

JONATHAN GAISMAN

The problem of Shostakovich

Does the idea of the composer covertly commenting on totalitarianism improve his music?

“When did you last hear a bad performance of Shostakovich?” This rhetorical inquiry, posed by cellist Steven Isserlis, for whose instrument the composer wrote a sonata and two superb concertos, provides food for thought. So does the recent decision of a prominent London competition to remove Shostakovich’s 15 string quartets from the early rounds because, while many young quartets impressed the jury in this repertoire, it was no guide to how they would fare in more canonical works. Does it tell one anything about a composer if professional musicians cannot easily distinguish between the qualities of differing interpretations? Is it the music’s fault? Why is it that serious articles are written about this most popular of composers, whose symphonies used to fill concert halls when concert halls were full, entitled *The Shostakovich Question* or *The Problem of Shostakovich*? Among the blunt questions which they pose is whether his music is actually any good.

To raise this question is not to license the wholesale denigration of someone who is obviously one of the most significant and expressive voices in 20th century music. Few music-lovers would want to be without the 8th and 10th symphonies, half a dozen of the string quartets, the 2nd piano trio and the string concertos at least. Others would add the preludes and fugues, the song cycles, and the last movement of the piano quintet—which captures that most elusive of states, the unbearable lightness of being. Yet even these masterpieces do not put the question to rest: what is it about Shostakovich which makes some withhold the highest approval? Does he deserve to be ranked alongside Bartók, Stravinsky or even Britten?

The story of Shostakovich’s relations with the Soviet state is better known than even his most familiar music: its main episodes are his exceptional early promise, the calamitous rebuke by Stalin, on the eve of the Great Terror, over his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, the return to favour through his composition of the enduringly popular 5th symphony (which the conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen considers wildly over-rated)

under the slogan “A Soviet artist’s creative response to justified criticism”, the compositions forged in the Great Patriotic War, and the subsequent slavish toeing of the official line (he joined the Communist party in 1960 long after the death of Stalin, and made speeches containing emetic statements such as “The artist in Russia has more freedom than the artist in the West”). Despite the continuing production up to his death in 1975 of many serious works alongside the film music and choruses served up for political purposes, many influential western critics tended during his lifetime to write him off: Harold C. Schonberg described him after 1936 as “ruined as a composer . . . after the 5th symphony he was to write nothing but safe music, repeating old formulas”.

Then came the publication, four years after his death, of the pseudo-memoir *Testimony*, in which Solomon Volkov claimed to have taken down in shorthand Shostakovich’s own recollections. It portrayed the composer in a quite different light—as a secret dissident, whose serious works represented an encoded critique of the regime, the apparent loyalist providing in his music a hidden, autobiographical commentary on the bestialities of Stalinist rule. Although there are numerous problems with accepting the strict authenticity of *Testimony*, the better view, supported by the composer’s son Maxim among other direct witnesses, is that it paints a broadly accurate picture of Shostakovich’s true self, in particular his lacerating self-reproach for having conformed to a regime which he abhorred. Thus the way opened to a reading of Shostakovich’s work as a Solzhenitsyn-like chronicle of life under totalitarianism.

Following the Volkov revelations, a general re-assessment of his music then took place. Has that re-evaluation led to an over-valuation? Is the real Shostakovich problem the tendency of some listeners to read into his works an extra-musical agenda which detracts from its abstract virtues? Supporting the latter view, Valery Gergiev said of the 5th symphony that it was “time to find more music in this music”. On the other hand, the dedicatee of Shostakovich’s viola sonata, his last completed work, wrote: “People who lived in [his] epoch have no need to dig in the archives or to marvel at the evidence of re-

pressions and executions and murders. It is all there in his music”. Whether interpreting Shostakovich’s works as an aural counterpart to *The Gulag Archipelago* clarifies or trivialises them may remain a bone of contention for years to come; but Terry Teachout has rightly observed that many western listeners were deaf to the music’s virtues until told that it was really “about” the horrors of Stalinism. This suggests that the music does require some appreciation of its internal programme to have achieved its current high standing—or at least that it benefits from such a perspective.

The possibility of reading the music in this sort of way is, among the major composers, unique to Shostakovich. No one who listens to Schubert is ever reminded of the repressive Metternich regime under which he wrote it. If, more appositely, we compare Shostakovich with his near-contemporary Prokofiev, whose relations with the authorities were less problematical at least until the post-war period, it becomes obvious that the former’s music is perfectly suited, and must surely in many cases have been intended to describe and reflect the world of the Soviet Union. Those whose forebears avoided the experiences of 20th century fascism and communism have an enduring, occasionally almost prurient fascination with the evidence of witnesses who testify to their endurance of these regimes. When we hear Shostakovich, we seem to accompany it with semi-conscious visual narratives: it is as if a grainy black-and-white film of the siege of Leningrad itself is playing before our eyes as we listen to the symphony depicting the event (one of his least appealing). This is the ground on which Shostakovich, as far as we can tell, chose to stand, and on which it is therefore fair to judge him.

Another, related difficulty is the prevalence of the ironic mood in the music. It is hard to think of any composer before Mahler (whose psychological essays are in some senses the counterpoint to the socio-political music of Shostakovich) who wanted to be understood ironically, but in the Russian’s case, the tendency is near-universal—and for good reason, since if Volkov is to be believed, it would have been suicidal for the composer to make his true feelings known. The wellspring of this disposition is the fact that he was capable of extremely funny music, for example his 1958 operetta *Cheryomushki* (although he wrote privately that the piece made him “burn with shame”). However, the trouble with irony is that it can too easily be used as an excuse for bombast or rhetoric. As David Fanning has written, “there is no music so empty-headed or incompetent that it cannot in principle be interpreted ironically. To play the irony card may be merely to sanction an abandonment

‘A problem in the music is a certain studied ambiguity . . . so many of Shostakovich’s works end with a question-mark or three dots’

Music



amount of its musical content. A Festival Hall concert pairing the long and noisy 4th symphony with the crystal economy of Mozart's piano concerto K595 provided such a memorable contrast of compositional means that it subsequently featured (albeit for other reasons) in Julian Barnes' short story "Vigilance".

The sheer extremity of the music is another striking feature, whether conveying manic elation, aggression, mockery or despair. An instance of the last of these moods is the 15th quartet, which (like the valedictory viola sonata) teeters on the verge of self-parody: six successive adagio movements, the first of which he insisted was to be played "so that flies drop dead in mid-air and the audience start leaving the hall from sheer boredom". It is as if the emotions generated are so blatant as to obscure the music itself, a line which two of his significant influences, Tchaikovsky and Mahler (both more gifted composers) came close to crossing, but never quite did. Whatever is meant by profundity in music—the abstract quality above all that, together with beauty, makes people want to listen to it—Shostakovich achieved only intermittently. The constraints within which he had to operate fashioned his stream into a different course. We will therefore derive the most satisfaction from his work if we accept that it is best understood as a permanent and eloquent description of a monstrous tyranny, and recognise that in general it is unhelpful to divorce it from that context.

At its best, this merging of music and historical commentary creates works of enduring power, and we may take as an example the justly famous 8th quartet, written "in memory of the victims of fascism and war". It is spell-binding from start to finish. Although it begins with a homage to Beethoven, the piece is full of autobiography and self-quotation; it unmistakably evokes both the suffering of the Jewish people, which this most philo-Semitic of composers treated as a synecdoche for all mid-20th century human miseries, and the omnipresent fear of the secret policeman. Shostakovich had lived through both, and for that reason among others the work is invariably a success in performance. Nor in terms of its achievement does it stand alone, even among his quartets, let alone his other best works. So let us perhaps listen to his music a little sparingly, and recognise that, when we do, we are enriched and educated by the fact that (unusually for music) it means something beyond itself, something that can never be forgotten or diminished, and to which Shostakovich's creative achievement stands as a permanent testimony. §

of artistic standards." A related problem in the music is a certain studied ambiguity: it would be absurd to suppose a piece by Beethoven or Wagner does not mean what it says; but as Fanning points out, so many of Shostakovich's works end with a question-mark or three dots.

For those who prefer music to be less self-conscious and to make its impact on the abstract level of pure forms, all of this is a distraction and may even be an irritation. It can give rise to the feeling that a little of Shostakovich's music goes a long way. This unworthy opinion is enhanced by the occasional thought that the devices in his compositional locker are not as varied or as numerous as they might be. This is a paradox, for he was a composer of the utmost facility and eclecticism, who could write fluently in any number of genres, from the

sub-Rachmaninovian (the first movement of the cello sonata; the second movement of the second piano concerto), to the raspingly avant-garde (his opera *The Nose*). As a non-practitioner of dodecaphony and serialism, both of which were out of the question in the USSR, he deserves our permanent gratitude. However, even in the compositions which he himself seems to have taken most seriously, there is an undeniable if intermittent sense of sameness. Among their features we may in our more censorious moments list grey, undistinguished melodies ("not his strongest point", Grove observes), sardonic harmonies, predictable scampering passages typically in dactylic rhythms, long paragraphs of circum-polar gloom, a habit of writing in widely-spaced octaves, and orchestration that leans heavily on the piccolo or the side drum. There also appears sometimes to be an inverse relationship between the length and volume of a work and the

Shostakovich in the uniform of the Leningrad Conservatory's volunteer firefighters, during the siege of Leningrad, 1941