wrote, "it seems to me I am reading memoirs about myself." This was a strange comment, since he was at that moment engaged in dictating his memoirs to Volkov. But certain passages of "Ward 6" eerily illuminate the rants of "Testimony":

Dr. Ragin was a great believer in intelligence and honesty, but he lacked the strength of character and the confidence in his own right to assert himself in order to see to it that the life around him should be honest and intelligent. He simply did not know how to give orders, to prohibit, or to insist. It was almost as though he had taken a vow never to raise his voice....When deceived or flattered or handed a quite obviously fraudulent account for signature, he turned as red as a lobster and felt guilty, but he signed the account all the same.

Late at night, Ragin broods over his condition: "I am serving a bad cause, and I receive a salary from people whom I deceive. I am dishonest. But then I am nothing by myself, I am only a small part of a necessary social evil.... It is the fault of the time I live in." He finds solace in the thought that suffering is universal and that death destroys all human aspirations in the end. Immortality, he says, is a fiction. When he dies, of a sudden stroke, he is mourned by no one. At that point, the resemblance to Shostakovich breaks down. ©

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