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Dmitri Shostakovich (left) with his first wife, Nina Varzar, and friend Ivan Sollertinsky, 1932

Shostakovich's Ambivalence

by MICHAEL O'DONNELL

Dmitri Shostakovich was a coward. Or at least the great Soviet composer admitted as much to friends. The resulting shame reverberates through his music, sounding notes of terror, humiliation and despair. When in 1948 Communist Party apparatchiks denounced his compositions as "formalist" and inaccessible to the common worker, he made a public confession, saying his music suffered from "many failures and serious setbacks" and pledging, "I will accept critical instruction." He occasionally composed inanely patriotic songs and, some say, symphonies to placate his censors. Although he kept a picture of the Russian expatriate Igor Stravinsky under glass on his desk, Shostakovich yielded to party pressure and denounced his Modernist music, a moment he would later describe as the worst of his life.

Some of his closest friends made different choices during the middle years of the dark Soviet century. The cellist and humanist Mstislav Rostropovich defied the party and risked everything by sheltering Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn—a mighty figure of resistance whom Shostakovich let down more than once. (The novelist considered enlisting Shostakovich to protest the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 but ultimately realized that the "shackled genius" would never agree.) Shostakovich shocked his friends by formally joining the party in 1960—well after survival demanded it—thereby becoming an establishment figure mistrusted by the next generation of composers. Many Russian liberals never forgave him for signing a 1973 petition denouncing the dissident physicist Andrei Sakharov. One of Shostakovich's friends remembered him saying, "I'd sign anything even if they hand it to me upside-down. All I want is to be left alone."

Shostakovich signed—he always signed—not because he was a recluse or a genius who couldn't be bothered with politics but because he hadn't the constitution to fight back. Racked throughout his life by illness—tuberculosis, lung cancer, polio and Lou Gehrig's disease—he was a wretched bag of nerves; contemporaneous accounts have him twitching, sweating and incessantly drumming his fingers. The fragile composer lived much of his life in a state of panicked desperation. He occasionally rebuffed the party in small ways, exerting his influence to help friends on the wrong side of an official or called up for service. Yet he ultimately chose subversion rather than resistance. He was a survivor, not a martyr, and when he mocked totalitarianism he did so in the safe company of friends or in sarcastic passages of music, like the perverted military march played by dissonant trumpets in the first movement of the Fifth Symphony. His motives and loyalties remain cloudy, if not quite enigmatic. The finale of the same piece features one of Shostakovich's most famous concessions: a last-minute switch to the major key to send the concertgoers out on a note of Soviet triumphalism.

Born in St. Petersburg in 1906, Shostakovich was the great red hope, the Soviet Union's first "homegrown" composer, or so the apparatchiks liked to boast when they weren't terrorizing him. Shortly after the 1948 denunciation—Shostakovich's second—Stalin telephoned and asked him to represent the USSR on a cultural junket to the United States. Stalin claimed to know nothing of the blacklisting that had been ruining Shostakovich's life. Like many others who lived through Stalin's purges and terror, Shostakovich always carried a toothbrush and change of underwear in case he was packed off to the gulag. But this never happened: he was too valuable an instrument of

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propaganda. After he composed the Seventh Symphony (*Leningrad*), an anthem of Soviet resistance to Nazism during World War II, Shostakovich became a national hero whose photo was splashed across the cover of *Time*. In *The Rest Is Noise*, Alex Ross describes how Russians first heard the symphony during the siege of 1942 "under the most dramatic circumstances imaginable":

> The score was flown in by military aircraft in June, and a severely depleted Leningrad Radio Orchestra began learning it. After a mere fifteen musicians showed up for the initial rehearsal, the commanding general ordered all competent musicians to report from the front lines. The players would break from the rehearsals to return to their duties, which sometimes included the digging of mass graves for victims of the siege. Three members of the orchestra died of starvation before the premiere took place.... An array of loudspeakers then broadcast the *Leningrad* into the silence of no-man's-land. Never in history had a musical composition entered the thick of battle in quite this way: the symphony became a tactical strike against German morale.

This from a composer who switched his radio from the BBC to Radio Moscow before turning it off, in case the party came snooping.

Not surprisingly, most discussions of Shostakovich's music invoke the political strands of his life, which are intertwined like the braids of a noose. It is at once impossible to understand his compositions independent of his lifelong persecution and dangerously tempting to let biography drown out the music. The playbill for a Chicago Symphony Orchestra performance I recently attended claimed, plausibly, that "Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony is perhaps the best-known work of art born from the marriage of politics and music."

Yet some Shostakovich boosters have taken the connection too far. In 1979, four years after Shostakovich's death from lung cancer, the Russian musicologist Solomon Volkov published *Testimony*, which purported to be the composer's dictated memoirs. The controversial book recast Shostakovich's life and work into an implausibly pervasive anti-Soviet narrative in which every note was an act of secret nose-thumbing. The book's authenticity has been fatally refuted by Shostakovich's biographer Laurel Fay. Unwilling to accept the composer's perceived moral failures, Volkov attempted to resuscitate him with hurricane winds rather than simple life's breath, favoring unity and cohesion over complexity and compromise.

There is little heroic exaggeration in Wendy Lesser's *Music for Silenced Voices*. An editor and a nonmusician, Lesser has written a sensitive biography that explores Shostakovich through his string quartets rather than his better-known symphonies. It joins more comprehensive studies by Fay and Elizabeth Wilson, but less as a contribution to Shostakovich scholarship than as a generous reflection on his life and chamber music. Lesser too discusses the composer's moral ambivalence, describing his decision to keep his head down rather than to stand up and fight as a choice most of us would make under similar circumstances. That assessment carries the uncomfortable ring of truth, but Lesser is compelled to offer a second line of defense, "an artist's responsibility toward his work":

> Shostakovich already, at the age of thirty, knew himself to be a significantly original composer; he knew, in other words, that he was capable of producing valuable, lasting work that was unlike anyone else's. This knowledge entailed certain obligations (one might even call them ethical obligations), and one of these was that he try as hard as possible to keep writing music. It would have been pretentious and morally dubious of him to have used this argument in self-defense, and he never did so, but I am invoking it on his behalf.

It's a fraught business, retroactively blessing "morally dubious" actions with a rationale that could not decently be claimed by the actor at the time. This process elides the actor's true reasons and justifies his deeds with the ingeniousness of hindsight. It would be obscene to reach for a hand in time of death and persecution only to find the hand withheld in favor of art. If the argument truly explains Shostakovich's behavior, it is solipsism personified. If every composer who thinks he is the next Mozart forgoes his basic duties to his fellow man so that he can keep working, the road to perdition will be paved with grace notes.

In addition to confronting Shostakovich's politics, Lesser delves deeply into the music. She contends that his fifteen symphonies were so heavily scrutinized by the party and the public that he saved his most honest and personal music for the string quartet, a format that rarely attracted big premieres. Chamber musicians share this view, and although their preferences are predictable, scholars have reached the same conclusion. (Wilson, who otherwise devotes little of *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* to the quartets, writes that the final three "are arguably the summit of his achievement," and that the composer used the quartet "as a vehicle for self-discovery and private confession.") With the exception of the Eighth and Fourteenth, Lesser shows mistrust and even a little disdain for Shostakovich's "variously heartfelt and hypocritical symphonies." Her enthusiasm for the quartets is infectious and her skepticism about the symphonies understandable, but in the end she overreaches.

Lesser observes of Shostakovich that "anxiety may well be the strongest feeling his music conveys." That is a plausible judgment of the quartets; the better-known symphonies overwhelmingly express tragedy. Like the symphonies, the quartets are uneven. Some are models of clarity. The Second, with its assertive melodies and passionate finale; the Sixth, an unusually light and tuneful work for Shostakovich; the tragic Eighth, long (and mistakenly) interpreted as a suicide note; and the spare, mournful Fifteenth are major contributions to twentieth-century music. Though they do not warrant Lesser's repeated comparisons of Shostakovich to Beethoven (or to Shakespeare), they are profound, complex and strikingly original works that reward each new listening.

That the quartets contain Shostakovich's most personal and intimate music does not necessarily mean they are his best works. The pages of a diary can be intensely personal, but they do not always cohere or illuminate. One of the triumphs of Beethoven's late quartets is that they are both introspective and universal—no mean feat in any art form. By contrast, some of Shostakovich's middle and later quartets—especially the Eleventh, Twelfth and Thirteenth—are all but unlistenable in their relentless fury and obsession with death. The Thirteenth—a work of profound despair—is the musical equivalent of a man shrieking all his fears into an empty room. Many of the quartets contain at least one frantic movement crowded with relentlessly unmelodic music and harsh bowing played at double forte. Such works reveal a side of the composer that is uncompromising to the point of indulgence. True to her project, Lesser defends all fifteen, but she also properly concedes some weaknesses. Here, for instance, is her description of the Tenth's unlovely second movement:

> [Its] loud, fierce opening comes as quite a jolt after the delicate close of the first movement. From this sudden start,

the music just keeps getting louder and fiercer. A series of braying chords (which can sound like either a donkey's hee-haw or a train's double whistle, depending on which instrument plays them) represents the most extreme version of what the composer does throughout this section, assaulting our ears with purposely unmelodic noises.

Part of the problem lies in the scale of the string quartet, which is in some ways poorly suited to Shostakovich's compositional style. His symphonies also contain bursts of frenzy—like the famous scherzo of the Tenth, an orchestral showpiece that conjures up all the wrath of Stalin. But a symphony orchestra—particularly the very large orchestra demanded by Shostakovich's music—softens the harsh effect of the strings. In his string quartets, by contrast, all the scraping pierces through, producing bare, ugly noises that grate on the ear. The quartet also makes no allowance for two of Shostakovich's strengths: his writing for percussion and brass.

If Shostakovich's quartets reveal the inner mind of a tragic man, his symphonies capture the tragedy of a nation and an era. Something in the writing suggests that he considered the symphonies his public legacy. In them he was more disciplined with melody and resisted the gimmick of the "false note," which deflates every melodic expectation in the quartets. Lesser explains that his "music is filled with moments where a seemingly stable melody begins and then breaks down into dissonance, or where our expectations have been set up to hear a particular turn of phrase and instead we get something very slightly off from that." In the quartets this device is overused, becoming a contrarian tic: Shostakovich careens repeatedly from beautiful music to brutal ugliness. The Fourteenth is a perfect example. It begins with the cello and then the violin carrying a lovely, dancelike melody whose structure and rhythm persist, but each time in slightly more grotesque form until once more we are staring at a six-foot hole in the ground. This is not to say that the hacks were right, and that all of the composer's music should have been accessible and easily whistled. But surely there could have been some whistling?

Unlike the symphonies, the quartets are largely apolitical. Shostakovich took his biggest risks in larger forms, including dramatic works. A lifelong philo-Semite in a virulently anti-Semitic society, he composed a song cycle called "From Jewish Poetry" and provocatively set his Thirteenth Symphony to Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem "Babi Yar," which deplores Russian anti-Semitism. Afraid of the consequences, the conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky refused to premiere it, as he had done with Shostakovich's other symphonies. Most profoundly, the Tenth Symphony—which Wilson rightly calls Shostakovich's "central masterpiece"—is a passionate, deeply moving ode to the horrors of oppression, completed in the months following Stalin's death in 1953. If Shostakovich was not brave enough to write it while Stalin lived, he was brilliant enough to render musically the catastrophe of Stalinism after the dictator died. That is a modest form of courage but a major form of genius.

Yet in the end the music must stand or fall on its own. Does the Eighth Symphony portray the tragedy of the Battle of Stalingrad, the tragedy of all war—or the human tragedy itself? It does not matter. Shostakovich's legacy will depend on whether we keep returning to his music, supplying our own narratives and hearing whatever the music stirs in us. With many of the symphonies and—as Lesser valuably reminds us—many of the quartets, we will keep listening. ■

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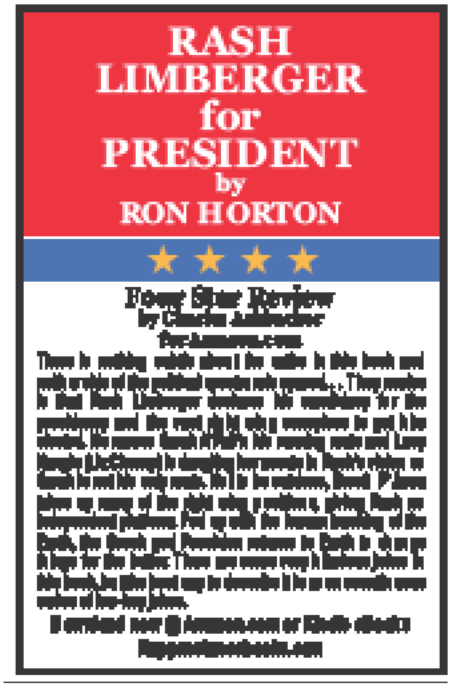

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