

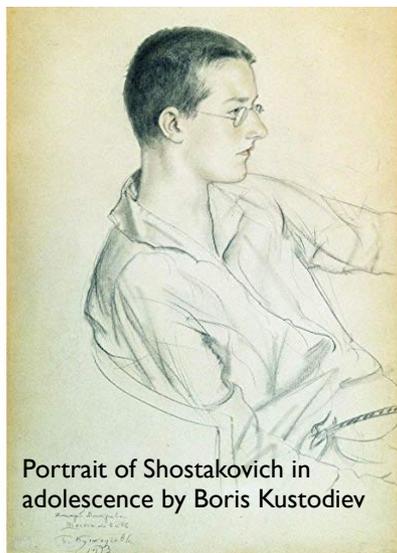
# Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony*

Brian McClinton

**I**N 1932, after two and a half years' work, the Russian composer Dimitri Shostakovich – who had written his first symphony when he was still a nineteen-year-old student at the Leningrad Conservatory – finished his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. Based on a novella of the same title by the 19th century Russian writer Nicolai Leskov, it told the story of Katerina Izmailova, a flour merchant's wife, driven through passion and boredom to commit brutal murder. She falls in love with the new farmhand Sergei and kills both her tyrannical father-in-law Boris and her weak and ineffectual husband Zinovy. Katerina and Sergei marry, but the police interrupt the ceremony. The last act of the opera is set in a Siberian labour camp where Katerina and Sergei are among the convicts, but he has now found another lover. Katerina drags her into a frozen lake and commits murder-suicide as both women drown.

Shostakovich portrayed the woman as a talented and clever victim of her narrow-minded provincial, petty merchant background, typical of the bad old days of Tsarist Russia. Indeed, unlike Leskov's novella, Shostakovich takes Katerina's side. "I feel empathy for her", the composer said. "She is surrounded by monsters". He dubbed the work, which oozes lust, sex and political liberation, a 'tragedy-satire'. But was it intended as a disguised attack on Stalin's regime? Does Katerina represent the spirit of Russia rising up against the tyrannical ruler? While Shostakovich was ostensibly satirising Tsarist Russia, was he really attacking Stalinism?

The opera was premiered in Leningrad in January 1934 and toured successfully for two years. It was widely praised as 'stunningly wonderful', 'a brilliantly orchestrated composition' and 'a masterpiece'. Stravinsky, though, criticised it as



Portrait of Shostakovich in adolescence by Boris Kustodiev

'lamentably provincial' in a letter to the conductor Ernest Ansermet in 1935: "*Lady Macbeth* is not the work of a musician, but it is surely the product of a total indifference towards music in the country of the Soviets". The work, he wrote, "deeply disappointed me, intellectually and musically".

It might be supposed, however, that its apparent anti-Tsarist theme would be music to the ears of Soviet officialdom, and indeed initially it was, but its fortunes were dramatically reversed with the publication in the Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* on 28th January 1936 of an editorial entitled *Muddle Instead of Music*, which effectively dealt it a sudden death-blow.

On 26th Stalin had attended a performance in Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre but left before the end. Shostakovich later wrote that he witnessed Stalin cringing at loud parts of the score and laughing at its sexual scenes. The 29-year-old composer was reportedly 'white as a sheet' when he bowed for the audience (*Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, by Elizabeth Wilson, Faber and Faber, 1994, 2006, p128).

His fears were justified by the tone of the unsigned editorial, which denounced the sympathetic portrayal of a murderess and condemned the work as 'an ugly flood of confusing sound', 'formalist', 'bourgeois', 'coarse' and 'primitive'. "Love", it said, "is smeared throughout the entire opera in the most vulgar form". What the masses wanted was 'genuine, simple art'. Ironically, this criticism amounted to saying that the work was unrealistic and too highbrow, whereas Stravinsky had felt that it was too lowbrow.

Rumours spread that Stalin himself had written the *Pravda* article, though the most likely author was David Zaslavsky, a high ranking party official and one of *Pravda's* senior writers, who probably wrote it at Stalin's instigation. The same person may have decided or been ordered to launch another onslaught, this time against Shostakovich's ballet *The Limpid Stream*, set in a collective farm, which had premiered in 1935. Just over a week after the first editorial, on 6th February 1936, another unsigned editorial appeared, entitled *Balletic Falsity*. It attacked the ballet for its 'unrealistic, uninformed' portrayal of life on a collective farm, and its 'arrogant' avoidance of the folk songs, games and dances that would have given it authenticity.

Shostakovich must have felt the earth open beneath his feet. The opera was effectively banned and not performed again until 1962. His position was now precarious. The year 1936 was the first of the 'Moscow show trials', where Stalin's political enemies were forced into humiliating confessions prior to their liquidation. During the Great Purge or Terror, between 1936 and 1939, at least 750,000 people were executed and more than a million others were sent to forced labour camps, administered by a government agency whose acronym —>

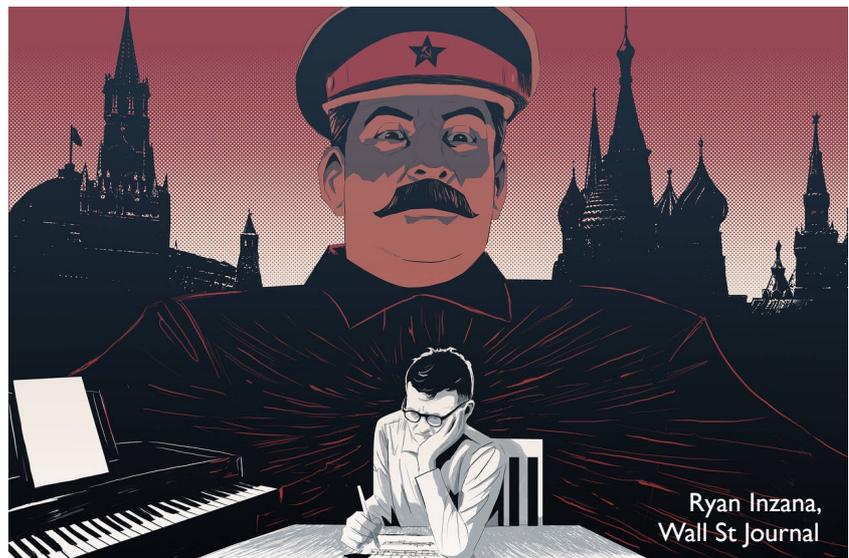
was Gulag, which gave rise to calling the camps Gulags. Members of Shostakovich's family were arrested and shot, including his brother-in-law, his mother-in-law and his uncle. Adrian Piotrovsky, librettist of his ballet *The Limpid Stream*, was arrested and shot. The same fate befell his patron Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky and the composer and musicologist Nikolai Zhilayev, who had praised him as a genius.

The question, then, is how did Shostakovich survive, especially when he had attracted the disapproval of Stalin himself? The latter wanted Soviet composers to write music that was joyful and optimistic, whereas Shostakovich often did the opposite. His music too often seemed to express the terror, fear, and frustration of living in Stalinist Russia. Yet he was also recognised at the highest level as a great composer. There is a transcript of a conversation the day after the *Muddle Instead of Music* editorial in which Stalin himself accepted this judgment but added that "He has no one to guide him" (*Dimitry Shostakovich*; Pauline Fairclough, Reaktion Books, 2019, pp59-60).

At this time Shostakovich was working on his 4th symphony. He refused to repent. He told his friend Isaac Glikman: "If they cut off both hands, I will compose music anyway holding the pen in my teeth". (Laurel Fay: *Shostakovich: A Life*, p92). He finished the work but, 'trembling with fright', as he later admitted, he withdrew it while in rehearsal in December 1936. He feared for his life and for that of the musicians, whose director persuaded him to withdraw it after he was probably pressurised by Communist Party officials. Its world premiere did not take place until 25 years later.

The withdrawal is not surprising. The work lacks the required features of grandeur, heroism and a happy ending. It is, as his son Maxim has stated, "absolutely devoid of happy resolution", and "there is no exit...The finale is dark". It could have been seen as a bleak comment on Stalin's regime, or at least as too negative when 'Soviet realism' demanded a positive outlook.

Keeping a small suitcase packed for impending arrest and sleeping in the



stairwell out of fear, Shostakovich quickly began work on the Fifth, completing the score after three months in July 1937. According to the soprano Galina Vishnevskaya (Rostropovich's wife), the composer then had to have the piece vetted by a party committee: "a few dozen nincompoops got together to judge a genius".

Its premiere on 21st November by the Leningrad Philharmonic under its young music director, Yevgeny Mravinsky, was a resounding success and received an ovation almost as long as the 45 minutes of the symphony itself. The work was hailed by the Soviet press as 'free from error'.

The Fifth is not only Shostakovich's masterpiece, it is also the piece that has been most subject to critical revision and debate. At the time, an unnamed critic wrote in a Moscow newspaper that it was 'a Soviet artist's creative reply to just criticism'. So, had Shostakovich learned his lesson and mended his ways? More generally, was he a conflicted but compliant communist or was he a secret dissident?

In 1960 Shostakovich joined the Communist party (after some pressure), and when he died in 1975 the *New York Times* obituary referred to him as "a committed communist who accepted the sometimes harsh criticism to which his modernistic works were periodically subjected". He also won various awards such as the Order of Lenin and the Stalin Prize, and in 1966 he received the title of 'Hero of Socialist Labour'.

But even if he was a socialist, it does not follow that he approved of the Stalinist regime. Indeed, the evidence points to the contrary.

In 1979 a Russian émigré musicologist Solomon Volkov published *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich* in New York. Claiming that the composer had related his story to him over three years, he portrayed a closet dissident who cooperated with the regime only as far as he felt it was necessary to survive. According to Volkov, Shostakovich said: "When I started going over the life stories of my friends and acquaintances, I was horrified...All I saw was corpses, mountains of corpses. I am not exaggerating, I mean mountains, And the picture filled me with a horrible depression".

Although Volkov's narrative has been questioned, both Maxim and Galina, Shostakovich's son and daughter, have both verified it, as have conductors such as Kurt Sanderling, Valery Gergiev, and Vladimir Ashkenazy. The last named wrote in a new introduction to the *Memoirs*: "The need to protect oneself was something all of us who had to survive in the Soviet Union understood...This was barely perceived by the gullible West". Mstislav Rostropovich, to whom Shostakovich dedicated his two cello concertos and a friend of the composer, called *Testimony* 'basically...true'.

Listening to the works themselves dispels all doubts. While it is true that we can never be sure about —>

the ‘meaning’ of a piece of music, many of Shostakovich’s compositions cry out in despair and horror at the troubled times in which he lived. The Fifth Symphony is one of the clearest examples. The first movement opens starkly with weeping strings, conveying both isolation and desolation. Gradually, more instruments enter, and then the development speeds up through a grotesque militaristic march to a near-hysterical climax, as if the Stalinist state is marching its citizens off into a bleak dystopia devoid of all humanity. Finally in the coda everything is slowed down again into a tragic resignation. The music becomes weaker and weaker, ending with violin and piccolo followed by the haunting sound of the celesta.

After a brisk opening in the cellos and basses, the brief second movement scherzo launches into a comic waltz that teeters close to the edge of sanity. It is surely a bitter dance parody. Shostakovich wrote the music for 30 films and this movement draws on the grotesque humour in many of his scores. It provides comic relief between the highly charged first and third movements. We can imagine it mocking graceless Stalinist officials dancing the night away and behaving like buffoons.

The grieving third movement Largo – written in only three days – caused people at the premiere to weep. Strings and woodwinds predominate, with sounds redolent of the Russian Orthodox Church service. It is an almost unbearable elegy to the countless victims of Stalin’s purges. In a conversation, Rostropovich refers to the sorrow and suffering conveyed by the symphony, and we hear it clearly in this tragic movement.

Now we come to the finale. Superficially, it sounds triumphant, following the pattern of Beethoven’s Fifth, of which there are echoes, noticeably in the Scherzo with its pizzicato strings. But to quote Rostropovich, again: “anybody who thinks the finale is glorification is an idiot”. Yet Stalin and the Politburo did, taken in by the apparently uplifting coda. But it is a deliberately bombastic false panegyric to the glory of the state.

Even at the time, some discerning voices noted that not all was what it

seemed. The writer Alexander Fadeyev wrote after the premiere that “the end does not sound like an exit (and certainly not like a triumph or victory) but like a punishment or a revenge on someone”.

The movement begins with fiery woodwind trills before a bombastic theme in the trombones. The first four notes (ADEF) were taken from an unpublished song, *Rebirth*, that the composer had written to words by Pushkin as a reaction to the nightmare attack on him in *Pravda* the previous year:

*An artist-barbarian with careless brush  
Blackens a picture of genius;  
And his sinful drawing  
Scrawls meaninglessly over it.  
But over the years, that alien paint  
Flakes off like old scales.  
The work of genius returns to us,  
In its former beauty.  
Thus delusions fall  
From my tormented soul,  
And from within again spring up,  
Visions of former, pure days.*

The ‘artist-barbarian’ is Stalin, repeatedly defacing the works of artists and forcing them to conform to his dictates. In the *Testimony*, Shostakovich is quoted as saying:

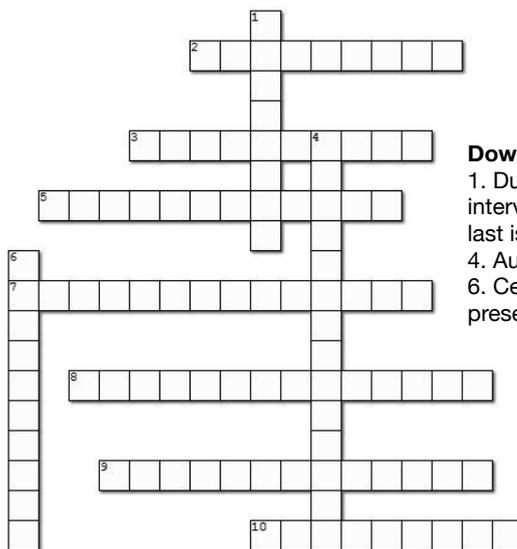
“The rejoicing is forced, created under threat. It’s as if someone was beating you with a stick, saying: ‘your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing’, and you rise, shakily, and go off muttering ‘our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing’”.

Shostakovich’s Fifth, the greatest symphony of the 20th century, is a work of deliberate ambivalence. For it had to address two audiences: the Stalinist state at the height of the terror and the critics of that state. Stalin may have had the victory for the moment but, as *Rebirth* suggests, one day the horror will end and the spirit of humanity will reassert itself.

The key to understanding the composer is to realise that he was a humane socialist and a great artist who survived in a totalitarian state. We should note that, on two separate occasions, he composed music to accompany productions of *Hamlet*, and it is not far-fetched to conclude that he saw himself as the musical embodiment of the humanist idealist subtly satirising the barbarian world of Soviet politics. □

### Quick Crossword

Compiled by Caroline Kennedy



- Down**
- 1. Dublin Humanist Councillor interviewed and featured in our last issue
  - 4. Author of *The God Delusion*
  - 6. Celebrity humanist and QI presenter from 2003-2015

- Across**
- 2. Irish town and host to Humanist Summer School this year
  - 3. The moral principle that people should treat others as they wish to be treated themselves
  - 5. The argument that everything that exists has a cause so the existence of the universe proves God exists
  - 7. The story of a man, born on December 25th, in the stable next door to Jesus
  - 8. Father of modern, experimental science; published his first book in 1630
  - 9. UK Club featured in our last issue, who help people design their own coffin to be a colourful celebration of their lives
  - 10. Declaration signed at the first world humanist congress in 1952