



Shostakovich, Dmitry (Dmitriyevich)

(b St Petersburg, 12/25 Sept. 1906; d Moscow, 9 Aug. 1975).

Russian composer. He was born at a crucial time in Russian history. Revolutionary fervour and dissatisfaction with the tsar and government had led to the bloody January uprising of 1905, and Shostakovich was just 11 when the decisive October Revolution occurred in 1917. His career as a musician ran in parallel with the history of the new Soviet state. Nevertheless he was often at odds with official artistic doctrines, and, though he appeared at times to bend with the fluctuating Soviet attitudes to music, he maintained to the last an integrity and individuality which have marked him as the most important composer in the USSR.

Early years

Shostakovich was at first destined to become a pianist. He studied the piano at home with his mother and then at the Petrograd Conservatory with Leonid Nikolayev. He also studied composition with Maximilian Steinberg and formed a close association with the conservatory's principal, Glazunov, whose influence is discernible in the crisp scoring of the First Symphony (1925). But Shostakovich swiftly outgrew the conservatory teaching, and Steinberg was later to express incomprehension of some of his dissonant early piano works, notably the First Piano Sonata (1926) and *Aforizmi* ('Aphorisms', 1927). At this time Shostakovich had allied himself with the forward-looking principles of the Association for Contemporary Music (ASM), which actively promoted the study and performance of contemporary Western music by such composers as Hindemith, Berg, and Schoenberg.

The fruits of this phase are seen not only in Shostakovich's astringent piano works but also in the incidental music that he wrote for Vladimir Mayakovsky's play *Klop* ('The Bedbug', 1929), the ballets *Zolotoy vek* ('The Age of Gold'; Leningrad, 1930) and *Bolt* ('The Bolt'; Leningrad, 1931), and the music for the silent film *Noviy Vavilon* ('New Babylon', 1929): this last, though rejected by most cinema orchestras as being too difficult, revealed an alertness to dramatic situation and characterization which manifested itself in later film scores and in his two completed operas, *Nos* ('The Nose'; Leningrad, 1930) and *Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uyezda* ('The Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District'; Leningrad, 1934).

The Nose is a vivid sign of its times, reflecting Russia's satirical mood of the 1920s and also emphasizing—in its extremely complex harmonies and rhythms—the modernism of Shostakovich's style of the moment. It also reveals his keen sense of theatre and a highly original treatment of the voice. As his close friend Ivan Sollertinsky remarked, Shostakovich was 'perhaps the first among Russian composers to make his heroes speak not in conventional arias and cantilenas but in living language, setting everyday speech to music'. Such a notion of 'musical realism'—of vocal lines closely moulded to the inflections and rhythms of spoken Russian—had been a feature of much Russian vocal writing (particularly in Musorgsky's music) since its advocacy by Dargomizhsky in his opera *The Stone Guest*. In *The Nose* Shostakovich applied a similar technique, but injected into it a new vitality, producing potent, virile vocal lines which the composer Sergey Slonimsky has aptly described as 'brilliantly eccentric'.

But brilliant eccentricity was soon to fall into disfavour. As the Soviet authorities, with Stalin in power, sought to invest the arts with a purpose directed towards the welfare of the state, so the atmosphere of musical experimentation that had been allowed to thrive in the 1920s was firmly dispelled. At the time of the 1932 decree bringing all musical activity under state control Shostakovich was nearing completion of his four-act opera *The Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. After its Leningrad premiere in 1934 it was hailed as a model of the new concept of SOCIALIST REALISM; but only two years later—just after Stalin himself had seen the opera—it was condemned in the notorious Pravda editorial 'Sumbur vmesto muziki' ('Chaos instead of Music') for its explicitness and dissonance. It was dropped from the repertory, and was not seen again in Russia until its revival—as *Katerina Izmaylova*—in 1963.

The years of maturity

The condemnation of *Lady Macbeth* had far-reaching consequences not only for Soviet opera but for Soviet music in general. At the time Shostakovich was working on his Fourth Symphony (1935–6). Although its

complexity was certainly not so pronounced as the polytonality, polyrhythm, and frenetic activity of the Second Symphony (1927), Shostakovich realized that it was stylistically a companion piece to *Lady Macbeth* in its bold gestures and grim power, its harnessing of lavish orchestral resources, and its huge, unorthodox symphonic structure. In the prevailing cultural climate it was the wrong work at the wrong time. He withdrew it, and it was not in fact performed until 1961.

Instead he produced his Fifth Symphony (1937)—dubbed 'a Soviet artist's reply to just criticism'—which is couched in a clearer, more direct manner than the Fourth Symphony: its essential euphony, its sense of grandeur and nobility, conformed more closely to the ideals of socialist realism. But that is not to suggest that Shostakovich's artistic principles were compromised: the path of ultra-modernism suggested by his music of the late 1920s was arguably a cul-de-sac. The Fifth Symphony revealed a maturing personality which had already been evident in such works as the First Piano Concerto (1933) and the Cello Sonata (1934) and which Shostakovich was to assert in such works as the First String Quartet (1938), the Sixth Symphony (1939), and the Piano Quintet (1940).

Shostakovich also confirmed his talent as a cinema composer in a number of film scores, and re-scored Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (1939–40). This last was of particular significance. Later he was to prepare an edition of *Khovanshchina* (1959) and to orchestrate the *Songs and Dances of Death* (1962): his own vocal music has a clear affinity with the stark realism of Musorgsky's writing, and Musorgsky's influence on the 13th and 14th Symphonies, and on the bleak song cycles of Shostakovich's last years, is particularly prominent.

At the heart of this period of Shostakovich's career lies the music he wrote during World War II. The USSR entered the war in 1941, the year in which Leningrad was surrounded by German forces. The siege was to last for two and a half years, a period of incredible deprivation and suffering but also one in which the people displayed a remarkable degree of heroism. Shostakovich captured the mood of these years in his Seventh Symphony (1941): he described it as 'a symphony about our epoch, about our people, about our sacred war, about our victory', and he dedicated it 'to the city of Leningrad'. It is a demonstrative work, graphically depicting human life and human tragedy, the resilience of the Soviet people, and (in the finale) their strength and ability to survive. The mood of the Seventh contrasts sharply with that of the Eighth Symphony (1943), written at the height of the war and couched in the bitter, pessimistic terms which also imbue the Piano Trio (1944), composed in memory of Ivan Sollertinsky. Only in his projected opera *Igroki* ('The Gamblers', 1941) could Shostakovich find a lighter touch, though he abandoned it at the end of scene 8 and the surviving music was not performed in public until 1978.

To mark the end of the war Shostakovich wrote his Ninth Symphony (1945), dominated, as he said, 'by a transparent, clear mood'. The jauntiness and air of trouble-free serenity dashed official expectations of a defiant, heroic celebration of victory, a fact that clearly contributed to the criticism the symphony attracted during the cultural purges carried out in 1948 by Stalin's right-hand man Andrey Zhdanov. Along with every other composer of note, Shostakovich was condemned for alleged formalism in his music, and was urged forcefully to find his way back to the path of socialist realism.

The late years

As in the crisis of 1936, Shostakovich once again had to take stock in the wake of Zhdanov's criticisms. He withheld a few potentially controversial works which were either completed or planned: the First Violin Concerto (1947–8), the song cycle *Iz yevreyskoy narodnoy poëzii* ('From Jewish Folk Poetry', 1948), and the Fourth String Quartet (1949). Instead he offered to the public a few more film scores and such choral works as the oratorio *Pesn' o lesakh* ('Song of the Forests', 1949), the *Ten Poems on Texts by Revolutionary Poets* (1951), and the cantata *Nad Rodinoy nashey solntse siyayet* ('The Sun Shines over our Motherland', 1952).

With the death of Stalin in 1953 the cultural climate thawed to the extent that Shostakovich's works of the late 1940s could be given their delayed premieres. He also completed his Tenth Symphony (1953), in which the undercurrents of melancholy and dark soul-searching flowing beneath much of his earlier music came powerfully to the surface. The Tenth Symphony is a deeply personal work—making overt use of his musical monogram D–S–C–H—and as such was the subject of a vigorous three-day debate at the Moscow branch of the Union of Soviet Composers (29 and 30 March and 5 April 1954). Some commentators felt that the symphony was 'non-realistic' and attacked its pessimism; others stressed that the Soviet composer ought now to be guided by his own artistic instincts, particularly since the process of de-Stalinization was allowing for 'independence, courage, and experimentation' in music.

From this time onwards Shostakovich's own music became gradually more inward-looking, more

concerned to express openly those concerns which he had so far kept largely suppressed. To a greater extent he withdrew into the intimate medium of the chamber ensemble: he composed seven of his 15 quartets in his last decade or so, and wrote the brooding Viola Sonata (1975) in his last year. He also composed a number of song cycles reflecting the preoccupations with irony, terror, and death which coloured his later life: *Satiri* ('Satires', 1960) to words by Sasha Chorny, *Seven Romances on Poems by Aleksandr Blok* (1967), *Six Poems of Marina Tsvetayeva* (1973), and the *Suite on Verses of Michelangelo Buonarroti* (1974).

His last symphonies, culminating in the enigmatic 15th (1971), reveal comparable traits. In the 13th Symphony (1962), for bass solo, male chorus, and orchestra, he painted a savage, terrifying picture of Stalinist oppression: subtitled 'Babiy-Yar', it sets five poems by Yevtushenko. And in the 14th Symphony (1969), a song cycle (to poems by Rilke, García Lorca, Apollinaire, and Küchelbecker) scored for soprano and bass soloists with a small orchestra of strings and percussion, the deep introspection of his last years is achingly asserted in music of sinister drama, heart-rending lyricism, chill gloom, and martial brutality, combining to create a work of harrowing intensity.

Much has been written about Shostakovich's position in the Soviet political scheme, about the wide gap that separates his apparently 'public' works from his more 'personal' ones like the late symphonies and quartets. He was indeed capable of the profound and the banal. On the surface it may seem odd that in a single year (1953) he could write the Tenth Symphony together with an entirely untroubled *Ballet Suite* and a sprightly Concertino for two pianos, and that in another year (1957) he could conceive the massive 11th Symphony and the jaunty, limpidly lyrical Second Piano Concerto. Similarly, at the very time he was working on the large-scale Fourth Symphony (1934–5) he was able to turn his mind to the lightweight 'cartoon opera' *Skazka o pope i rabotnike yego Balde* ('The Tale of the Priest and his Workman Balda', 1933–6). But this diversity should not be attributed to political pressure, more to his multi-faceted personality, which was able to create music of (usually) high artistic merit for all manner of audiences.

True, Shostakovich had little time for the musical bureaucracy which sought to restrain compositional flair through blanket decrees. His relationship with officials within the Union of Soviet Composers is vividly described in *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, a book which, if almost certainly owing much to the editor Solomon Volkov's own interpretative mind, nonetheless seems to voice in words the sentiments which are so strongly expressed in the music. A balanced portrait of the man, which stands out as a beacon of sanity in the current war between Shostakovich experts over what his music really 'means', is Elizabeth Wilson's collection of reminiscences by his friends and colleagues. And, more than any amount of writing, it is the music that should occupy our time, for, as Shostakovich said, 'by studying my music you will find the whole truth about me as a man and as an artist'.

Geoffrey Norris / David Nice
Oxford Companion to Music