

# Marche Funèbre

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LOATHING owns a powerful voice, but it speaks in monotone. Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich As Related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov vibrates on a single chord. "I hate Toscanini. . . . What he does to music is terrible. . . . He chops it up into a hash and then pours a disgusting sauce over it." Prokofiev is a corrupt exhibitionist who "never did learn how to orchestrate properly." Malraux is damned for glorifying the construction of the White Sea Canal, in which thousands upon thousands of slave laborers perished. Feuchtwanger was a revolting toady. Shaw spread a pack of lies to glorify Soviet tyranny. "And what about Romain Rolland? It makes me sick to think about him." In their translations, Pasternak and Akhmatova committed a twofold crime: "For money and out of fear they pretended that something existed. The second crime was against their own talent. They were burying their own talent through this translation." Anyway, what did Akhmatova know about music? Nausea without end; gray on gray.

The facts are, of course, appalling enough. "I have thought that my life was replete with sorrow and that it would be hard to find a more miserable man. But when I started going over the life stories of my friends and acquaintances, I was horrified. Not one of them had an easy or a happy life. Some came to a terrible end, some died in terrible suffering, and the lives of many of them could easily be called more miserable than mine." Stalin's pet hooligan, Lazar M. Kaganovich, goes to V. E. Meyerhold's famous avant-garde theatre. He walks out. "Meyerhold, who was in his sixties then, ran out into the street after Kaganovich. Kaganovich and his retinue got in the car and drove off. Meyerhold ran after the car, he ran until he fell." Not long after, the great director was done to death in the Gulag. Marshal Tukhachevsky, handsome hero of the civil war, excites Stalin's jealousy and is shot. "When I read about it in the papers, I blacked out. I felt they were killing me, that's how bad I felt." The catalogue of torture, of starvation, of suicide is interminable. But it may be that the final humiliation is survival. In the totalitarian world, life is "a huge ant hill in which we all crawl," we are told. "In the majority of cases, our destinies are bad. We are treated harshly and cruelly. And as soon as someone crawls a little higher, he's ready to torture and humiliate others."

Not that the West is much better. A young American woman comes to call on the composer. Suddenly, she begins waving her arms and almost

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jumps on the table, shouting "A fly, a fly!" Americans cannot even face common existence. And in a Hollywood version of "Anna Karenina" Tolstoy's tragic novel has to be given a happy ending. Western conductors are, almost to a man, sycophantic bullies who know nothing of Russian music. Stalin could not have prospered without the poisonous support of Western fellow-travellers and the gullible apathy of Western, notably American, public opinion. For Western liberals to defend the human rights of a Russian dissident is ignorant cant, "because you know even less about my rights and duties than you do about the rights and duties of the dinosaur." After the war, Westerners sent letters to Russian colleagues. To receive such a letter was tantamount to execution by the secret police: "And the naive former Allies kept sending letters, and every letter was a death sentence. Every gift, every souvenir—the end."

Success came early to Dmitri Shostakovich. He was only nineteen when, in 1925, his buoyant First Symphony scored a triumph. Material circumstances were fearful. The young composer fought off hunger by writing film scores, making transcriptions, even playing the piano in a movie house. But Shostakovich's exceptional powers were widely recognized and his pieces performed. His opera "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District," which was completed in 1932, achieved formidable critical and popular acclaim. Its pounding rhythms, its cunning mixture of satire and lyric pathos precisely captured the mood of the moment. On January 28, 1936, Shostakovich went to the railroad station to buy *Pravda* and, leafing through the paper, found on the third page an unsigned article entitled "Muddle Instead of Music." It denounced the opera as decadent cacophony, as an example of musical gangsterism which "could end very badly." Within ten days, a second article appeared, similar in tone. The syntax, the phraseology of these two denunciations stemmed, unmistakably, from the lips of "the Leader of the Peoples and Friend of Children" himself. Overnight, Shostakovich's world fell into ruin. "Lady Macbeth" was snatched off the stages. Meetings were held throughout the artistic, intellectual, and academic communities of the Soviet Union to expatiate on the depravity of the composer. Even intimate friends turned away, as from a leper. In Orwell's famous phrase, Shostakovich had become "an unperson," merely waiting for moral and bodily extinction. He was very near suicide: "I was completely in the thrall of fear. I was no longer the master of my life, my past was crossed out, my work, my abilities, turned out to be worthless to everyone." Shostakovich did not kill himself. He set out his terror and his refusal of a facile exit in the closing pages of his Fourth Symphony, which waited twenty-five years for its first performance.

Outwardly, however, Shostakovich's fortunes not only mended but blossomed. The Fifth Symphony, with its celebrated subtitle, "The Response of a Soviet Artist to Just Criticism," was played in 1937. It proved immense-

ly popular. The “Leningrad Symphony,” of 1941, became the very hymn of Russia’s heroic battle against the Nazis and gained for its composer a world audience. The Stalin Prize followed a year later; the Order of Lenin and a second Stalin Prize were awarded in 1946 and 1947, respectively. Honorary doctorates, medals, elections to academies avalanched on Dmitri Shostakovich to the end of his life. Here, many thought, was a major artist who had survived—perhaps even profited from—ideological menace, and emerged victorious with his moral and technical integrity intact. Was this not the meaning of the change from hammering fury to lyric calm in the sovereign Fifth Symphony?

“Lies,” rasps *Testimony*. All sordid lies. There may have been official pardon and a golden shower of honors, but the realities surrounding Shostakovich’s creation were those of hypocrisy and abjection. It is not patriotic hope that sounds out of the Fifth Symphony but strident protest against the Stalinist castration of the arts. Contrary to official propaganda, contrary to a naive *Time* cover story, the Seventh Symphony is not about Leningrad under siege – “It’s about the Leningrad that Stalin destroyed and that Hitler merely finished off.” What of the celebratory journey to the United States in 1949? An infernal travesty carried out on Stalin’s direct orders. With death in his heart, the composer had to pretend to represent the official values and rewards of Soviet culture.

No, the truth is starkly different. The symphonies are “tombstones,” set in impotent memory of the numberless victims of Stalinist and post-Stalinist butchery. The First Violin Concerto, the song cycle “From Jewish Folk Poetry,” the Fourth Quartet, the setting of Yevtushenko’s “Babi Yar” (a poem on a massacre of Jews) in the Thirteenth Symphony of 1962 – these are raging protests against the virus of anti-Semitism that infects every fiber of Soviet policy. The official honors, the outward privileges were nothing but a cunning mockery through which the Soviet regime unmanned Dmitri Shostakovich at home and hoodwinked opinion abroad. The whole thing was a macabre farce of cross-purposes. Visiting Moscow, Wendell Willkie was asked about the hoped-for opening of a second front against the Germans: “He replied, Shostakovich is a great composer. Mr. Willkie, naturally, thought that he was an extremely deft politician; see how he got out of that one. But he didn’t think about the repercussions for me, a living human being.” To praise another Russian to Stalin was to earmark him for doom.

Few survive this book’s bill of attainder. If there is a hero, it is Alexander Glazunov, whose musical and pedagogic gifts and personal kindness helped set Shostakovich on his way to greatness. Not that Shostakovich himself would allow this word: “Stravinsky is the only composer of our century whom I would call great without any doubt.” Mahler and Berg remain favorites, though of a distinctly lesser order. Schoenberg does not merit mention. Solzhenitsyn is referred to sarcastically as a “luminary” of

“over-whelming genius” who refused to have tea with a mere pessimist such as Shostakovich. In this settling of scores, everyone is a loser.

Is this text genuine? Exactly what is signified by the formula “As Related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov”—a musicologist and dissenter who emigrated from the Soviet Union to the United States in 1976? Volkov tells us that Testimony (it has been rendered into unpleasant American English by Antonina W. Bouis) represents material that he wrote down during a series of long, intimate colloquies with Shostakovich. The latter is alleged to have signed every chapter as it was compiled. The publisher gives full backing to this account. On November 14, 1979, in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, six Soviet composers denounced Volkov’s compilation as a forgery. They did so on grounds of style as well as of content. Even in polemic, they said, Shostakovich’s idiom retained a characteristic courtesy and finesse. Shostakovich’s family has apparently never seen Volkov’s document; according to Soviet sources, the composer’s son, the prominent conductor Maxim Shostakovich, believes Testimony to be a slanderous fabrication. Prokofiev’s son agrees.

I do not know whether the Russian original is available, and do not, in any event, have the linguistic competence that would be needed to judge the central question of tone. But there are very troubling points about the book as we have it. The uniformity of scorn and self-loathing is one; the emphasis on the Jewish question and on Shostakovich’s purported involvement in this question is another. It is very difficult to escape the impression that Volkov has colored or arranged the conversations he set down—has added bile from his own incensed spirit. Are these truly the remembrances, the sum of the remembrances, that an artist of genius and manifest humor (look at his scores) wished to transmit to posterity? And would Shostakovich have had nothing to tell us about the enigmatic protection extended to him even during the immediate period of Stalin’s displeasure, a protection that insured not only his survival but the continued performance of his music soon after the Pravda attack? The absence of any reference to this cardinal point seems to me to put in some doubt the integrity of Testimony as it is now presented to us. At best, the case is unclear.

But we do possess Dmitri Shostakovich’s autobiography in a form immeasurably deeper and more persuasive than this bitter leaving. The fifteen string quartets constitute an incomparably delicate and detailed self-portrayal. They minutely enact successive stages in the composer’s inward and public being between 1938 and 1974. The eighth and the ninth, for example, record anguish as bleak as any in Testimony, but anguish shot through with intimations, at once uncanny and witty, of survival. And whether the Fifth Symphony was composed in secret wrath or genuine self-criticism, it remains very great music. It is a work inseparable from the Soviet setting, from the tragic pressures that compelled it into life. “We are olives,” said Joyce of all artists. “Squeeze us.”