

Shostakovich Listener's Guide

**2011-2012 Demirjian
Classical Connections Series
Concert One: September 23, 2011
Profile: Dmitri Shostakovich
Program: "Either-Or"**

Welcome to the 16th season of Dayton Philharmonic *Classical Connections* concerts, made possible thanks to the generous support of music lovers Patti and Chuck Demirjian. This season is devoted to music of four of my favorite composers: (in alphabetical order) Bartók, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Tchaikovsky.

* It's an interesting quartet: four central Europeans, three masters of the 20th century, three Russians, three artists whose careers were adversely affected by politics, three composers influenced in one way or another by indigenous folk music, three composers for whom 1936 was a pivotal year. But what's really interesting is the amazing music we'll explore in our four concerts, four Listener's Guides, and four audio podcasts. * Dmitri Shostakovich is one of the most intriguing composers of all time.



His cat-and-mouse game with Soviet authorities makes him one of the most controversial, too. Lots of ink, lots of trees, and lots of bandwidth have been spent arguing the key questions: Was Shostakovich a loyal communist or a closet dissident? Did his music reflect the politics of his era? What do we believe when a composer's words seem to say one thing and his music seems to say another? How does political interpretation affect musical interpretation? * I can't promise definitive answers to those questions in our September *Classical Connections*. But I can promise you a fascinating evening with the greatest symphonist of the 20th century and one of his greatest works. I can't think of a better way to kick off a thrilling, thought-provoking season of *Demirjian Classical Connections* concerts.



DAYTON
PHILHARMONIC



NEAL GITTLEMAN
MUSIC DIRECTOR

PROGRAM

SHOSTAKOVICH



"Either-Or"

Д. Д. ШОСТАКОВИЧ

DEMIRJIAN CLASSICAL CONNECTIONS SERIES

Friday, September 23, 2011 8:00 p.m.

Schuster Center Q&A after the concert

Neal Gittleman conductor, host

DMITRI SCHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)

- Festive Overture -

INTERMISSION

- Symphony No. 5 -

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Concert Broadcast on Saturday, October 15, 2011 at 10:00 a.m.

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BY NEAL GITTLEMAN

A Soviet Artist's Reply to Just Criticism?

When he went to sleep on January 27, 1936 Dmitri Shostakovich, age 29, was sitting on top of the world. He was in Archangel, 500 miles north of Moscow, starting a concert tour. He was the Soviet Union's "hot composer". His opera Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District was a hit, simultaneously packing houses at Moscow's Bolshoi Opera and Leningrad's Kirov Opera. Working on an eagerly anticipated Fourth Symphony, Dmitri Shostakovich was "The Man".

He woke up on January 28 to a changed world. A dedicated reader of Pravda, Shostakovich stood in line to buy a copy from a newsstand. Nothing special until he got to page three, where he saw an unsigned editorial titled "Muddle Instead of Music", subtitled "About the Opera Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk".



"MUDDLE INSTEAD OF MUSIC" IN PRAVDA RATTLES SHOSTAKOVICH TO HIS CORE

It wasn't good. Here's the third paragraph: "From the first minute, the listener is shocked by deliberate dissonance, by a confused stream of sound. Snatches of melody, the beginnings of a musical phrase, are drowned, emerge again, and disappear in a grinding and squealing roar. To follow this 'music' is most difficult; to remember it, impossible."

Okay, even the top dog of Soviet music gets a bad review.

The next paragraph was much worse: "Here is music turned deliberately inside out in order that nothing will be reminiscent of classical opera, or have anything in common with symphonic music or with simple and popular musical language accessible to all. ... The power of good music to infect the masses has been sacrificed to a petty-bourgeois, 'formalist' attempt to create originality through cheap clowning. It is a game of clever ingenuity that may end very badly."

Stalin was in the second year of a terror campaign against intellectuals and artists — particularly Leningraders like Shostakovich. People were disappearing. People were being shot. No one was immune — party leaders, high military officers, prominent artists were all subject to denunciation, imprisonment, execution. So when the official organ of the Soviet government says that things "may end very badly", that's bad news, indeed.

(Shostakovich might have seen it coming. Just before going to Archangel, Shostakovich was urgently summoned to Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre. Stalin was coming to see Lady Macbeth, and the composer's presence was required. While the audience's eyes were fixed on the stage, Shostakovich's eyes were fixed on the Great Leader's box. Stalin flinched each time the brass and percussion reached a fortissimo. He didn't applaud after Act I. He laughed during the big love scene. And he left before the end.)

And "Muddle Instead of Music" was just the beginning. Another editorial, "Ballet Falsehood", appeared on February 6, attacking Shostakovich's comic ballet The Limpid Stream, which was far more



PRAVDA'S ARTICLE "BALLET FALSEHOOD" FOLLOWS LESS THAN TWO WEEKS LATER

conventional and tuneful than *Lady Macbeth*. A third editorial, "Clear and Simple Language in Art", followed on February 13, and Shostakovich must have felt damned-if-he-did-and-damned-if-he-didn't: "Both our first and second articles were directed against lies and falsehood alien to Soviet art — the formalistic trickery in *Lady Macbeth* and the sickly sweetness of *Limpid Stream*. Both works are equally distant from the clear, simple, and truthful language in which Soviet art must speak."



STALIN EXPECTED THE ARTS TO PRODUCE A POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR WORKERS; NOT SELF-INDULGENT "FORMALISM"



Word was that these articles came from Stalin himself, part of an attack on innovators in various artistic disciplines: film on February 13, architecture on February 20, painting on March 1, theatre on March 9.



DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH'S MUSIC BRILLIANTLY STRADDLED THE LINE BETWEEN MULTIPLE MEANINGS. SUCH IS THE POWER OF HIS MUSIC: TO CREATE STRIKINGLY DIFFERENT IMAGES IN THE MINDS OF DIFFERENT PEOPLE AT THE SAME TIME.

"Golden Boy" was in danger of becoming "Gulag Boy". Shostakovich began sleeping fully dressed in a chair outside his apartment, a packed suitcase at his side. He hoped that if the police come for him they would just take him and leave his family alone. Secret police reports to Stalin said that the composer was believed to be considering suicide.

Shostakovich stayed quiet, kept his head down, stuck to his friends, and hoped the storm would pass. He withdrew the Fourth Symphony — a dark, tragic work sure to incur Stalin's wrath — days before its scheduled premiere. (It finally got its first performance in 1961!)

During the first part of 1937 Shostakovich composed three film scores — safe work, given that Stalin was a big film buff — then began work on a new symphony in mid-April. It was completed by September and received a triumphant premiere on November 21.

The Fifth Symphony was a change for Shostakovich. It was less experimental than his earlier music, with soaring lyrical melodies, vigorous march tunes, and powerful emotions. It was, perhaps, a response to the *Pravda* editorials — not as wild as *Lady Macbeth*, not as sweet as *The Limpid Stream*. But it was hardly the kind of bright, optimistic music that Stalin wanted. The music is by turns dark, angry, sarcastic, elegiac, and, in the end, defiant.

When the Fifth was met with thunderous applause in both Leningrad and Moscow, there was nothing the authorities could do but declare victory and say that Shostakovich had learned his lesson. They anointed the symphony "A Soviet Artist's Response to Just Criticism".

Is it?

Or is it "An Angry Artist's Response to Just So Much B.S."?

Something to decide at our Classical Connections concert. *

Whose Testimony?

The world of Shostakovich scholarship was rocked in 1979 by the publication of *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich as Related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov*. The book revealed a “new Shostakovich”: not a loyal Soviet artist, but an angry, bitter man full of harsh words for the authorities.

Here is *Testimony's* description of the ending of the Fifth Symphony, which had been characterized by Soviet commentators as a triumphant reaffirmation of Shostakovich's solidarity with his government:



DMITRI & SOLOMON

“[W]hat exultation could there be? I think that it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat... 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.”

Passages like that led to a reappraisal of Shostakovich's music and cast him as a closet dissident filling his works with hidden anti-Soviet messages understandable only to like-minded listeners.

In 1980 two Shostakovich experts — one American, one Russian — established that *Testimony* contained passages lifted verbatim from articles Shostakovich had published years earlier. If Volkov had fudged those passages of the “memoirs”, what else had he fudged? Although close friends of the composer confirmed that the book sounded authentic, the revelation of Volkov's plagiarism cast doubt on the entire *Testimony* text.

Shostakovich's words — even 100 percent authentic ones — must always be taken with a grain of salt. He lived in dangerous times and was circumspect in his speech. The only place he felt free to speak clearly was in his music. You can't use the words of *Testimony* as a key to understanding Shostakovich's music. You can only work the other way, using the music to test the authenticity of the words.

For me, *Testimony* rings true. But the music doesn't just ring true. It IS true.

A Shostakovich Timeline

1906

September 25, born in St. Petersburg to engineer Dimitri Boleslavovich Shostakovich and amateur pianist Sofia Kokoulina.

1915

Begins piano lessons.

1919

Enters St. Petersburg Conservatory as a piano and composition student. Writes his first orchestral piece, *Scherzo for Orchestra*.

1928

First opera, *The Nose*, a modernist setting of Gogol's satirical story.

1935

Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District plays packed houses at the Kirov and Bolshoi Operas.

1936

Pravda denounces *Lady Macbeth*. Shostakovich withdraws his dark *Symphony No. 4* in the midst of rehearsals.

1937

Symphony No. 5 premieres. Strong audience response prompts Shostakovich's political rehabilitation.

1942

Symphony No. 7 (“Leningrad”) insures Shostakovich's worldwide reputation.

1954

Composes *Festive Overture*.

1961

Fourth *Symphony* receives its premiere, after a 25-year delay.

1975

August 9, dies in Moscow of complications from cancer and heart disease.

1906

Tsar Nicholas II announces Reform Laws in an attempt to calm civic unrest in Russia. San Francisco earthquake.

1915

Lusitania sinks in U-Boat attack.

1919

Russo-Finnish War. Measurements of a solar eclipse confirm Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Black Sox scandal rocks baseball.

1928

George Eastman introduces color motion pictures.

1935

Stalin mounts show trials against his enemies. Omaha wins the Triple Crown.

1936

Spanish Civil War begins. King Edward VIII abdicates. Baseball Hall of Fame opens in Cooperstown.

1937

Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong unite forces to fight Japanese occupation. First use of insulin to combat diabetes.

1942

Doolittle bombing raid on Tokyo. Battle of Midway. Irving Berlin's “White Christmas”.

1954

Brown vs. Board of Education ruling.

1961

“Ask not what your country can do for you...” Maris hits 61.

1975

U.S. forces leave Vietnam. Nobel Peace Prize goes to Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov.