

SHOSTAKOVICH UNDER SOVIET SOCIALISM

By John Hospers

A review of *Testimony* by Dmitri Shostakovich, Harper & Row, New York, 1979.

The popular impression of Shostakovich in the Western world is that he was a talented composer who sold out to the Soviets. Many people in the West do remember the reprimands he received at the hands of Stalin and Khrushchev, and the charges that his music was "too German" and "formalistic," not rooted in native Russian folk tunes. But, so goes the popular impression, Shostakovich always complied: he was a moral coward who sold his soul in order to stay alive.

We get a very different picture from his autobiography, *Testimony*, recently translated and published in English (and, like Solzhenitsyn's works, not published in the Soviet Union). The manuscript was smuggled out of Russia by his pupil Solomon Volkov, who also wrote the preface and introduction to the English-language edition.

Early in 1975, the last time that Volkov saw Shostakovich alive, Shostakovich asked, "Where is my manuscript?"

"It is in the West," Volkov replied.

"Good" replied Shostakovich with satisfaction, "you will publish it after my death."

The memoirs are simply written and (so far as one can tell) uncompromisingly honest. The work is not an attempt at self-vindication, certainly not an ego trip for the author, who (as many incidents in the book, as well as recollections from others,

make clear) had no patience with exaggeration, self-aggrandizement, or hypocrisy. The same Shostakovich who refused at considerable risk to himself to praise a composer who was in favor with the regime when he believed the man's work was without merit, also refused to alter the facts on his behalf. He wanted to leave an accurate record of life in the Soviet Union and the lives of others whom he knew, particularly fellow artists chafing under the burden of official censorship.

Shostakovich was an extraordinarily prolific composer. His highly acclaimed First Symphony appeared when he was nineteen, and a profusion of other works followed each year. His first encounter with political censorship occurred in the mid-1930s with the performance of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk District* (renamed *Katerina Izmailova* in the revised edition), which is little known in this country but of which the composer apparently thought more highly of than of his early symphonies. He did not reckon on Stalin's dislike of Shakespeare tragedies: that Macbeth or Hamlet should kill was apparently all right, but that they should experience guilt at having done so was too annoying (it might even show up Stalin by comparison).

The next morning there appeared in *Pravda* an editorial, dictated by Stalin himself, entitled (also by Stalin) "Muddle instead of Music." It read in part: "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. Following this 'musk' is difficult, remembering it is impossible." And the editorial concluded with a warning: "This is playing at abstruse things, which could end badly."

Shostakovich, who had no strong political convictions and wanted only to be left alone to write music, was now in danger of

his life. To make matters worse, he was a close friend of Marshal Tukachevsky, one of Stalin's most reliable subordinates and highly placed in the Stalin hierarchy, but whom Stalin came to perceive as a potential rival, and had him killed. It was customary that when Stalin had someone shot the person's friends and associates were rounded up and shot at the same time. Then appeared a second editorial in *Pravda*, equally ominous, and Shostakovich felt that his days were numbered. His erstwhile friends refused to speak to him, his associates snubbed him and tried to avoid him, fearing for their own lives when a knock at the door at night would take Shostakovich away forever.

But it never came. Apparently Stalin had long since determined not to "terminate" Shostakovich, mainly for one reason: Shostakovich had written the music for numerous Soviet films; an accomplishment in which Stalin believed he had no peer (though nothing that Shostakovich ever did in this genre comes close to Prokofieff's score for Eisenstein's film *Alexander Nevskiy*), and Stalin considered film to be the most powerful medium for the dissemination of Soviet ideas, and didn't want to lose his ablest man in this department. But Shostakovich was never told any of this during Stalin's lifetime, and Stalin let him dangle on a string, off again and on again, until his death in 1953.

The Seventh (Leningrad) Symphony appeared in 1941 after Hitler's invasion and during the siege of Leningrad. Though somewhat scanty in musical ideas per page, it contained rousing singable melodies which marshaled Russian (not Soviet) patriotism, and it was also an instant success in the West. Even had Stalin disliked it he would not have chosen this time, when help from the West was essential, to take measures against the composer. The Eighth Symphony also appeared during the war, and Stalin specifically requested Shostakovich to write a triumphal Ninth Symphony in 1945, to parallel Beethoven's Ninth with its Ode to Joy. Shostakovich did write a ninth sympathy, but without

chorus, without words, and without praises of the Great Leader; it was bitter, inward-turning, withdrawn, mysterious. Stalin was furious that the composer, whose life he had spared, had written nothing in his savior's praises. The fact that Shostakovich had just written the music for the pusillanimous film *The Fall of Berlin*, which attributed the Soviet victory solely to Stalin's military genius, did not abate his anger. But he waited till he had got what he wanted from the West before unleashing his fury in 1947-9 on Shostakovich and other composers as well, again in *Pravda* (and echoed by numerous flunkies in other papers all over the Soviet Union), for being formalistic, German, and insufficiently Russian. They all feared for their lives, and their music was totally banned from performances in the U.S.S.R.

Shostakovich writes, "Stalin hated the Allies and feared them. He couldn't do a thing without the Americans. But almost immediately after the war he dealt cruelly with his citizens who had had relations with the Allies. Stalin transferred all his fear and hatred to them. This was a tragedy for thousands upon thousands. A man received a letter from America and was shot. And the naive former Allies kept sending letters. And every letter was a death sentence." (p. 138).

Yet, just when Shostakovich feared most for his life, events took another turn. It was 1948, when the West was still trying to pretend that there WAS no Gulag - the main thing for which Shostakovich never forgave the West. "Stalin didn't give a damn about the West," he writes (p. 147), "and the Western intelligentsia in particular. He used to say, 'Don't worry, they'll swallow it.' But...they had started a peace movement, and they needed people for it. And Stalin thought of me. That was his style completely. Stalin liked to put a man face to face with death and then make him dance to his own tune. I was given the order to get ready for a trip to America...to the Cultural and Scientific Congress for World Peace in New York."

Shostakovich wanted no part of this charade, and he refused. Molotov asked him twice, and still he refused. And then Stalin himself phoned him. "And in his nagging way, the leader and teacher asked me why I didn't want to go to America. I answered that I couldn't. My comrades' music wasn't played, and neither was mine. They would ask about it in America. What could I say? Stalin pretended to be out-going. 'What do you mean, it isn't played? Why aren't they playing it?' I told him that there was a decree by the censors, that there was a blacklist. Stalin said, 'Who gave the orders?'..." (148).

Stalin rescinded the order and Shostakovich went to New York, where the questions he dreaded were asked of him: "How could you participate in such film projects as the *Fall of Berlin* and *Unforgettable 1919*?" He knew that if he told the truth, or if he had dared breathe a word about the horrors of the Gulag he would have been liquidated upon his return to Russia; so, he would reply by smiling and adding to the list of his "scandalous participations" with works unknown in the West. But Stalin had decided that Shostakovich would write film scores, and, writes Shostakovich, "considering the circumstances, it would have been irrational for me to refuse to do film work."

This decision undoubtedly saved his life. "I couldn't write an apotheosis to Stalin, I simply couldn't. I knew what I was in for when I wrote the Ninth. But I did depict Stalin in the music in my next symphony, the Tenth. I wrote it right after Stalin's death, and no one has yet guessed what the symphony is about. It's about Stalin and the Stalin years. The second part, the Scherzo, is a musical portrait of Stalin."

Though I would not have guessed this last point, the Tenth has long been my own favorite among Shostakovich symphonies. Even greater, in my opinion, are his later string quartets. Stalin didn't

care for chamber music and few people attended the performances, so Shostakovich was safer here: the string quartets are Shostakovich's most emotionally expressive works, and into them he poured the welter of intense and conflicting feelings that were largely omitted from the more publicized symphonies, operas, and film music.

But his troubles were not over. Shostakovich had always loved Jewish folk music ("Jews were tormented for so long that they learned to hide their despair; they express despair in dance music."), and when he read Yevtushenko's moving poem about the mass execution of thousands of Jews at Babi Yar near Kiev, he chose this poem as the text for his Symphony No. 13 for orchestra, solo, and chorus (1962). Anti-Semitism was a tender subject in the U.S.S.R., and the premiere of the 13th Symphony in Moscow turned into an open expression of anti-government feelings. The symphony was suppressed. (Some years later it could be performed again. I myself bought a recording of it in MOSCOW several years ago.)

There are many chapters in the book dealing in detail with musical figures not well known outside the U.S.S.R. (Glasunov, Glaire, Kallinikow, etc.) which may not interest the general reader but are fascinating to any student of musical history. The main theme of the book is Soviet music under government control.

There is not much about political theory or communism or even about Soviet society in general, but it is about dictatorship. A recurring theme is the author's indignation with Western intellectuals for being so naive about what really went on in the Soviet Union. There are many fascinating examples. Here is one:

"Stalin liked leading Americans by the nose. He would show them a man -- here he is, alive and well -- and then kill him... The Americans don't give a damn about us, they'll believe anything..."

In 1949, the Jewish poet Itzik Feffer was arrested on Stalin's orders. Paul Robeson was in Moscow in the midst of all the banquets and balls, he remembered that he had a friend called Itzik. "Where's Itzik?" "You'll have your Itzik," Stalin decided, and pulled his usual base trick. Itzik Feffer invited Paul Robeson to dine with him in Moscow's most chic restaurant. Robeson arrived and was led to a private chamber in the restaurant, where the table was set with drinks. Feffer was really sitting at the table, with several unknown men. Feffer was thin and pale and said little. But Robeson ate and drank well and saw his old friend. After their friendly dinner, the men Robeson didn't know returned Feffer to prison, where he soon died. Robeson went back to America, where he told everyone that the rumors about Feffer's arrest and death were nonsense and slanders; he had been drinking with Feffer personally (1989).

There are similar incidents about Andre Malraux, Lion Feuchtwanger, Romain Rolland, and George Bernard Shaw. Shostakovich's contempt for their gullibility was total, as it was also for the Hollywood film *Mission to Moscow*.

There are those who say that Shostakovich should have refused to write music at all under the Soviet regime, that he should have chosen instead to be shot. Was it expediency, or a moral choice to live and fight another day? Fight he did, standing up to the oppressive regime repeatedly with breath-taking bluntness, yet continuing to write the film music that kept him off the chopping block. But the struggle embittered him, and when he died in 1975 of a chronic heart condition, death came almost as a relief. The endless struggle against the inhuman Soviet system, the envious rivals who wanted him out of the way, and the despot who could have dispatched him at the slightest whim, as Shostakovich puts it, "colored my whole life gray."