

# Taking Notes for Testimony

Simon Karlinsky

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In Lidiya Chukovskaya's diaries, which chronicle the labors and days of the poet Anna Akhmatova, a telling episode is recorded. In 1946 Akhmatova was denounced in a resolution by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as a harmful writer, alien to the Soviet people. Andrei Zhdanov, the orchestrator of Stalin's post-Second World War persecutions of artists and other intellectuals, in a famous speech qualified Russia's great and beloved poet as "half nun, half harlot, mingling prayer with fornication."<sup>2</sup> There followed a massive press campaign urging the country to hate Akhmatova. She was berated at innumerable public meetings and ostracized from Soviet culture for a long time.

Several years later, a visiting delegation of students from England asked to meet Akhmatova. The encounter took place in the presence of officials of the party and of the then all-powerful Writers' Union. One of the students wanted to know Akhmatova's reaction to the party resolution and to Zhdanov's speech. She had no choice but to stand up and say: "I consider both documents, the speech of Comrade Zhdanov and the resolution of the Central Committee, to be entirely correct." The students made it clear that they found Akhmatova's response "not pleasing."

Setting down Akhmatova's story of this incident in her diary, Chukovskaya gave vent to her own sense of outrage. "What were those Englishmen, idiots or scoundrels? ... Someone was humiliated, beaten half to death and here they come asking: 'Did you enjoy the beating? Show us your broken bones!' And our own people—why did they allow this encounter? It's sadistic."<sup>3</sup> But, of course, the students meant no harm. They were typical of Western intellectuals who for most of Stalin's reign assumed that conditions in Communist countries were identical to those in Western democracies and that people there spoke what they thought. There was no way for

1 Review of *The New Shostakovich*, by Ian MacDonald (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990). Originally published in *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 September 1990, 949.

2 "Doklad t. Zhdanova o zhurnalakh 'Zvezda' i 'Leningrad,'" *Novyi mir*, 1946, no. 9, xi.

3 Lidiia Chukovskaia, *Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi*, vol. 2, 1952-1962 (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1980), entry for 8 May 1954.

them to imagine what the novelist Josef Škvorecký has called “the scientific methods of making terrified mice out of men and women.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the most valuable aspects of Ian MacDonald’s new biography of the composer Dmitry Shostakovich is his massive documentation of the terrorized state of Soviet society, including its artists, from the end of the 1920s on. Such fearless truth-seekers as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov could appear and take on the system only after Stalin’s death—in his time they would have been physically destroyed before they could make their mark.

Shostakovich is a good example of a major artist deprived both of the right to express his ideas and of his dignity by political pressure and intimidation. An honored figure in Soviet culture for most of his career, the recipient of numerous Stalin and Lenin prizes, Shostakovich was also the object, in 1936 and again in 1948, of two savage vilification campaigns by the Soviet regime and media. At those times, he lived in constant expectation of exile to the gulags or summary execution, sleeping in the lift so that the arresting officials would not disturb his children. But he weathered those periods of danger by making penitent statements and tailoring his music to the requirements of the state-imposed aesthetic of Socialist Realism.

In the 1960s Shostakovich became bolder, writing music that indicated the conformism and anti-Semitism of the Brezhnev era: the vocal cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry* and the *Thirteenth Symphony*, with its settings of satirical poems by Evgeny Evtushenko.<sup>5</sup> But he was careful to intersperse his more daring works with safely conventional ones, such as his *Twelfth Symphony*, a paean to Lenin and the October Revolution, and the cantata *The Execution of Stepan Razin* (also to a Evtushenko text), which turns the seventeenth-century brigand-rebel into a politically correct proto-Bolshevik and preaches a Leninist message of class hatred. Still, for the outside world the composer remained a faithful son of the Communist Party (which he joined in 1960) and a loyal Soviet citizen.

This is the image that MacDonald seeks to overthrow. *The New Shostakovich* is constructed by the author with considerable ingenuity and eloquence even if its main foundation, as he admits at the outset, is shaky.

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4 Josef Škvorecký, *The Engineer of Human Souls*, trans. Paul Robert Wilson (Toronto: Lester & Orpen, 1977), 462.

5 *From Jewish Folk Poetry* was actually written in 1948 and kept “in the drawer” until 1955, in the period of the so-called Taw.—Ed.

This foundation is the odd book Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich, brought out in 1979 by the Soviet musicologist Solomon Volkov after he emigrated to America. Volkov claimed that the entire text was dictated to him by Shostakovich. Unfortunately, Western scholars soon discovered that the opening pages of each chapter of Testimony were taken verbatim from memoirs by Shostakovich published earlier in Soviet books and periodicals. Since the composer could not have memorized his old texts, the discovery cast doubts on the validity of the whole book. The refusal of Volkov's publishers to make the original Russian text available for scholarly examination made things look even more dubious.

Had Volkov styled himself as the author of Testimony, rather than as its stenographer and editor, had he refrained from "the editorial sleight of hand" (MacDonald's phrase), his revisionist view of Shostakovich's politics and outlook might have had a better chance of acceptance in the West. Shostakovich's hatred of the Soviet system, the false and misleading character of the programs of his Fifth and Seventh Symphonies, his life of fear and demoralization—all this has been confirmed since Volkov's book in the memoirs of people who knew the composer well, among them Galina Vishnevskaya and the violinist Rostislav Dubinsky, and in a television interview of the composer's son Maksim, cited by MacDonald.

The New Shostakovich accepts (with occasional hand-wringing by the author) the reliability of Volkov's Testimony, but it ups the stakes of the earlier book. In a detailed survey of Shostakovich's entire oeuvre, MacDonald seeks to demonstrate that, beginning with 1931, virtually all of his music embodied a repudiation of Communism and was a portrayal of the sufferings of the oppressed Soviet people. Under the present Gorbachev regime, when all accounts of Stalinist (and even Leninist) brutality are highly valued and encouraged, this could have been accomplished by interviewing the composer's surviving intimates and perhaps studying his archive in the Soviet Union. MacDonald chose a different path. He tries to show the composer's liberalism, humanitarianism, and political subversiveness by either describing a passage of his music and then juxtaposing it with quotations from literary works that do take an adverse view of Communist realities, such as Nadezhda Mandelstam's two volumes of memoirs or The Captive Mind by Czesław Miłosz; or else by identifying certain recurring musical formulae and cross-references which MacDonald then labels as codes for "Stalin," "tyranny," or "satire of Socialist Realism."

There are some attractive things in MacDonald's book—his love for the music of Shostakovich and his able demonstration of the self-referential nature of many of Shostakovich's compositions make one want to hear

more of this music. He is aware of his hero's penchant for writing trashy, low-comedy music suitable for accompanying the antics of circus clowns and then placing it in some of his more serious symphonic and chamber works. MacDonald always calls such passages "satiric," but even he is hard put to decide just whom or what they are meant to satirize. Hardest of all to swallow is the book's claim for Shostakovich as the twentieth century's greatest composer on the grounds that he was the only one to portray the time's political and moral realities, while other composers addressed themselves mostly to musical form. There is even an invidious comparison of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, which in MacDonald's decoding speaks "for the hundreds of millions ... in the twentieth century who have suffered under political oppression," to Tchaikovsky's Sixth, which "speaks primarily for Tchaikovsky."

In pre-glasnost times, there existed in the Soviet Union a vast critical industry that specialized in discovering revolutionary and anti-tsarist messages in the work of politically conservative artists of earlier times, such as Gogol and Tchaikovsky. Many pages of The New Shostakovich make one think of the products of that unlamented industry—not because one disagrees with what Ian MacDonald has to say, but because wishful thinking so often takes the place of what should have been critical and historical rigor.