

## IDENTITY AND INTEGRITY IN STALIN'S RUSSIA: *The case of Shostakovich*

*Lord Sutherland of Houndwood*  
Provost of Gresham College

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I

(A portrait slide each of Stalin and Shostakovich to be showing on the screen)

Lenin died in 1924 and Stalin won the power struggle for which he had been preparing carefully, and thereafter established the power base from which he was to rule Russia with unrestricted power until he died in 1953.

Let me tell you a (true) story set at the very end of 1926. By then students who wished to graduate from the Leningrad music Conservatory, were required, in addition to assessment of musical capacity to pass an examination in Marxist methodology. Shostakovich, then twenty years old, went with four fellow students to be examined orally by the relevant commission:

When one of the students was asked to explain the difference, from the sociological and economic standpoints, between the work of Chopin and Liszt, his answer produced prolonged fits of hysterical laughter from Shostakovich and another classmate. Offended by the outburst, an "elegant" (a translation of Shostakovich's own word) Marxist quizzed Shostakovich about his reading preparation, concluding that the student could in no way be prepared to answer questions about the sociological principle of Bach's system of temperament and Scriabin's timbral aggregates. Shostakovich was summarily dismissed from the exam. (Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, OUP, 2000, p.36).

Clearly the young Shostakovich was a better musician than a politician, and so it remained throughout his life. In fact he managed to evade the potentially very serious consequences of his exuberance on this occasion, and indeed re-told the story as a good story to his friends, without apparently detecting the sinister undertones of what underlay the event. Although later perceptions and impressions of Shostakovich leave the picture of a pressurized and often angst-filled man, there is plenty evidence of his sense of humour and fun. The difference was that he came to learn how to disguise and code that humour. There is plenty of evidence in his letters that he could use irony, and its lesser partner sarcasm to code reactions to contemporary events.

There are some clear examples of this in his letters to his friend Isaak Glikman when he reflects his view of local events by parodies of the type of press report expected – for example his letter to Glikman of 29 Dec 1957, about the 'Celebrations' in Odessa to mark the fortieth anniversary of the creation of the Soviet Ukraine. (Glikman, pp 72-3. See appendix). Or again his weary comment in a letter of 16 February 1966,

I am planning to go for ten days to Repino. I'll pay for it no doubt: on 19 February the Plenum of the Governing Body of the Union of Soviet Composers of the USSR opens (sc. in Moscow), at which there will be a quantity of brilliant new works by composers to listen to. I did promise to attend the Plenum, but I simply don't have the strength. (op.cit. p126).

More light-heartedly, a month later he writes,



...I fell ill when I returned to Moscow. My blood pressure went up, and my heart began to have problems. I am now officially classified as invalid seventh class. I expect in time to graduate to invalid first class de luxe.

My point in quoting these examples is to remind you that for all the angst in his life, Shostakovich did have a sense of humour, and even at times of fun – exuberant and crass doubtless as a youth, but a resource to draw upon as he became more immediately aware of how dark the landscape had become as Stalin tightened his grip on all aspects of Russia life. (It is perhaps relevant to note Shostakovich's wide knowledge and appreciation of the work of Chekhov who wrote tragedies infused with humour as the vehicle of both expression and communication.) The visiting Commission to examine the twenty-year-old Shostakovich on Marxist Methodology was but the smoke of dangerous fires being fuelled daily in Moscow.

My contention is that this capacity for humour in the form of irony is central to an understanding of Shostakovich, man and musician, and that its particular importance becomes even clearer as we remember the context in which he lived and composed – Stalin's Russia.

## //

Stalin's Russia was so appalling that it is almost incomprehensible as a totality. Solzhenitsyn's devastating introduction of the portrait of The Leader in *The First Circle*, set as it was in the early hours of the morning, gives more than a flavour:

The Leader's most creative hours were the hours of darkness.

The poet Anna Akhmatova, a friend of Shostakovich, was with her friends the Mandelstams, one night in 1934 (13 May). Nadezhda Mandelstam described what happened:

Suddenly, at about one o'clock in the morning, there was a sharp unbearably explicit knock on the door. 'They've come for Osip I said, and went to open the door.

Some men in civilian overcoats were standing outside – There seemed a lot of them. For a split second I had a tiny flicker of hope that this still wasn't it – my eye had not made out the uniforms under the covert-cloth topcoats. In fact topcoats of this kind were also a sort of uniform – though they were intended as a disguise, like the old pea-green coats of the Czarist okhrona. But this I did not know then. All hope vanished as soon as the uninvited guests stepped inside. (*Hope Against Hope*)

This was by then a society whose structures were both subtly and brutally subversive of any notion of trust and commitment to common purposes and values.

The bonds of trust had been completely destroyed and in an empirical exemplification of one key aspect of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, each individual was prised apart from neighbours, from friends, from relatives, and ultimately in some cases, from closest family. Hobbes, you will recall, warned his contemporaries of the dangers of the total collapse of political and social order other than the order of Leviathan, or the Ruler. In such an extreme form citizens have only one allegiance, one civic relationship – with the Ruler. All else was subservient to that – no guilds, no professions, no family ties, and certainly no social contract between citizens was the basis for social or political power. The sole meaningful political relationship was one of total obedience to the orders of the Ruler, based if necessary on fear. This was however, a subtle form of fear – not simply fear of the Ruler, but fear of betrayal by fellow 'citizens' for no one could trust anyone else. The cement of this State created bonds only between Ruler and citizen, not between citizen and citizen.



The fictional representation of this, Orwell's *1984*, shows clearly the devilish cleverness as well as the brutality of this. No trust, no common purposes between citizens, were possible in such a State. The atomization of society via the destruction of normal human relationships was more than a consequence of such a political and social structure, it was a condition of its survival.

This was the Russia, which Stalin created, in which Shostakovich lived and composed, in which Solzhenitsyn was sent to the Gulags, and in which Osip Mandelstam died:

Stalin personally monitored a succession of novelists, poets and dramatists. In this sphere he wavered as in no other. He gave Zamyatin his freedom: emigration. He menaced but partly tolerated Bulgakov...He tortured and killed Babel. He destroyed Mandelstam. He presided over the grief and misery of Anna Akhmatova (and of Nadezhda Mandelstam). He subjected Gorky to a much stranger destiny, slowly deforming his talent and integrity; next to execution, deformity was the likeliest outcome for the post-October Russian writer, expressed most eloquently in suicide. (Martin Amis, *Koba The Dread*)

The choices for an artist or a writer of a composer were reduced to two in Stalin's Russia; martyrdom or survival on Stalin's terms:

...next to execution, deformity was the likeliest outcome...

- deformity, that is of 'talent and integrity'. The question, which I am posing in this lecture, could in fact be structured round this remark of Amis. Granted that Shostakovich did survive, what was the price he paid? And did it include deformity of talent and integrity?

There are others in this hall who would better answer the question of 'talent', and for that as for many other reasons my focus is rather on the question of integrity, although I shall in conclusion suggest that there may be in the case of Shostakovich, the sort of link which Amis implies between integrity and talent.

There are plenty of reasons for raising the question of Shostakovich's integrity. He did sign public letters with which he did not agree; he was used, and was aware that he was being used to present an acceptable face of the USSR in the West; and a point to which I shall turn very shortly, he gave as a subtitle to his Fifth Symphony,

A Soviet Artist's Practical and Creative Reply to Just Criticism, a subtitle which was taken by Stalin and the apparatchiks of the State to be an act of contrition, confession and remorse.

There is evidence in his letters and elsewhere of self-criticism and dissatisfaction with his own life. He ended one letter to his friend Glikman,

Do not, I beg you, judge me too harshly. (29 December, 1957);

And in anticipation of his sixty-second birthday, the next day, wrote in September (24) 1968,

At such an age, people are apt to reply coquettishly to questions such as 'If you could be born over again, would you live your sixty two years in the same way?' 'Yes,' they say, 'not everything was perfect of course, there were some disappointments, but on the whole I would do much the same again'.

If I were asked this question, my reply would be: 'No! A thousand times no!'

This outburst, quite uncharacteristic, sits between a couple of short paragraphs of domestic and travel news. The cheeky, self-confident student of four decades earlier, who ridiculed those who examined the political correctness of Music students, had by then lived through the twenty-nine years of Stalin's oppression followed in due course by the



variations of Krushev on that theme. There was, it seems, much that he regretted. Whether that did or should include substantial loss of integrity is a matter much debated. Fuel was added to that debate by the publication posthumously of *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich, as related to Solomon Volkov*. The authenticity of these has been disputed, and commentators range on both sides of the argument. I want to summarise the issues in question, by focussing upon one particular example: the response to both the music and the subtitle of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony:

A Soviet Artist's Practical and Creative Reply to Just Criticism. .

III

Shostakovich's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony has a special place in the canon his work. Many recognise it as the point at which he established himself as belonging to the highest international musical rank. Within his own life odyssey, particularly as it related to his place in Stalin's Russia, it came at one of the darkest moments.

By 1937 (the year of the composition and first performance of the symphony) Stalin's reign of terror was fully mature, and attention had already focussed upon Shostakovich as one of Russia's leading artists. An earlier work, the opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was playing in Moscow in January 1936. In repertory along with it was Dzerzhinsky's *The quiet Don*. On 17 January Stalin, along with Molotov and a few other officials attended a performance of the latter. Before the final act the composer and two or three others were summoned to Stalin's box for conversation. The contents of the latter were, as we would say today, 'leaked' to the press. One or two weak points in the production were pointed out, but the tone of the conversation was positive, praising, amongst other things the 'considerable ideological-political value of the opera'.

On 26 January Stalin went to the opera again; this time to see Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth*. The director of the theatre, doubtless assuming similar treatment for Shostakovich, forewarned him to be at the performance. Shostakovich presented himself and waited – but in vain. No summons, only the information that Stalin's party had left before the end. The consequences were swift and potentially lethal.

On 28 January an editorial in *Pravda*, titled 'Muddle Instead of Music' was brutal in its criticism:

Several theatres have presented to the culturally maturing Soviet public Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* as a novelty, as an accomplishment. Fawning musical criticism extols the opera to the heavens, trumpeting its fame. Instead of practical and serious criticism that could assist him in his future work, the young composer hears only enthusiastic compliments.

From the very first moment of the opera, the listener is flabbergasted by the deliberately dissonant muddled stream of sounds...

At the same time as our critics – including musical critics – swear by the name of Socialist Realism, in Shostakovich's work the stage presents us with the coarsest naturalism.

We have come a long way since 10 years earlier Shostakovich ridiculed by outbursts of laughter the examiners of political correctness at the Leningrad Conservatory.

To underline the point, perhaps also, *pour encourager les autres*, a second editorial appeared on 6 February in *Pravda*, further attacking Shostakovich and some of his colleagues. What was to be done? What was to be said? What music was to be composed?

That is the question, that is the context which would define the significance of the next major work – the 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony.



In fact the 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony saw, to a very large extent, the rehabilitation of Shostakovich the composer. Certainly the audience at the premiere were overwhelmed. Many broke down and wept during the slow movement, and the ovation lasted for forty minutes –almost as long as the symphony itself.

There are those who saw the symphony quite literally, as subtitled,

**A Soviet Artist's Practical and Creative Reply to Just Criticism,**

that is to say as a capitulation to the taunts of *Pravda*, and to the humiliations received in formal denouncement at the hands of the Congress of Soviet Composers. On such a view what this represents is, in the words of Martin Amis, the beginning of

slow deformation of talent and integrity.

In that context it is worth noting that the subtitle was in fact included following a suggestion, four days before the premiere, by an anonymous 'journalist'.

There is an alternative interpretation, summarised and expounded well in book by Ian MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich*. Much as I should like to abandon the lecture and simply play the whole symphony, I shall confine myself to two extracts.

(first the opening stages...)

Now let us join the Symphony about three-quarters of the way through the first movement. At this stage, in the words of MacDonald, the First Movement is driving towards 'an agitated climax',

Whereupon a startling cinematic cut sends us tumbling out of the world of abstraction into representation...

Listen and watch for the 'cinematic cut' (remembering, of course that Shostakovich wrote a great deal of music for film).

The question, I pose is simple and straightforward: Who is being represented? My contention is that this is a piece of Shostakovichian irony, a cartoon which has resonances, as MacDonald puts it,

A political rally, the Leader making his entrance through the audience like a boxer flanked by a phalanx of thugs.

A literary and dramatic equivalent can be identified in Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, a classic identification of political and criminal thuggery.

Is that too fanciful, I think not? Recall the context. There was only one possible prototype for this cartoon at that time, in that place – Stalin. Perhaps the youthful Shostakovich had not been completely 'deformed'. It was of course, foolhardy. Men and women died for much less. Around this specific point other issues about the work and its interpretation arise.

Ever since this dramatic first performance in Leningrad, the Fifth Symphony has had a place of particular importance in the Shostakovich canon. On the one hand the Soviet State made plain in the emotional and popular response which it was allowed to receive in Leningrad and Moscow, that it accepted at face value both the symphony and the subtitle,

**A Soviet artist's Practical and Creative Reply to Just Criticism.**



Nadezda Mandelstam wrote in her *Hope against Hope*, of the symphony being 'all the rage', and reported the comment, 'that puts Shostakovich right at the top'. Such a position is only permitted to those who are in good political standing.

On the other hand, in the controversial *Testimony*, Shostakovich claims that those who see only the surface interpretation and, for example, see the symphony as rising to a final and positive or optimistic finale have understood nothing of what is going on.

In between these extremes we have two pieces of unimpeachable testimony: the symphony itself, and the tears and forty minute standing ovation of the people of Leningrad.

I put it to you that in the tragic dimensions of the third movement the audience saw an expression of their suffering under perhaps the most consistently and systematically oppressive regime of the twentieth century. (I prompt your imagination by asking you to recall once again, Orwell's *1984*.)

I put it to you further that just as the Soviet officials were wrong to see the symphony as the optimistic and triumphant affirmation of Soviet values, so it would be wrong to see the music as simply tragic and passive capitulation to, quoting Amis again,

the slow deformation of talent and integrity.

The insertion of a political cartoon of Stalin into the first movement was the dangerous but clear affirmation of the composer that the integrity of the artist was not conceded. The difference between the hilarity of the twenty year old and the spotlight and pressurized composer of 1937 was one of subtlety and complexity.

The mockery was even fiercer, albeit through the use of irony.

#### IV

Why do I tell you this story? Interesting as it is, disputed on specific points though it might be, is it not simply a piece of the murky history of the twentieth century, which we need not know to appreciate the greatness of the music? This latter point is certainly true, but in telling the story, I want to make a larger point, for I am not simply (or if truth be told, 'even') a historian or scholar of the period.

This study is one of a number upon which I am engaged as a series of specific examples of a general exploration of the survival of social, moral, cultural and spiritual values through the pressures of the last century and into this.

My framework goes under the heading, 'Pilgrims, Nomads, and Tourists'. It is easily expressed. Whereas in previous generations, there were in our society common values and purposes which effectively defined the goals of life, and which left to us, as pilgrims, the pursuit of these understood purposes. Usually this was set in a religious framework, perhaps most famously Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress*. The goal was known and recognised: the difficulty was in achieving it. For some this is still the framework within which life's decisions are made, life's ambitions set, and life's goals realised. For many, however, this is not the case. The old frameworks, for whatever reason, are no longer in place.

On my metaphor, there are two alternative stances, Tourists or Nomads.

Even in non-metaphorical terms there are more tourists in Notre Dame, or Santa di Compostella now than pilgrims. Metaphorically, Plato gave us the finest description of tourists that I know: 'lovers of sights and sounds'. Now some of my best friends are tourists, and I confess to being from time to time a fairly enthusiastic member of the species.



But to be only a tourist in matters social moral, cultural and spiritual, has immense dangers: for it is to seek experience, and experiences as atomic things in themselves bereft of a framework of meaning. Ultimately, there are no grounds for discriminating between them. One experience is as good as another. What matters is how it was for you.

Now there is much presupposed in these few remarks, for defending this way of classifying the approach to questions of value, would require a lecture or two in itself, rather than a few minutes at the end of a lecture.

My point, however, that in matters moral and spiritual, there is value in the picture of a nomad. For a start nomads are not lost. They are concerned with more than mere physical survival: they are concerned to preserve what I want to call the arts of living. These are the markers of meaning, of value, of affirmation of what preserves communities of value in extreme circumstances.

My discussion of Shostakovich is a study of one such nomad, who in the most extreme social, moral, cultural and spiritual circumstances, preserved at least one of the arts of living. He harnessed his own musical genius to this, and in his music preserved something of his integrity. There was no life-map to which he had access which showed him the progress which he had to achieve as a pilgrim. Perhaps others in his circumstances had such access, but not him. Those he knew as fellow artists were subject to execution or exile, or the slow deformation of talent and integrity of which Amis writes. If I am correct in the reading of the facts of his self affirmation through his music (and I have chosen one very specific example), then he perhaps, flawed and cowardly as he saw himself to be, has something which we nomads may wish to ponder and perhaps even treasure. He is not a 'role-model', as they say these days, for I doubt that any of us in this room have his particular talent and genius. But if in those circumstances he did preserve something of his own artistic and therefore human integrity, we should, in the words of Simone Weil, pay attention.

Stewart Sutherland  
Gresham College, 2003  
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