

The Noise of Time

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To be Russian is to be pessimistic. But the Soviet Union was based on optimism, thus the expression of Soviet Russia was a contradiction in terms, hence it was doomed. In retrospect it is so easy to make categorical statements. Now the Soviet Union is something of the past and hence the horror it once provoked is now merely quaint. Horror is like pain, it cannot be experienced second hand. Once you know that everything will end well, you may endure everything (except possibly extreme physical pain), but if not things will be very different, and it is very difficult to imagine this, as it means 'unknowing' what you know which is almost impossible.

Shostakovitch was a coward. It is easy to be a hero, because it often only involves one single act, often impulsive, while being a coward is a continuous activity, and thus is more difficult and taxing. Also physical courage is most often a sign of a lack of imagination¹. Shostakovitch was basically a timid and indecisive character (with a lot of imagination) and very much tied to his mother, his father, more aloof, had died at a young age. He lost his virginity to a young woman, his mother naturally did not approve of; and practiced for a while 'free love' very much in vogue during the heady days of the 20's, when the revolution was still young and socialism the way of the future. But predictably the woman was not as enamored as he was, no doubt surprised and exalted of having his attentions requited, and soon tired. The experience was nevertheless a most exciting one and he sought desperately to repeat it, naively taking up with prostitutes without even realizing it. Eventually he met Nita. They were going to get married, he got cold feet and called it off, only to go through with it later, then there was a divorce and after that a reconciliation followed by remarriage and the birth of a daughter Galina (a son - Maxim - would later follow). It was an open marriage, but it seems only to have been the wife who took advantage of it, Shostakovitch himself seems to have been too inept. When Nita eventually died at a relatively early age², he mourned together with her latest lover, who was the one who provided red roses for her grave. Shortly thereafter his mother died and he was at loose ends what to do. Not surprisingly he threw himself into a second marriage which turned out to be ill advised and due to incompatibility it was soon dissolved. In the end he found happiness in a third marriage with a woman both musical and domestic, and very young to boot, who took good care of him in his late age, no doubt attracted by his fame (what other reasons are there for young women to take up with older men?).

The central part of the book is his musical career and how it related to his dealings with the powerful authorities. Classical music had its heyday in the 18th and 19th century, than it more or less petered out in the West while the Russians, who had embarked on it relatively late, were those who continued the tradition. Stravinsky is thought of as

¹ Galileo only needed to be show the implemets of torture to get the point

² 1909-54

the foremost classical composer of the 20th century, Prokofiev was another noteworthy contributor as was Shostakovitch. He, as most composer, was a musical prodigy and he attained his first resounding success already as a teenager with his First symphony. The 20's was, as noted earlier a period of joyful artistic freedom, the avant-garde of the Socialism harbinger of a new era of freedom, captivating the sympathy and fascination of naive intellectuals in the West, a sympathy and fascination which would take a long time to die out. With the rise of Stalin things slowly changed at first, but then speeded up and came to a crescendo in the mid-thirties with forced industrialization and collectivization and purges fueled by paranoia. Stalin was for all intents and purposes a reactionary. The lofty ideals of Communism, meant to conquer the world as envisioned by Trotsky, became inward looking and nationalistic (if anything fitted the bill of National Socialism it was the Soviet Union under Stalin). Culturally it turned away from experimentation and became very conservative. 'Leftist' became a term of abuse, as did 'formalistic'. The ideals of art were those entertained by Stalin, no matter how vague and contradictory those may have been in the mind of the Great Father. To have power or being paid attention to was very dangerous. The great purges of the 30's with their concomitant show-trials, may not have caused as many deaths as that of purposeful starvation or slave labor, but it hit the elite, political as well as intellectual, and thus became Kafkaish in its implementation and incomprehensible to rational understanding. Shostakovitch as a young successful composer had attracted attention, not only among the musically appreciative, which made up a large portion of the Soviet bourgeoisie, but also in the corridors of power, and ultimately at the very pinnacle where we find Stalin, who fancies himself an authority in many fields, music not excepted. Stalin has been intrigued by the success of the opera 'Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk' and demands to have a performance he can attend. This is of course arranged and Shostakovitch is duly invited. The performance is a disaster, the musicians play too loud and in their individual desire to be heard above the general din of the orchestra they play even louder. But it is clear that Stalin, a simple-minded amateur when it comes to music, with conventional and conservative taste, does not approve. Shostakovitch, who is no fool, understands what it means. And sure enough the official reviews are very damning, 'Muddle instead of Music', or as noted above 'formalistic' and even 'leftist'³. Once the authorities had pointed the way in the leading editorial in Pravda, the rest of the musical establishment followed suit. People who before had praised the work, now turned their coats. This was in 1936, one of the years of crisis. Shostakovitch is indeed called to the 'Big House' in Leningrad for a 'friendly interview' on Friday. That he has powerful friends and protectors, such as the 'Red Napoleon' Marshal Tukhachevsky, turns out rather to be a liability. After initial polite chitchat with the interrogator, the latter comes down to business and focuses in fact on the composers relations with the Marshal and his involvement with the generals coup against Stalin, an accusation against which there is no way of defense. The powerful Marshal has fallen out of power and is in fact soon to be condemned and executed. The continuation of the talks are scheduled on the next Monday after the weekend. When he returns dutifully it turns out that the interrogator himself has fallen out of favor and been taken into custody, of course this is not revealed

³ It is interesting that such a term would denote something objectionable. What was Socialism and Communism if not 'leftist'? Or did the term refer to a Western watered down and hence distorted version?

to the composer, only that there is no one with that name. So Fate has intervened. The pure luck of a coincidence, or has Stalin changed his mind? We will never know. Anyway Shostakovitch gets a reprieve, he can abandon his nocturnal vigils by the elevator in his apartment building, and life can return to some semblance of normality. The war years proves a reprieve, he can spend them in relative security in provincial exile, way out of harms way, and Stalin has other things on his mind than cultural purges.

Twelve years later there is another crisis. Stalin demands a personal conversation with him and give him an offer he is not free to decline, in spite of his fervent desire to do so, and all the excuses he can come up with, including that of not having a proper 'tail-suit'. He is sent to America to be an official representative of the Soviet regime, to read aloud speeches prepared for him in official settings, something he does with such a monotonous voice as possible, often not even bothering to finish, but just letting the English translation being read aloud. He does not bother to read what has been prepared for him, nor to listen to the English translation. It turns out that his speech is filled with denunciations, in particular against Stravinsky, a composer that he admires more than any other living composer. A certain Nabokov, in fact in the service of the CIA, as Shostakovitch rightly suspects, asks him some pointed questions with the sole intention of humiliating him and revealing him as a stooge of the regime. The composer is forced to confirm that he indeed denounces the music of Stravinsky, what else can he say?

The years after the death of Stalin gives of course relief. Not that the party is more approving, but at least it does no longer execute those they disapprove of. The musical taste of Khrushchev is even cruder than that of Stalin, but at least he does not have any pretensions of having any taste at all. Still Shostakovitch is admonished to write more optimistic music, i.e. Soviet music rather than Russian, and with a more Socialist approach, and above all a music that appeals to the masses. Now this infringement on artistic freedom may strike modern western readers as detestable, but the matter is more complicated. Ultimately it boils down to *l'art pour l'art*, and even in liberal western societies there is censure, and being social (political correctness) rather than official, it is more pervasive and harder to oppose as it is being internalized more effectively. In former times Art could not oppose Christianity, to blaspheme was a crime. This is now out of fashion, so you can hardly cause a scandal by religious blasphemy but this seems to be changing due to the vague ideology of so called multi-culturalisms, fraught with internal contradictions; but instead there are political ideologies (just as in Soviet times). Woe to those who put in question democracy, or racial or gender equality, or using words that can be seen as racially demeaning. The reactions, often hysterical, have much in common with those of former Soviets, which is hardly surprising, so called 'human nature' being rather constant. But any creative endeavor need constraints and opposition, otherwise the imagination is not properly engaged. In Science we have the indubitable facts which you can only ignore at your peril, and to which you have to accommodate. In the Arts there are no such indubitable facts so something else must come in its stead, and it is never clear what. At a minimum there must be a tradition, and an appreciative audience guided by critics. As noted above, Russia may be the foremost country as to continuing the western classical musical tradition, with a large appreciative audience⁴ and many competent musicians and

⁴ It was noted that after the war it was possible to restore the Berlin philharmonics. The building

critics, which provided the necessary milieu. As to the admonishment to be popular, i.e. catering to the tastes of the 'masses', commercial considerations are much more effective in this regard, than official admonishments, and indeed commercialism has had a far more detrimental effect on culture than official Soviet meddling ever had.

In 1960, yet another twelve years later, there was to be a new crisis. Khrushchev wanted Shostakovitch to be head of the Union of Composers, an honor he in vain tried to evade, coming up with the one excuse after the other. Especially what irked him was the concomitant necessity to join the Party, which he so far had managed to stay clear of, and thus at least maintain a modicum of independence and integrity. But Shostakovitch was no hero, a timid man, as noted, who wanted nothing more than to be left alone with his music. Instead he was not immune to vanity (why was he not allowed a Mercedes like many of the party bosses), obsessive compulsive in his daily life (co-ordinating the clocks at home to strike at the same time, sending postcards to himself to check the reliability of the postal services⁵). In the end he gave up, after all the struggle was not worth it. Hence the world would be witness to the sorry spectacle of him signing petitions denouncing Solzhenitsyn and Shakarov, people he may privately have admired, although occasionally he rose to the occasion and spoke out in defense of those of his colleagues unfairly persecuted.

Nothing noteworthy happened in 1972, the end of next twelve year period, except a heart attack, but his health had by then seriously deteriorated, an inveterate smoker as well as a steady consumer of vodka, Russian style. He dies a month short of his 69th birthday in 1975.

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could easily be re-erected, as well as the manning of the orchestra, but it was different with the audience, a large part of which had been killed or driven into exile

⁵ Quirks I would say, more inspired by whim than being symptoms of neurotic compulsion