

# Shostakovich and the Soviet State

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## Introduction

Nearly three decades after his death, Dmitriy Dmitrijevich Shostakovich remains one of the most controversial composers in the history of Western music. His compositions are widely studied and admired, his name is known throughout the world; his life and views have become the subject of a debate as contentious as any in the field of musicology. There are several reasons why Shostakovich remains a hot topic for debate. First among these is his music, a brilliant and idiosyncratic oeuvre including two operas, 15 symphonies, 15 string quartets, 37 film scores, and dozens of other pieces in various genres. He is almost universally considered to be one of the great composers of the 20th century. Yet there is very little consensus on the “meaning” of his key works; where is he being ironic, where is he being sincere, and where is he hedging his bets?

A great deal of the current fascination concerns Shostakovich the man. He suffered bitterly from Soviet repression for much of his adult life, yet frequently received the government’s highest honors and awards. To follow the thread of Shostakovich’s career, indeed, is to chronicle the long history of the ambivalent, volatile relationship between Soviet artists and their government. At every significant development in the Soviet state’s policy with regard to artists, we find Shostakovich in the foreground, alternately weeping and rejoicing. He was the first to suffer from waves of repression, the first to benefit in times of “thaw.” He was in many ways a living embodiment of the terrifying roller-coaster ride that was artistic life in the USSR. In a similar way, the explosive debate over his artistic legacy

can be seen as an embodiment of a much larger phenomenon: the extensive revision of our views on all things Soviet as once-secret information continues to pour out of post-Soviet Russia.

## Early Career

Shostakovich was born in St. Petersburg on September 25, 1906 to upper-middle-class parents who were liberal but not radical. His father, Dmitrij Boleslavovich, worked in the Bureau of Weights and Measures. His mother, Sofija Vasiljevna, was a housewife and amateur pianist. She often played duets with her husband singing, usually popular romances or gypsy songs. Young Dmitrij wasn't particularly taken with music at first, but when he was eight he asked his mother to show him how to play, and his lessons began.

It turned out, of course, that young Dmitrij was a prodigy. He possessed perfect pitch and an uncanny memory for music (in fact, he had an astonishing memory in general). His mother enrolled him in music school at age nine. By age ten, he was writing preludes and funeral marches. At 13, he played for the director of the Petrograd Conservatory, Aleksandr Glazunov, who was a renowned composer in his own right. Glazunov was astounded at his talent and allowed him to enroll in the conservatory at once, studying both piano and composition.

Shostakovich thrived at the conservatory, studying piano with Leonid Nikolajev and composition with Maksimilian Shtejnberg, who was the son-in-law of renowned composer Nikolaj Rimskij-Korsakov. Shostakovich graduated with honors in both courses, piano in 1923 and composition in 1925. His diploma composition was the Symphony No. 1 in F Minor, completed when he was 19 years old. It has been called "the most remarkable work of its type ever written by a composer under 20 years of age."<sup>1</sup>

Over the next several years, Shostakovich produced two more symphonies, both patriotic pieces that ingratiated him with the Soviet authorities. Many smaller instrumental works were also forthcoming, as well as his first opera, an adaptation of the story "The Nose" by Nikolaj Gogol. He had gained a reputation as an up-and-coming young composer by the time he finished his next opera, *Ledi Makbet Mtsenskovo Ujezda* (*Lady Mac-*

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<sup>1</sup>MacDonald, p. 28.

*beth of the Mtsensk District*), in 1933.

The opera is based on a novel by Nikolaj Leskov, a 19th-century naturalist writer. The main character is Katerina Izmailova, the young wife of a merchant, who takes a lover while her husband is away on a business trip. When her father-in-law finds out about the affair, Katerina poisons him. Later, Katerina and her lover, Sergej, kill her husband as well. In the book, there is a third murder, that of a nephew who stands to inherit the estate of Katerina's late husband. After this murder, Katerina and Sergej are caught and sentenced to hard labor in Siberia. On the march to Siberia, Sergej takes another lover. Katerina attacks this woman, Sonjetka, and drags her into the icy river, where both of them drown.

In Leskov's story, Katerina is portrayed as being evil, vengeful, and callous. Shostakovich radically altered this characterization in his opera. Katerina is presented as an innocent victim of the oppressive bourgeois society into which she was born and the loveless marriage into which she was forced. The father-in-law is presented as a cruel, heartless man whose murder is somehow less than a crime. The husband is also not quite seen as a human being. What's more, Katerina's lover Sergej is the biggest cad of them all, taking ruthless advantage of her, then leaving her in the lurch. Shostakovich radically altered the moral orientation of the story to better fit with the Soviet view of 19th-century Russian history.<sup>2</sup>

Russian musical society was abuzz about Shostakovich's new opera before it even premiered. After the premiere in January 1934, the critical response was overwhelming. From almost every corner, *Ledi Makbet* was hailed as an instant classic, a landmark in Soviet opera. Even the composer Mjaskovskij, with whom Shostakovich never got along, called the opera "stunningly wonderful."<sup>3</sup> *Ledi Makbet* at once cleared a spot for Shostakovich amongst the top rank of Soviet composers. Only a short time later, his enormous fame and the opera that was so well-received would turn into the biggest nightmare of his life.

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<sup>2</sup>This section draws heavily upon the excellent discussion of the opera in [Taruskin (1997)], pp. 498–510.

<sup>3</sup>See [Fay (2000)], pp. 74–77, for a citation of this quote and further praise from musical luminaries.

## First Persecution

In January 1936, the enormously popular *Ledi Makbet* was being staged in no less than three theaters in Moscow. On January 26, Stalin and a group of high-ranking Party officials went to see the opera. They walked out before the show ended. Two days later, there appeared in *Pravda* (the official newspaper of the Soviet state) an unsigned editorial entitled “*Sumbur Vmesto Muzyki*” (“Muddle Instead of Music”). In the article, Shostakovich and his opera were condemned in the harshest possible terms.<sup>4</sup> His music is “formalist,” “cacophony,” “a confused scream of sounds.” The singing “is replaced by shrieks.” Politically, the piece is reactionary and anti-Soviet: “The power of good music to infect the masses has been sacrificed to a petty-bourgeois, ‘formalist’ attempt to create originality through cheap clowning.” Perhaps the most chilling part of the article is the admonition that Shostakovich’s “game... may end very badly.”

It is hard to fathom the effect this article must have had on the composer. It came at the beginning of the Great Terror following the 1934 assassination of politburo member Sergej Kirov. Thousands of people were disappearing every week, and the population of Siberian prison camps swelled exponentially. Most of those arrested had done nothing that could be construed as threatening the government in any way. Even the most tenuous connection to undesirable elements could lead to arrest, deportation, or death at the hands of the NKVD, Stalin’s terrorist secret police. The editorial came, then, at a time when the slightest displeasure on the part of an official could lead to disaster for the object thereof. To have an entire article in *Pravda* devoted to condemning one’s work at such a time was a virtual death sentence. In addition, the article was unprecedented at that time; nobody could remember such an article having appeared for the sole purpose of condemning one particular composer in such great depth. The veiled threat of violence was also a new development.

This was not the end. One week later, a second unsigned editorial appeared, condemning Shostakovich’s ballet *Svetlyj Ruchej* (*The Limpid Stream*). Again the magic word “formalism” was invoked.<sup>5</sup> The message was clear:

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<sup>4</sup>All subsequent quotations come from the translation in [Seroff (1947)], pp. 204–207.

<sup>5</sup>Formalism is a term for the artistic preoccupation with form over content. It was considered elitist, petit-bourgeois, and anti-Soviet. The opposite of formalism, more or less, is “Socialist Realism.” It remains forever unclear what these terms could mean with regard to music. Ostensibly, ecstatic choral settings of traditional Russian folk songs are

an all-out war was being waged against artistic freedom in the Soviet Union, and the *Pravda* editorials constituted one of the first shots fired. When the articles appeared, the government was in the process of restructuring the composers' union in order to establish more rigid control over its members. Shostakovich quickly found himself on the outs with the new union.

A special meeting of the union was called for February 10. One by one, Shostakovich's friends and colleagues marched to the podium to denounce him. The criticism quickly expanded to take in not just the composer, but anybody who was associated with him in any way: the conductor of *Ledi Makbet*, the critics who had praised it, the critics who had praised other works by him. Next came denunciation of the composers Sergej Prokofjev and Nikolaj Mjaskovskij, who got it almost as bad.

This new wave of repression, in the guise of a crusade against formalism, soon pervaded all of the arts. Writers, poets, and film directors were denounced by the hundred as formalists, expelled from their respective unions, and put out of work. Such an unfortunate soul was said to be "unpersoned."

Shostakovich was unpersoned with a vengeance. Within two months, *Ledi Makbet* was withdrawn from every place it was being performed. A *de facto* ban was put on the rest of his *oeuvre*. All but his closest friends stopped seeing and speaking to him; it was dangerous to be associated with such a man. He kept the infamous packed suitcase<sup>6</sup> with him, and found it hard to sleep at night, constantly listening for the inevitable footsteps on the stairs.

Several writers have speculated that Stalin's attack on *Ledi Makbet* was not a spontaneous response to an opera that offended him, but a carefully calculated and rigorously planned first blow in the terror that was to follow<sup>7</sup>: a wave of similar *Pravda* editorials and repressive attacks on

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Socialist Realism, while transient tone poems are formalist. Beyond these clear cases, the terms have essentially no meaning at all, which was one of the greatest advantages for the Soviet government of using them. People in a position of power could conveniently label any work as formalist if they didn't like it, or if they didn't like the person who had composed it. See [MacDonald (1990)], pp. 100–102, for discussion.

<sup>6</sup>During the Great Terror, it was common for people who thought they might be arrested to keep a small suitcase packed with necessities ready at all times, in case they were taken away with no notice by the NKVD.

<sup>7</sup>[MacDonald (1990)], pp. 117–118, [Taruskin (1997)], p. 516.

architecture, painting, drama, literature, and the cinema. The campaign against formalism in all art forms became just one front in the massive wave of purges and terror for which Stalin is best remembered, peaking around 1937.

In this environment, Shostakovich didn't have the option of responding to criticism, if he valued his life. He was thrown into despair and unspeakable terror for himself, his wife, and their unborn child. Although it may sound like a cliché, the only solace he had during this time was his music. He returned to his unfinished fourth symphony, pouring into it his terror, alienation, and grief.<sup>8</sup>

The resultant fourth symphony was certainly not what was expected of him at such a time. After his public vilification, the proper response was to renounce formalism and write his next piece in the simple, tonal, homophonic style of Soviet social realist kitsch. A libretto would help, particularly one sung to clear tonal melodies, and glorification of the Soviet state also seemed requisite. Instead, Shostakovich finished his most challenging and perhaps least accessible work to date. The fourth symphony is unapologetically "formalist," and nowhere does Shostakovich pander to the composers' union or try to save his own skin. For these reasons, he had to consign the work "to the drawer" after a brief, unsuccessful attempt to have it performed. The work was not premiered until 25 years later, well after the providential death of Stalin. Having it performed in 1937 would have been the musical equivalent of spitting in Stalin's face. Shostakovich turned to a far more subtle and ambiguous piece in order to rehabilitate himself in the Soviet eye.

## Redemption

Shostakovich's fifth symphony premiered in Leningrad November 21, 1937, at the height of the Great Terror. It was his first major premiere since his denunciation, and his fate was still entirely undecided. The concert could conceivably have ended in his arrest, but it soon became apparent that this would not be the case. The audience was held rapt by a work of extraordinary intensity and expression. During the slow movement, many

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<sup>8</sup>See [Fay (2000)], pp. 92–93, which includes an enlightening quote from a letter to Isak Glikman.

audience members wept openly. They heard in it a requiem for the millions of victims of Stalin's purges, for the brutalized Russian people, living in a state of abject fear. At the end of the piece, Shostakovich received a forty-minute standing ovation, nearly as long as the symphony itself.

The audience reaction alone would not have been enough to save the composer if the Party stalwarts had interpreted the symphony as a tragic lament. Just weeks after the premiere, the Party-line music critic Alexej Tolstoj published his tremendously influential review, which led to almost total "rehabilitation" for Shostakovich.<sup>9</sup> Tolstoj expounded the oft-repeated theory that the work was one of personal development, a depiction of the composers struggles with pessimism and formalism, his final victory over those twin evils, and, in the presumably triumphant finale section, an apotheosis of some kind.

Up until the very collapse of the Soviet Union, this remained the official view of the work. Most knowledgeable observers, however, had an entirely different interpretation. The composer's "struggles" were not with formalism or pessimism, but with brutal and senseless persecution at the hands of Stalin's government. The Largo was acknowledged even by one of the most strident *apparatchiki* as creating an air of "numb terror."<sup>10</sup> The "triumphant" finale is now widely seen as flawed and unconvincing. Many critics believe this was entirely deliberate, that Shostakovich was engaging in the time-honored Russian tradition of saying one thing but meaning something quite different. Shostakovich has even been called a *jurodivyj*, the quintessential Russian Holy Fool, who cloaks his deadly-serious critique of power under a mask of idiocy. The interpretation of the fifth symphony is one of the primary bones of contention in the posthumous debate over Shostakovich's music, which will be addressed later in this paper. Whether one hears the finale as triumphant or shrill and terrified is almost a litmus test in the "Shostakovich wars."

The fifth symphony restored Shostakovich to his position as the foremost Soviet composer of his generation and a favorite son of the Soviet regime. He continued to be in the good graces of the Party through the 1930s and the Great Patriotic War. He was shaken to his core, nonetheless, by the terror of 1936–37, events which marked him for the rest of his life.

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<sup>9</sup>For discussion of the review, see [Taruskin (1997)], pp. 521–524.

<sup>10</sup>Georgij Khubov's review. See [Taruskin (1997)], pp. 526–528, for a fascinating look at Khubov's review and its shocking undertones.

From that point forth, he always viewed his personal security as a temporary state of affairs, something that could be pulled from under him at any moment. Years later, he was proved correct in this assumption.

## Later Persecutions

The Great Patriotic War was accompanied in Russia by a slight relaxation of state controls. The country suffered almost inconceivable losses during the war; even in 1989, 43 years after the war ended, there were significantly more women in the country than men.<sup>11</sup> Almost as soon as the war ended, however, Stalin forged ahead with his plan to create a New Soviet Man. Nowhere was this more evident than the arts and sciences, which suffered through a new wave of repression known as the *zhdanovshchina* or “Zhdanov era.” Andrej Zhdanov was a Soviet cultural watchdog who was put in charge of reforming the wayward arts and sciences during this time. His name has become synonymous with totalitarian evil.

Zhdanov began his post-war offensive with a special conference of the writers’ union, at which he condemned and boorishly insulted Anna Akhmatova and Boris Zoshchenko, two writers who ran afoul of Soviet standards of acceptability. The attacks later came to include Boris Pasternak as a central figure. These three writers, along with hundreds of less famous colleagues, were expelled from the union, denounced as enemies of the people, and effectively unpersoned. Their livelihoods destroyed, they were forced to subsist on loans from the few friends who would still talk to them.

Zhdanov turned his attention next to the cinema, where silent-film pioneer Sergej Ejzenshtejn became the central villain in the new fight against formalism. Within two years, the famous film-maker had lost his mind and died.

Science was up next. Zhdanov commenced the attack on the “imperialist” field of genetics, although he died before the campaign could be finished. Soviet scientists were forced to adopt Michurinist genetic theory, which held that acquired traits could alter the genotype and be passed on to future generations.<sup>12</sup> The theory, in retrospect, was patently absurd, but

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<sup>11</sup>[Vaillant & Richards (1993)].

<sup>12</sup>[Post script January 2006: the official Soviet theory of this time is often referred to as *Lysenkoism*, after Trofim Lysenko. Lysenko was a propagandist and pseudo-scientist who



it was catchy, it promised quick agricultural returns, and it didn't require the meticulous testing or rigorous methodology of science. In addition, a flexible genotype would be a logical necessity for Stalin's creation of a New Soviet Man.

In January 1948, Zhdanov finally took on music. At the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Composers, Zhdanov "uncovered" a pre-arranged conspiracy in which prominent composers such as Shostakovich and Prokofiev were forcing their formalist beliefs onto the rest of the union. The congress became another mass denunciation. The *apparatchiki* once again took to the stage to attack Shostakovich and his "reactionary individualism." Once again, he had no choice but to sit quietly and listen. When called upon to close the meeting, he remarked upon the great value of Zhdanov's speech. His remarks on this occasion are deadpan, but they sound almost unmistakably sarcastic to the modern ear. Perhaps he meant it to be ambiguous; had it been more obvious, he undoubtedly would not have lived to see 1949. As it was, he was booted out of the composers' union and once again marked as an enemy of the people. He became unemployable again, and was able to survive only by scoring propaganda movies. Most of his works were banned; his recordings and writings, burned. He lived for more than five years as an enemy of the state.

The year 1953 brought the much-awaited death of Stalin and the beginning of what later became known as the cultural "thaw." Shostakovich was slowly rehabilitated in the public eye, and by the end of the decade he had regained much of his former prestige.

His last major clash with the state came in 1963 with the premiere of his 13th ("Babi Yar") symphony. Shostakovich used Jevgenij Jevtushenko's poem "*Babij Jar*" for the libretto, a courageous nod to Jewish suffering at a time when anti-semitism was unofficial state policy.<sup>13</sup> After the KGB tried unsuccessfully to sabotage the first two performances, the symphony was banned outright.

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drew upon the earlier theories of Ivan Michurin, a pioneer in the emerging field of genetics. Michurin, in turn, drew his incorrect ideas on genotype from the now-discredited tradition known as *Lamarckism*. Lysenko gave the Lamarckian tradition an explicitly political bent, currying favor with Soviet officials and setting Soviet science back at least a half-century.]

<sup>13</sup>[Post script January 2006: Babij Jar was the site of a major Nazi massacre during World War II, outside Kiev, Ukraine.]

## Late Period

Shostakovich developed an increasingly personal, idiosyncratic style in his late works. He made no more political statements, and encountered no more opposition from the state. Indeed, he lived his last years as the Soviet Union's composer laureate, and was officially celebrated as a hero by *Pravda* upon his death.

His later style is more mystical and ethereal than his earlier body of work; it doesn't have the same Mahlerian grandiosity that marks the fifth symphony, for instance. Subtle and sparse, many of the pieces seem to be meditations on death. There are obvious parallels to Beethoven's late period, which are well beyond the scope of this paper. Major works from this period include the 14th and 15th symphonies.

Shostakovich died August 9, 1975, in a Moscow hospital, after a long bout with lung cancer and heart disease. His obituary in *Pravda* was signed by 85 dignitaries and officials, starting with Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev. He was given a hero's burial at Novodevichij Cemetery August 14. In 1979, just four years after the composer's death, an obscure Soviet music critic fled to the West with a manuscript that would forever change our view of his life.

## The Afterlife

The book was entitled *Testimony*, and it was proclaimed to be Shostakovich's oral memoirs, as transcribed and edited by one Solomon Volkov. Volkov was a music journalist, and he was known to have interviewed Shostakovich. Volkov defected in 1976, moving to New York. *Testimony* arrived over the next several years, smuggled out of Russia piece by piece. In 1979, he published, and all hell broke loose<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup>Throughout this section, I rely heavily on a series of discussions I had with the eminent musicologist Miriam Whaples. Dr. Whaples is head of the musicology division and graduate program director in the UMass music department. She is a venerable and encyclopedic authority on Western art music, and she very graciously lent me some of her time to help me orient myself in the sea of contradictory literature on this issue. She was extremely helpful, directing me to Taruskin's writings, as well as Feofanov and Ho's. She also provided me with a vivid first-person account of a contentious professional conference she had attended on the topic.

The Shostakovich we find in *Testimony* is an embittered, cynical dissident. He rails against the Soviet government, communism in general, Lenin, Stalin, the composers' union, the *apparatchiki*, and virtually every figure of authority in Soviet history. He claims that he has been a dissident his entire life, and that all of his music was composed with a dissident agenda. What appears to be Soviet kitsch is actually sarcasm. The deadly battle march of the German invasion from his seventh ("Leningrad") symphony is in fact meant to personify Stalin. The "triumphant" finale to his fifth symphony represents forced rejoicing: "It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, 'Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing,' and you rise, shaking, and go marching off, muttering, 'Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing.'" <sup>15</sup>

The publication of the book was a political bombshell, and doubts about its authenticity soon arose. In the West, Shostakovich had always been considered a loyal communist. Even when he was condemned by the Soviet regime, he had never defied it. Over the years, he had published many articles parroting the official Party line on matters of music and art. He had even signed a denunciation of Andrej Sakharov, the famous dissident physicist. How was it possible that he had been a dissident the whole time?

## The Shostakovich Wars

In 1980, musicologist Laurel Fay struck the first major blow in the battle over *Testimony*. She published an article in a scholarly journal that revealed damaging evidence about the book's authenticity.<sup>16</sup> The supposed memoirs contained inconsistencies and incorrect information about the composer's life. Entire sections had been copied verbatim from much earlier writings by Shostakovich. Worst of all, these borrowings were to be found, by and large, on the exact pages that the composer had signed in order to authenticate the memoirs. Fay concluded that Volkov had met Shostakovich only three or four times, had gotten him to sign the typescript under the pretext of publishing a collection of his previous writings, and had fabricated the rest of the "memoirs" himself. The Soviet press, of

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<sup>15</sup>[Volkov (1979)], p. 183.

<sup>16</sup>[Fay (1980)].

course, concurred wholeheartedly with this reading of events, as did most western musicologists.<sup>17</sup>

The idea of *Testimony* as a complete lie soon began to unravel, however. One by one, Shostakovich's colleagues and friends had begun defecting to the United States. Each new arrival weighed in with his or her opinion on the memoirs, and a consensus began to emerge: the view of Shostakovich presented in *Testimony*, if not the book itself, was more or less authentic. One of the most important voices in this chorus was the composer's son, Maxim Shostakovich. Maxim denied everything while he was still in the Soviet Union, in order to protect his family. After his defection, however, he progressively softened his criticisms of *Testimony*, conclusively stating in 1984 that the overall picture of his father was true.

Laurel Fay continued her campaign against *Testimony*, publishing several articles, as well as her own massive Shostakovich biography [Fay (2000)]. The literary scandal, and the subsequent rethinking of *Testimony*, however, had left some critics equally convinced that the composer's life and music needed to be radically rethought. In 1990, musicologist Ian MacDonald published *The New Shostakovich*, which wholeheartedly adopted the Shostakovich-as-dissident view and attempted to analyze his music from that standpoint. The book makes for fascinating reading, and contains many excellent insights into the artistic and cultural life of both Shostakovich and the Soviet Union in general. The musical analysis, however, is positively ludicrous.

MacDonald insists on a rigid, literal, programmatic reading of virtually every piece in Shostakovich's *oeuvre*.<sup>18</sup> Every descending two-note motive is heard as "Sta-lin;" every three-note motive signifies betrayal. The march theme in the first movement of the fifth symphony is a literal depiction of Shostakovich's humiliation at the hands of the composers' union. Mac-

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<sup>17</sup>[Post Script January 2006: In 2004, Indiana University Press published *A Shostakovich Casebook*, a collection of writings about the composer's life and about *Testimony*. Laurel Fay's essay in this book proved conclusively that the pages Shostakovich signed consist entirely of previously-published material, that in many cases Volkov departed from the previous material immediately following the first page-break, and that in at least one case he erased some of the contents of a signed page in order to alter those contents on the next page. I take this to be final, irrefutable evidence that the memoirs are a fabrication, although the possibility remains that they are based on an accurate view of who Shostakovich was.

<sup>18</sup>Most of the subsequent discussion focuses on MacDonald's "analysis" of the fifth symphony, pp. 127-134.

Donald's book is filled with dozens of pages of this gibberish.

Lest the reader not be satisfied with the opinions of a 22 year-old undergraduate music major, I defer to the opinions of several sources more authoritative than I. Musicologist Miriam Whaples is a professor at UMass Amherst, an authority on all aspects of Western art music, and the author of numerous articles on Bach, Schubert, Mahler, and musical exoticism. When I described MacDonald's interpretation of the march theme, she smiled wryly: "I don't think it works quite like that."

Musicologist Richard Taruskin, perhaps the greatest living writer on the topic of Russian music, was much harsher in his criticism of MacDonald's methods: "Having ears only for the paraphrase, he is unable to distinguish his own hectoring, monotonous voice from Shostakovich's."<sup>19</sup> Taruskin has since become embroiled in the controversy over *Testimony*, and at times seems like the only voice of reason in the entire tawdry affair.

The intent of MacDonald's book is, I believe, admirable. The emerging view of Shostakovich as a person does suggest that some of our views on his music may need to be restructured. MacDonald is simply too strident and dogmatic in his analysis, accepting wholeheartedly the idea that Shostakovich was a *jurodivy* and a lifelong dissident, and that every note he wrote is infused with a rebellious spirit.

Another landmark publication in this battle was *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, by Allan Ho and Dmitrij Feofanov. The book is an extremely aggressive defense of *Testimony* and the "revisionist" view of Shostakovich. It is arranged as a mock trial for the book (Feofanov is a lawyer), which often makes it hard to take the content seriously, but it is one of the most impressively-researched books in recent memory. Footnotes detailing how, when, and from whom the authors drew their arguments fill up almost half of the printed surface. They appear to have read every word ever written about Soviet music. They systematically poke holes in Fay's research, and attack Taruskin and her as naive Westerners who don't understand the subtexts and subtleties inherent to Soviet art. Their arguments for the veracity of *Testimony* are very convincing, and it seems that they may have found several instances of sloppy scholarship in Fay's writings. Perhaps most impressive is the list of musical and cultural luminaries who contributed pro-*Testimony* articles to the book: Maxim Shostakovich, the composer's son; Mstislav Rostropovich, a virtuoso cellist, dissident, and

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<sup>19</sup>[Taruskin (1995)].

the composer's close friend; Kirill Kondrashin, who conducted the premieres of many of the composer's works with the Moscow Philharmonic; Jevgenij Jevtushenko, a famous poet whose verse Shostakovich used repeatedly for librettos; Andrej Bitov, one of the most important dissident writers of the last 50 years; and numerous others.

While the book succeeds in confirming the portrait of Shostakovich presented in *Testimony*, it falls short in terms of insightful analysis. The authors are, like MacDonald, too dogmatic in their magnification of every tiny sign of dissent in the composer's life and works. Their vicious attacks on Laurel Fay do cast some doubt on the veracity of her work, but also detract from the integrity of the authors' own book. There is an air of thinly-veiled hatred and contempt that is unnecessary, unprofessional, and seriously distracting.

Volkov himself has remained curiously silent throughout the debate. With the exception of a few terse statements affirming the authenticity of *Testimony*, he has remained a spectator. In 2004, he published *Shostakovich and Stalin: The Extraordinary Relationship Between the Great Composer and the Brutal Dictator*. In this book, Volkov tries to make a further case for the theory that Shostakovich had established a *jurodivoy* role for himself with regard to the state. The book is a somewhat jumbled collection of anecdotes and hearsay, historical investigation and wild conjecture. It is not without merit; many of the anecdotes collected here have never been told in English before, and parts of the book make for fascinating reading. The main purpose, however, exploring the *jurodivoy* theory, fails miserably. The vast majority of Volkov's "evidence" is his own conjectures and ruminations on the nature of Soviet art, and he's not able to establish that the two men met more than once. He has a handful of quotes about each from the other, but he tells a story where Stalin seems to be constantly thinking about Shostakovich. It borders on fiction. With the exception of a brief declaration that *Testimony* is authentic, Volkov doesn't mention the controversy at all.

Dr. Whaples shared some memories of a 1998 American Musicological Society meeting in Boston that, according to her, "remains seared on the memory of all who attended." The conference featured a roundtable discussion on Shostakovich, with Feofanov and Ho reading papers in defense of *Testimony*. At one point Feofanov declared, "The struggle for

Shostakovich's soul is over, and the truth has won."<sup>20</sup> Dr. Whaples remembered the meeting as a less-than-civil gathering, with panelists shouting each other down and one audience member standing up to read in its entirety a polemic she'd written on the topic. Whaples also recalled that toward the very end, Taruskin, "who had been the whipping boy for the night," had a chance to take to the podium and respond to his critics. She was amazed at how calm he was able to stay, and thoroughly impressed with his demeanor during the at-times chaotic meeting.

It is Taruskin, in my opinion, who comes closest to achieving a catharsis in this epic "battle for Shostakovich's soul." His writings on the composer, collected as part of his 1998 monograph "Defining Russia Musically," are lucid, profound, and never hysterical. He absolutely savages MacDonald's book, quite justifiably I think, but also offers a coherent alternative to this kind of tautological drivel.

Taruskin makes no bones about the fact that he thinks Volkov's book is a fraud. But far more interesting is his assertion that *it doesn't matter* whether Shostakovich wrote it or not.<sup>21</sup> He notes that most aspects of the personality revealed in *Testimony* have already been confirmed. Specific insults or slights that have upset the composer's friends are trivial personal matters, and do not bear on the interpretation of his work. Even if he *is* the author of the memoirs, it doesn't make them true. Memoirs are among the least reliable sources in academia, and serious scholars have always treated them accordingly. Given the fact that Shostakovich was dying when he allegedly dictated them, he would have had every reason to believe that these memoirs would be his legacy. How could he have avoided the temptation to tell his story the way he wanted it to be remembered? It seems highly likely that he would exaggerate, affect attitudes, and recreate episodes from his life in such a way as to put the best possible light on himself.

As Taruskin points out, there simply were no dissidents in Russia in 1937. If the finale of the fifth were as obviously subversive as *Testimony* would have us believe, it would have been suicide. If "any oaf"<sup>22</sup> could have figured it out, "so could any informer."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>[Oestreich (1998)].

<sup>21</sup>The subsequent discussion is based on the brilliant essay *Shostakovich and Us*, from [Taruskin (1997)], p. 468.

<sup>22</sup>[Volkov (1979)], p. 183.

<sup>23</sup>[Taruskin (1997)], p. 539.

In the interest of obtaining a modern, post-Soviet view on the issue, I spoke to Mila Romm. Romm is a pianist, musicologist, and Shostakovich enthusiast who studied at the Belarussian State Conservatory during the 1970s. She immigrated to Brookline, Massachusetts in 1990, and works there as a piano and ESL teacher. Although Romm continues to be involved with the Russian music community in and around Boston, she was not familiar with the *Testimony* controversy and had never read the book.<sup>24</sup> She balked at the idea of open satire of Soviet kitsch in Shostakovich's work: "He wouldn't have dared." This sentiment matches that of Taruskin, and it comes from a woman born and raised in the USSR, and steeped in the musical culture there. Romm did agree, however, that audiences found their own meaning in Shostakovich's music: "We knew he had been silenced... When we heard him, we always knew that without words he was reflecting certain things we wanted to hear."

After sketching the initial points about the unreliability of memoirs and the impossibility of dissent in Stalinist Russia, Taruskin continues with a virtuoso discourse on the issue of intent in art. His discussion brings together ideas from Schiller, Nietzsche, Schoenberg, and several Soviet experts on music and the arts. Although I won't do his argument justice, a paraphrase follows.

It doesn't matter whether Shostakovich intended his work to be taken as a condemnation of Stalinism or not. Given the time and the place in which it was written, it was inevitable that it would be interpreted as such. This is an enormous component of the "meaning" of the work, whether he intended it that way or not. This idea is not new or controversial; there is a long, illustrious tradition of Western critical thought that holds that the meaning of art comes partly from the creator and partly from the audience. To say that a work such as the fifth symphony is a narrow, programmatic account of the composer's persecution is both preposterous and an insult to the music; the piece is much broader and more subtle. Shostakovich did not write political music. He uses coding, but in an extremely complex and ambivalent manner. This is the great genius of his music; the complexity of his coding allowed both the censors and the dissidents to find within exactly what they wanted to hear. What is the final, objective "meaning" of the piece? There clearly can't be one; it is a composite of the

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<sup>24</sup>Oddly enough, *Testimony* was never published in the original Russian, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union made such a publication possible.



various meanings found in it by various groups of listeners and the composer himself. It is exactly this quality that makes his music unique and universal, not neatly reducible to one meaning or political view.

Taruskin's writings are, to my thinking, the most impressive and valuable contribution to come out of the entire Shostakovich affair. One wishes that other musicologists shared his maturity and insight.

The issues at stake here are much more inflammatory than "just" Shostakovich's life. The debate touches on the most combustible aspects of life in the Soviet union, questions of complicity, complacency, and culpability. The debate brings to the fore the question of how Soviet history is to be reinterpreted now that state control has ended.

For many years, Shostakovich was derided in the West for being a communist hack. He often toed the Party line on matters musical and otherwise, and allowed all manner of Communist gibberish to be published under his name. He never had the dissident bravado of later generations of artists, like Rostropovich and Vasilij Aksjonov. Of course, they never went through what Shostakovich did during the Stalin years. Is a man who signs statements of denunciation out of fear for his family really guilty? What if it's fear for his career? We have it on good authority that the composer, in his later years, would sign anything that the government pushed across his desk. He had divorced itself, it seems, from the content. It was taken as a given that everything he signed was just propaganda, and didn't mean anything. Is that letting him off too easy?

It is the constant undercurrent of these larger issues in the Shostakovich affair which more than likely prompted the composer's third wife, Irina Shostakovich, to publish "An Open Letter to Those Who Would Abuse Shostakovich" in the *New York Times* in 2000.<sup>25</sup> In this heart-rending letter, Irina rails against "music critics who are interested in scandal above all else," people who "exploit his name, even to the point of abusing and humiliating his memory," and especially Solomon Volkov. She sees Volkov as an opportunist who barely knew Shostakovich, met him only three times in fact, and faked the memoirs as leverage to get himself out of the country and jump-start his career in the West. She rolls out all of her previous arguments against *Testimony* and reiterates that the book is undoubtedly a fake. The controversy, seemingly, will never end.

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<sup>25</sup>[I. Shostakovich (2000)].

## Conclusion

As I write this paper, I've begun to ask myself whether I believe that *Testimony* is the legitimate creation of Dmitri Shostakovich. I come to one conclusion: I have no earthly idea, and neither does anybody else except Volkov. Shostakovich's family, his friends, and the musicologists who spend their entire careers writing about him may never know the answer. Perhaps this is the reason why I find Taruskin's writing to be so compelling. His insights don't rest on whether or not the book is real. He doesn't think it is, but he's not so certain as to stake his professional reputation on it. He'd rather focus on what's important.

The more I think about Irina Shostakovich's letter, the more I begin to sympathize with her. It really does seem like a wide variety of pro- and anti-Soviet forces have been attempting to put their own words in Shostakovich's mouth for the past 25 years. Scenes like the one at the aforementioned AMS meeting denigrate the memory of this greatest of Soviet-era composers. What's more, they in no way add to our understanding of Shostakovich as a man or as an artist.

The future of Shostakovich studies lies in his music, not his politics. The furor over *Testimony* will eventually die down, although we'll probably never know who wrote it. In time, the people who have interesting and insightful commentaries on his work will emerge as the foremost experts on Shostakovich. The ideologues who trade insults over his politics will be forgotten by history, just like the obscure *apparatchik* composers who denounced Shostakovich at the composers' union during the Great Terror.

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