

Prelude

“Inside Masterworks”

May 2018

bringing music to life

Masterworks #8: Shostakovich 5 | May 4-6, 2018

The rise and fall and rise of Dmitri Shostakovich: the journey of an artist whose music became the object of censorship – and a source of terror for the composer.



We often associate censorship with written or spoken expression, whether in speeches, books, movies, or other communication through words. But communication without words – the language of visual art and music – can also be the subject of censorship.



While examples of censorship in the 21st century abound, the story of Shostakovich is set in the 20th century, a time when war and politics were intertwined with music, and when many totalitarian regimes subjected composers and artists to strict censorship.¹

Classical music was associated with the Nazi presence, and, for a time, the Nazi embrace of the music resulted in a marked decline in the classical repertoire. Music critic Alex Ross theorized that classical music's perceived decline in “moral stature” drove many composers to explore alternatives, leading to the dissonant sounds of experimental music that erupted in the 1950s.² In 1949, Theodore Adorno, a left-wing sociologist and musician, wrote that preserving tonality in music advanced a fascist mentality.³

Under Stalin's rule in 20th century Soviet society, art was rigorously policed to reject any style reflecting Western modernism. Dmitri Shostakovich, born in Petrograd in 1906, was one of the few censored

Soviet artists to survive the purges that decimated the entire Soviet Union.⁴

Dmitri Shostakovich is recognized as one of the most influential composers of the last century. It is a miracle that his music survived, but even more miraculous was the survival of the composer himself (who lived until 1975). While Shostakovich was undoubtedly a celebrated composer within the Soviet Union, his life and art depended upon Stalin's approval.⁵ By the 1930s, as compared with his noted contemporary, Sergei Prokofiev, who was championed by the Soviet government, Shostakovich was often reviled.⁶

Prokofiev, who rushed into the streets of Petrograd after the removal of Tsar Nicholas II to



From a production of the opera “The Nose”

celebrate the Russian Revolution, was the Soviets' beloved composer.⁷ With government approval, in 1918 he embarked on a brief foreign tour that lasted a decade and a half. He traveled through Siberia to eventually give concerts in Tokyo and San Francisco.⁸ While Prokofiev was on tour, Shostakovich remained in the Soviet Union and achieved many of his early successes, including his Symphony No. 1 in 1925 and the opera *The Nose* in 1927.⁹ By 1928, Soviet life was forever altered when

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Stalin instituted his Five-Year Plan, demanding a strict and uniform style of Soviet music. Even the works of the great Russian composer, Tchaikovsky, were banned because his music was created during tsarist times.¹⁰

Shostakovich believed he was composing "Soviet" music with his opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, in 1934.¹¹

The opera tells the story of an adulterous housewife whose unfaithfulness is discovered by her father-in-law. In her desperation, she murders both her husband and his father. The protagonist was written to be a tragic heroine, faced with the hardships of being a woman. The piece was also designed by Shostakovich to be an analogy for the oppression of Russians before the revolution, and the protagonist's sexual liberation is related to Russia's own liberation from the tsarist system.¹²



The opera was a huge hit in the Soviet Union and beyond, but Stalin was not impressed. He and his entourage walked out of the performance immediately after the finale. Within a few days, the Communist Party newspaper, *Pravda*, published the opera's official "review," entitled "Chaos Instead of Music." The enraged author, now identified as Stalin himself, wrote: "Singing is replaced by shrieking.... The music quacks, hoots, growls and gasps to express the love scenes as naturally as possible."¹³ With that one review, *Lady Macbeth* disappeared from stages, and a distraught Shostakovich vanished from the public eye. In 1936, with the start of Stalin's Great Terror, Shostakovich suffered the loss of countless friends and relatives. His patron, best friend, uncle, and several close colleagues were all assassinated by the secret police. His brother-in-law and mother-in-law were sent to Soviet camps.¹⁴

To avoid risking his life, Shostakovich withdrew his more "modern" Fourth Symphony, which was then in rehearsal in Leningrad. He retreated to writing film scores until the premier of his Fifth Symphony

in November of 1937. This composition, reflecting a much less modern style than his other works, helped him re-enter Stalin's good graces.¹⁵

But despite this reprieve, the composer was forever changed, and lived in a state of constant fear, never knowing how Stalin would respond to his music. His music became a minefield, punctuated with hollow triumphs, intended to keep Stalin at bay.¹⁶ Shostakovich always kept a small packed bag nearby, fearing imminent arrest. His memoirs confirm that the negative articles written in *Pravda*, and the isolation they produced, made him feel like a hostage and a condemned man for the rest of his life.¹⁷

It was not until Stalin's death in 1953 that a great weight was finally lifted from Shostakovich's shoulders.¹⁸ The composer's heartbreaking anguish is dramatically expressed in his String Quartet No. 8,¹⁹ composed shortly after two traumatic events: he was diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) and reluctantly forced to join the Communist party. The String Quartet's score states that it is "dedicated to the victims of fascism and war." When the Borodin Quartet performed the composition for the composer at his Moscow home, the composer, overwhelmed by the music's realization of his most personal feelings, buried his head in his hands and wept.²⁰

Shostakovich continued to defy Soviet authorities; he was last officially censured in 1962 for his Symphony No.13, *Babi Yar*, (with words by Yevtushenko), a condemnation of Soviet anti-Semitism.²¹ But it has been said that his final completed work, the Viola Sonata, conveys a sense of acceptance and inner peace, after a lifetime of struggle against repressive regimes.²²

Please join the Hartford Symphony Orchestra for an emotional performance of **Shostakovich 5, May 4-6, 2018**, and celebrate the glorious music of a composer who defied the odds, and managed to evoke joy, humor and beauty despite unbearable personal trauma.

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Wondering How the Music Will Sound?

Try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage – and more!

To hear Valery Gergiev conduct Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=16&v=kTqsU7tQW48

The humorous *Tahiti Trot*, emulating the popular *Tea for Two*, was composed in one hour – on a bet – when Shostakovich was just 22!
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYJUJ_qzVWY

Hear a young 16-year old cellist, Sheku Kanneh-Mason, winner of the BBC Young Musician Competition 2016, perform Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 1:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6GJgOXBi2U>

Hear the same piece performed by the incomparable Mstislav Rostropovich, friend of Shostakovich: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4t3UtfWnsE>

To better appreciate Shostakovich, we offer added suggestions:

The deeply emotional String Quartet No. 8, performed by the Borodin Quartet:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tby5aMrMu6Q>

The famous *Babi Yar* Symphony performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra and Eugene Ormandy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pVPorivMs8>

And the composer's final Viola Sonata, featuring pianist Emanuel Ax and violist Nobuko Imai: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2BFJ8OZH10>



Friends: Conductor and cellist Mstislav Rostropovich with Dmitri Shostakovich



Shostakovich and Rostropovich



Headstone marking the grave of Dmitri Shostakovich

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The return of Casey's Classics
Recommended recordings for your listening pleasure!

Want the best recordings of the pieces you'll experience on the concert program?

Coleman Casey, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers his recording recommendations of selections featured in our upcoming Masterworks Concert: An all Shostakovich evening to honor one of the last century's greatest composers!

Shostakovich's most popular symphony, the Fifth, requires great sound, great playing, and great sense of line and restraint, all of which is offered in this performance from Bernard Haitink with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and the superb DECCA engineering.

We return to the same orchestra and engineering but Riccardo Chailly conducts the composer's witty *Tahiti Trot* on a recording filled with other such amusing works drawn from a wide spectrum of the composer's career.

Finally, there is still no greater recording of the First Cello Concerto than one made over sixty years ago by Rostropovich and Eugene Ormandy with the incomparable Philadelphia Orchestra (SONY), in surprisingly excellent stereo sound.

¹ <http://www.economist.com/node/10015908#print> – Music, war and politics intertwined.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dmitry-Shostakovich>

⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/prokofiev-and-shostakovich-under-stalin-notes-of-dissent-112661.html>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2006/jul/21/classicalmusicandopera>

⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sergey-Prokofiev>

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2004/mar/26/classicalmusicandopera.russia>

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dmitry-Shostakovich>

¹⁵ <http://www.old-yankee.com/writings/shosta.html> – Clark, Bruce. *Dmitri Shostakovich, Politics and Modern Music*

¹⁶ <http://www.classicfm.com/composers/shostakovich/guides/dmitri-shostakovich-life/>

¹⁷ <http://www.old-yankee.com/writings/shosta.html> – Clark, Bruce. *Dmitri Shostakovich, Politics and Modern Music*

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ The Hartford Symphony Orchestra just performed this deeply moving piece on March 29, 2018, at our final HSO:Intermix concert of the season, which treats audiences to a non-traditional musical experience, with small ensembles in non-traditional settings.

²⁰ [https://www.revolvy.com/topic/String%20Quartet%20No.%208%20\(Shostakovich\)](https://www.revolvy.com/topic/String%20Quartet%20No.%208%20(Shostakovich))

²¹ <http://www.classicfm.com/composers/shostakovich/guides/dmitri-shostakovich-life/>

²² Ibid