

## *Composer Under Communism*

**Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich**, as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov; translated from the Russian by Antonina W. Bouis, *New York: Harper and Row, 1979. xli + 289 pp. \$15.00.*

THESE ARE THE MEMOIRS of the composer "Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich, Deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R., laureate of the Lenin and State prizes of the U.S.S.R. A faithful son of the Communist Party. . . ." (so the official obituary described him); taken down during the last four years of his life by a young Russian musicologist, brought to the West with the help of some "coura-

geous people," and now published here, for the first time.

On May 12, 1926, his Symphony No. 1 was given its first performance, and the nineteen-year-old graduate of the Leningrad Conservatory became instantly a celebrity. Shostakovich's resourceful inventiveness and seemingly effortless technical brilliance, his adroit use of harmonic modernisms that titillated the hearers' ears without outraging their sense of traditional propriety, made the work popularly accessible; and he, to use his own words, "acquired a certain fame." Within the next few years performances of the symphony by the most prestigious conductors and orchestras created for the young composer an international reputation and almost universal recognition of his great talent.

Shostakovich had been given rigorous training in piano and composition at the Conservatory, which he entered at the age of thirteen, and was a dedicated student. In *Testimony* he reminisces at considerable length, and with admiration, about Alexander Glazunov, head of the Conservatory from 1906 to 1928; a conservative musician who, nevertheless, gave him support and understanding. Repeatedly he praises the selfless integrity (so unlike the ruthless, back-stabbing self-seeking of the Party-line followers) of this survivor from the pre-Revolutionary era, who "lived in a terrible world that he didn't understand."

After the success of the First Symphony the Soviet government began to take notice of Shostakovich. The officially commissioned, propagandist Second ("Dedication to October") and Third ("May First") Symphonies both conformed to the Party-line dictate, that the arts must reflect and celebrate the Revolutionary uprising and final victory of the proletarian masses. And in spite of their daring and aggressive "modernism" the composer remained immune from censure by the authorities—a privilege that he was not long to enjoy.

The opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* ("a tragic-satyrical opera," the composer calls it) had its first performance in Leningrad in 1934. There it was given thirty-six times in five months, and in Moscow ninety-four times in two seasons; in the capitals of the West it was presented with sensational success. Then Stalin went to see it, and "left the theater in a rage." And on January 28, 1936, an article, "Muddle instead of Music," appeared in *Pravda*:

The listener is flabbergasted from the first moment of the opera by an intentionally ungainly, muddled flood of sounds. Snatches of melody, embryos of musical phrases, drown, escape, and drown once more in crashing, gnashing, and screeching.

"I'll never forget that day," Shostakovich says, "it's probably the most memorable in my life. That article on the third page of *Pravda* changed my entire existence." He had no doubt that the article had been dictated by "the Leader of the Peoples and Friend of Children," Stalin himself. "All right, the opera was taken off the stage. . . . Everyone turned away from me. There was a phrase in the article saying that all this 'could end very badly.' They were all waiting for the bad end to come." He, too, waited, his suitcase packed, expecting to be arrested—at night; for that was when they would come to take him away.

Solomon Volkov records, in his introduction, that Stalin had made a "private decision" that Shostakovich would never be arrested. The composer, meanwhile, had become (whether consciously or not, Volkov says) a "new *yurodivy*."

Stepping onto the road of *yurodstvo*, Shostakovich relinquished all responsibility for anything he said: nothing meant what it seemed to, not the most exalted and beautiful words. The pronouncement of familiar truths turned out to be mockery; conversely, mockery often contained tragic truth.

His public acceptance, after the condemnation of *Lady Macbeth*, of Party discipline, and such a statement, made later, as, "I am a Soviet composer and see our epoch as something heroic, spirited and joyous," could appear, in the context of his life, to be characteristic actions of a *yurodivy*.

The first performance of the Fifth Symphony in 1937 completely rehabilitated his reputation. It seems apparent that in composing this symphony and for the rest of his career, during which he wrote nine more, Shostakovich had decided prudently to moderate his "modernism" and trust that those who had ears to hear would understand the hidden meaning of his music. In the preface to the symphony, for example, he writes of "optimism and the joy of living" portrayed in the finale; but in *Witness* he says:

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."

Fear is the *leitmotiv* of this book. Fear of the tyrants—not only Stalin, but his successors too. ("I wasn't sent to the camps, but it's never too late. After all it depends on how the new leader and teacher feels about your work.") Fear of the informers; the "pawns, toadies, screws, and other tiny souls"—the "citizen composers" who, during the 1948 campaign against the "formalist conspiracy" panicked, and "began hanging one another," and "knocked themselves out to avoid the list [of the 'main offenders'] and did everything they could to get their comrades on it."

To the Party-line critics and the "aesthetes" who "are equally against music reminding people about life, about tragedies, about victims, the dead," Shosta-

kovich responds with unequivocal demands for "brave music"—"brave because it is truthful." And the truths he would wish his music to communicate are harsh truths. He has no use for those who talk about "other, more noble aims of art . . . about beauty, grace, and other high qualities." He says, ironically, "Let anything at all go on around you, but serve high art, and nothing but, at the table."

His creative drives did not compel him to rethink and reinvent form. To him, content—what the work was "about"—seems to have been all-important. The Romantic symphony of Gustav Mahler undoubtedly was the springboard from which he took off. He praises the music of Stravinsky (who told him that he should go beyond Mahler), and says that he "is the only composer of our century whom I would call great without any doubt." But Stravinsky's "idea of the role of music" is not for him. It is difficult, indeed, to imagine that the Byzantine austerities of the *Symphony of Psalms* or the hieratic solemnities of *Oedipus Rex* could have influenced him, whose objectives were so opposed to those of the older, devoutly Orthodox composer.

It is when he discusses Mussorgsky, "probably the most *yurodivy* of the Russian—and not only the Russian—composers," that he reveals most intimately his conception of the composer's task. He has a "special relationship" with him. "In general," he says, "as I go over Mussorgsky's character and personality, I'm amazed at how much we have in common."

I always felt that the ethical basis of *Boris* was my own. The author uncompromisingly decries the amorality of an anti-people government, which is inevitably criminal . . . and it is particularly revolting that it hides under the name of the people. . . . The style of justifying villainy in Russia never changes, the stench of evil lingers.

All questions concerning the meaning and function of music begin for him with Mussorgsky, whose music is "always alive . . . and that means an argument with citizens grabbing each other by the lapels is not far behind." He does not, however, speak of the pivotal influence on Mussorgsky's style of folk music—the Russian native art that the Soviet rulers wantonly destroyed. ("It was destroyed forever because it was oral. When they shoot a folk singer or wandering storyteller, hundreds of great musical works die with him.")

He is not a militant atheist, he says; but it is apparent that Shostakovich has no use for religion, which he is most likely to speak of as "superstition" or "false religiosity." Stalin, who had had "all that religious stuff beaten into his head by his ignorant teachers," was superstitious, and his superstition "touched on religion." Profession of religious faith most often is a lie, or at least a superstitious delusion. Shostakovich derides Solzhenitsyn, with whom he had had a cordial relationship, for preaching religion and speaking out against lack of faith.

For those whom he calls "humanists" he has unqualified contempt. Some he names: André Malraux ("Has anyone ever asked André Malraux why he glorified the construction of the White Sea Canal. . .?"); Lion Feuchtwanger ("I read his little book *Moscow 1937* with revulsion"); George Bernard Shaw ("It was Shaw who announced . . . 'Hunger in Russia? Nonsense'"); Romain Rolland ("It makes me sick to think about him"). "Famous humanists," journalists, foreign tourists—delegations of "defenders of this or fighters for that"—all make him suspicious, convinced that they are unprincipled liars who care only for their own comfort and have no concern about the suffering and oppression that he and his fellow citizens have to endure. ("If

they don't give a damn, then they don't. And to hell with them.") This distrust, often xenophobic, makes it impossible for me to believe that he would ever have thought of defecting to the West.

Shostakovich composed musical scores for forty movies—some of them glorifying the vilified leader, Stalin—for which he received money and prizes. His public utterances—probably ghost-written—followed obsequiously the Party-line. (*Yurodivy* or not, martyrdom was not his vocation.) He must have realized, eventually, that the early promise of his genius would never be fulfilled completely in that repressive environment, where to survive meant to compromise. (The *samizdat* counter-culture was not for him; nor were the dissidents' manifestoes, which he refused to sign.) Nevertheless, what he had written, he had written.

A frightened man, withdrawn into himself at the last, and obsessed by death. "Fear of death," Shostakovich says, "may be the most intense emotion of all." He agrees with Chekhov, who thought that life after death "was all nonsense" because it was superstition.

There were no particularly happy moments in my life, no great joys. It was gray and dull and it makes me sad to think about it. It saddens me to admit it, but it's the truth, the unhappy truth.

This book is not "literature." It is the chronicle of a superbly gifted composer's life under Communism; of friendships and enmities; of loyalties and betrayals; of some who survived, and others who were shot or imprisoned: a bitterly documented indictment of the malign dictatorship whose leaders and lackeys continue to suppress into uncreative conformity the homeland of Pushkin and Glinka, of Dostoevsky and Mussorgsky.

Reviewed by DONALD POND