

A New Shostakovich

With so much in the Soviet Union now subject to change, reinterpretation is the name of the game. Today, a new Dmitri Shostakovich is coming to light: the artist who most inspired the next generation of Soviet composers.

HARLOW ROBINSON weighs the evidence.



When the enigmatic Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich died in Moscow on August 9, 1975, six weeks before his 69th birthday, he was celebrated at home and abroad as the greatest Soviet composer, and among the most important artists ever produced by the USSR's lavishly subsidized cultural establishment. In Shostakovich's official obituary, a long list of ideological heavyweights headed by Communist Party General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev and KGB chief Yuri Andropov—neither

known as fans of classical music—glorified this reclusive and painfully high-strung composer as a "true son of the Communist Party" who had "devoted his entire life to the development of Soviet music, to the ideals of socialist humanitarianism and internationalism, and to the struggle for peace and friendship between peoples."

Despite his frequent and bruising conflicts with Party bureaucrats and censors over the years, Shostakovich's many "patriotic" works (especially his Sym-

phony No. 7, the "Leningrad," a source of inspiration in the desperate struggle against Hitler), his silent endurance, his international stature, and his willingness to compromise earned him a chestful of decorations: Deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, Hero of Socialist Labor, People's Artist of the USSR, laureate of the Lenin and State Prizes. After his death, the composer's name was added to the official title of the country's most prestigious orchestra, the Leningrad Philharmonic, and to the magnificent nineteenth-century concert hall in the center of the city where he had lived, composed, and suffered.

No dissident, he. As far as the vast majority of Soviet citizens was concerned, Shostakovich—a full Party member from 1961—was a model Communist and proof of their country's cultural superiority.

Or was he?

Sixteen years after his hero's burial in Novodevichy Monastery, and nearly seven years into *glasnost*, Shostakovich's real feelings about the repressive regime under which he lived his entire adult life now appear ambivalent at best. Far from being a loyal Communist and a musical apologist for Stalinism, it now seems he loathed the Great Leader and all his tasteless toadies. Far from appreciating his titles and medals, Shostakovich, it now turns out, viewed his role as official composer and spokesman for Soviet culture as a horrible joke.

The evidence upon which the portrait of this "new Shostakovich" is based has come primarily from two sources. The first, and most important, is his music, which has always invited contradictory interpretations. For example: were those noisy marches so common in the finales of Shostakovich's symphonies really triumphant celebrations of Communist victories, as official Soviet critics insisted, or were they ironic putdowns of the enforced optimism of Socialist Realism?

Did the Fifth Symphony's agonizing *largo* illustrate the attempt (eventually successful) to overcome "individualist illusion," as the official line went after its 1937 premiere, or did it actually reflect the composer's despair over the tragic situation of his plundered country and his horror at Stalin's systematic destruction of the Russian intelligentsia?

Interpreting music is a tricky business, of course; it can cut both ways. That Shostakovich understood music's special power to express the composer's inner soul and at the same time elude and even mislead less perceptive listeners (like the Party censors) was clear from something he once said to his acquaintance and occasional collaborator, Soviet poet Evgeny Evtushenko: "I never lie in music, that's enough." In other words, don't listen to what I say in these meaningless official pronouncements; just listen closely to what the *music* says.

The other piece of evidence that has called Shostakovich's "orthodoxy" into question is *Testimony*, the composer's controversial "memoirs as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov." Published in the United States in 1979, *Testimony* paints a harrowing picture of a bitter man profoundly alienated from the politicians, bureaucrats, and composers who poisoned his artistic and personal life.

Immediately and viciously attacked in the Soviet press as a "pack of scandalous speculation," the book has still not been published in the USSR, though copies imported from the West have circulated there. Soviet musicologists and musicians who have managed to read *Testimony*—including those who knew the composer well—have expressed reservations about the research methods of Volkov, who now lives in New York, but they have agreed almost unanimously that this was basically what Shostakovich said within his intimate circle.

A number of Soviet emigres living in America who knew both the composer and the situation have also gone on record as believing in the fundamental

accuracy of the memoirs. These include the composer's son Maxim Shostakovich, currently the music director of the New Orleans Philharmonic; pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy; and soprano Galina Vishnevskaya, whose own 1984 book *Galina* also reveals Shostakovich as profoundly alienated from, and even disgusted by, Soviet society.

To Soviets who only know the composer from his carefully created official portrait, however, the revelations contained in *Testimony* dropped like a bombshell. "Shostakovich was always held up to us as a model of the loyal Soviet artist," one literature professor told me in Moscow in late 1979, shortly after hearing about *Testimony* over Radio Free Europe. "Now we see that it just wasn't so." For Westerners, too, it was difficult to absorb the idea that Shostakovich—who once appeared on the cover of *Time* wearing the helmet of a member of the fire brigade in besieged Leningrad—could have found Soviet life and Communism so odious.

Ian MacDonald, author of the recently published *The New Shostakovich*, believes our inability to understand Soviet society led us to misinterpret the composer's deeper feelings and intentions. We must remember, writes MacDonald, that people living in totalitarian societies like the pre-Gorbachev USSR never say what they really mean. With his international reputation, Shostakovich was a perfect pawn for the Soviet cultural bureaucracy, which sent him abroad to improve the country's image. He had little choice in the matter if he wanted to protect his family and keep on working.

With the arrival of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the truth of Shostakovich's hatred for the Soviet system has emerged from many more sources—and as only one of countless similar stories. One of the most exciting and daunting tasks that now faces Soviet historians is the rewriting of their cultural past, distorted and falsified during decades of totalitarian

ideological control over the media, publishing, and academia. Maya Pritzker, a young Soviet musicologist and critic, observes that she and her colleagues had long disagreed with the official interpretation of some of Shostakovich's compositions, but could only share these thoughts in private. "Now we can express our appreciation for the tragedy of Shostakovich's life and music, and point out the compromises he—like everyone else in his generation—had to make."

Not surprisingly, Shostakovich's musical and personal legacy has exerted an important influence on the next generation of Soviet composers. Always ready to help aspiring artists, Shostakovich was a devoted teacher at the Leningrad and Moscow Conservatories, where his students included many aspiring composers who have now become important artists in their own right. Shostakovich also extended a helping hand to a young man from the Siberian city of Tomsk who wrote asking whether his enclosed compositions showed any promise. Yes, replied Shostakovich, who helped him enroll at Moscow Conservatory. The young man was Edison Denisov, today a leading avant-garde composer.

But the man most often considered Shostakovich's aesthetic heir is Alfred Schnittke, born 1934, whose music has been heard with increasing frequency in the United States in recent seasons. Both composers shared a belief in music's spiritual power, a seriousness of purpose, and a similarly dramatic approach conveyed in large-scale programmatic works. Like Shostakovich, Schnittke suffered for his artistic principles; during the Brezhnev "era of stagnation" not a single major orchestra would play his music, even though it was becoming relatively well-known abroad. Like Shostakovich, Schnittke believes that music can act as the conscience of a people, resounding with a spiritual meaning so strong and eternal that it can withstand both tyrants and their short-lived earthly powers. ■