



Nothing but Trouble

The success of his first symphony meant that by 1926, Shostakovich could stop working as a cinema accompanist. He had been doing it for over two years but had grown increasingly resentful of the demands it made on his time and the fact that he derived minimal creative benefit from it. In June 1927 he began a totally unrelated project - an opera based on Gogol's short story *The Nose*. Work went so well that on November 25th 1928 a suite of seven pieces from the completed opera was performed in Moscow.¹

Perhaps it was at this concert that the young directors Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg first heard Shostakovich's music though they may already have known it through performances of the symphony or other works which came on its back. Like Shostakovich they were lovers of Gogol and their group FEKS (The Factory of the Eccentric Actor) had staged *The Wedding* before moving on to film a version of *The Cloak*. If they had heard the symphony its grotesqueries would have whetted their iconoclastic appetite for *The Nose* and Kozintsev later cited the opera as the specific reason for employing Shostakovich to write a score for their next film *New Babylon*.²

Sovkino studios had suggested the Paris Commune as a subject for the directors eight months previously in February 1928. Kozintsev and Trauberg took a typically serious approach to research and while they did not claim the film to be historically absolutely correct they read many accounts of events. After writing a script they went to Paris for three weeks where Kozintsev borrowed a Leica from his brother-in-law Ilya Ehrenburg to take photographs to serve as reminders and to supplement the inspiration that they took from Degas and Daumier. During this time they probably imagined it as a silent film to be accompanied in the usual way by a pianist or small orchestra. But Sovkino was beginning to promote specially composed music and at some point the directors changed their minds.

Commissioning a score for large ensemble gives an idea of the film's importance. Since many cinemas had only small ensembles or a pianist full orchestral scores could only be used at a limited number of venues and were thus expensive in terms of usefulness. Shostakovich was presumably working on a piano reduction for the film's general release after opening in the musically better equipped cinemas.

Moreover avant-garde films, despite critical praise, were usually unpopular at the box-office and Shostakovich and the directors were all known avant-gardists.

Sovkino, then, must have had a lot of faith in the directors to allow them to use a modernist score to be played by a large ensemble in synchronisation with a politically sensitive film that would probably turn out to be extremely avant-garde.

But, though the directors managed to get it past the increasingly interventionist studio system, they underestimated the political and practical difficulties that the film and its music would cause. This was probably at least in part due to their failure to see that Soviet art was beginning to turn against the avant-garde.

Shostakovich accepted the commission keenly. Here was an opportunity to get away from hackneyed cliché accompaniments and to produce music that had a permanent and considered relationship to the images on the screen.

"It is time to take cinema music properly in hand, to get rid of sloppy unartistic vamping and thoroughly clean the Augean stables. The only solution is to write special music for each film."³

"The most absolute garbage is solidly established at the cinema within its musical accompaniment. And most regrettably this garbage is absolutely legitimate. No-one shouts, no-one protests."⁴

"Most musicians working in the cinema consider it a mire which will swallow musicians up, stifle their talent, turn them into uninspired machines, and leave a deep indelible mark."⁵

Many years later Trauberg remembered Shostakovich:

"He came to see us - a little man, very neat but with unruly hair. At that time he affected a

Gogolesque manner of speech - very clipped and formal - phrases like 'Honoured - most delighted...' We were rather worried because he seemed so young. [Kozintsev and Trauberg were only a few years older than he.] We asked him if he knew anything about music for films and he said that he had played the piano in the Ribbon of Light cinema in Leningrad for three years. That was reassuring. We showed him the film. He sat quite silent through it and at the end stood up with 'Honoured - most delighted. When do you need it?' Rather embarrassed we said that we needed it in three weeks. 'If you help me,' said Shostakovich, 'I'll do it quicker than that.' Within three weeks he brought us the score - 90 minutes of delight.

"It is very good." we told him.

"Yes," he said "I thought so too." "6

From the beginning and right up to their deaths the directors were insistent that the music was integral to the film.

Kozintsev echoed what Shostakovich called 'the principle of contrast' when he wrote:

"We had the same idea: not to illustrate shots but to give them a new quality and scope; the music had to be composed so as to show the inner sense of the action...In many respects it foreshadowed the talkies: the character of the screen changed."⁷

To write such a large score in three weeks is remarkable - his famous facility came to him early - and it is doubly surprising since he was simultaneously scoring a production of Mayakovsky's play *The Bedbug*.⁸ Moreover as he wrote versions of *New Babylon* for both large and small ensembles composition time would have been at a premium. Having been commissioned in early December 1928 he delivered the score in mid February 1929. Presumably it was composed in three weeks and the rest of the time was spent orchestrating it in between working on other pieces. He would have been helped by the fact that he used some 'found music' in the form of Offenbach's *Can-Can* from *Orpheus aux Enfers*, a re-orchestrated version of his own Scherzo (opus 7) and Tchaikovsky's *Old French Song* (opus 39/16) as well as the *Marseillaise*, *Ca Ira* and *Carmagnole*.

One wonders how he imagined the directors helping him. The conductor Omri Hadari thought that Shostakovich may have had a hand in the editing. This would have allowed

some scope to cut the film to his music and the theory is backed up by the fact that he would have had limited opportunities to see the film before writing the music. Perhaps the occasion that Trauberg mentions is the only one before he played it to them on the piano.

During the month of rehearsals which followed the conductor of the Piccadilly Cinema offered to help Shostakovich with the scoring much as his tutor Maximillian Steinberg had with the Symphony.

"Not only does this young man know nothing about cinema...but he also has an inflated idea of his own importance. I have proposed to offer him my help, I have offered to arrange his music, and he has refused."⁹

Presumably he thought the strange orchestration was due to Shostakovich's inexperience: in March the film opened to general consternation.

Trauberg later remembered that night.

"But it was terrible. The film opened in two cinemas on the Nevsky Prospect. Kozintsev and I went to the first performance at the Piccadilly [where, ironically, Shostakovich had once been an accompanist] and the actors Kuzmina and Gerassimov went to the Giant Cinema. You can't imagine how terrible it was. I couldn't bear it. I came out of the cinema and went across the Prospect to the Anichkov Park. I just clung to the railings and cried. And at that moment Kuzmina and Gerassimov came from the Giant. They looked at me and simply said 'So, it was the same at the Piccadilly.' The reviews were as bad. In the studio there was a very hostile discussion. At the end a small man, a carpenter - stood up and said, "Comrades, this film is not all bad. There is one good scene - where the soldier is digging the grave. The only pity is that we can't put Kozintsev and Trauberg in that grave." "¹⁰

Communist Youth International denounced it as counter-revolutionary though RAPP (The Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) defended it with Alexander Fadeyev's signature heading the letter. There were calls for a public debate (a common way of addressing issues in the 1920's) and for its makers to be put on trial for "jeering at the heroic pages of revolutionary history and the French proletariat". Factory workers to whom it was shown disagreed about its quality and newspapers' opinions were divided some urging their readers to see it and

some calling for the makers to be punished. The level of hostility can be gauged from an article by Pavel Petrov-Bytov¹¹. *New Babylon* is mentioned rarely by name (he prefers to speak of the poor general state of cinema) but it is obvious that the recently opened film was the catalyst and the article foreshadows many criticisms that would be made of artists in the following years. In writing:

"I am not denying the virtues of these films. The virtues do of course exist and they are not negligible. Great formal virtues. We must study these films just as we study the bourgeois classics", he subtly denounces them as irrelevant, or even positively harmful, to the revolution. Retrogressive and possibly counter revolutionary their only 'virtue' was the possibility they gave of learning from their mistakes. Turning to the film makers he says:

"The people who make up Soviet cinema are 95% alien, aesthetes or unprincipled.

Generally speaking none of them have any experience of life."

The word 'alien' and a plea not to 'transform the Russian language into Babylonian' echo the xenophobia encouraged by the policy of Socialism in One Country. As Soviet life was increasingly seen in physical terms their aestheticism and lack of experience meant that they could have no role in the revolution. After this he calls for film makers to be 're-generated' so that 'their hearts beat in unison with the masses'.

"I am sorry but you will not lead [the masses] with *Octobers* and *New Babylons* if only because people do not want to watch these films."

Pre-empting the defence that the artists' role was to lead the masses into the revolutionary future and that in five or ten years time their works would be understood Petrov-Bytov says that:

"The principle of the Soviet cinema is to raise the cultural level of the masses now, urgently, immediately."

This sort of criticism had been mounting for some time and though it was probably not orchestrated by the government they certainly encouraged it. As early as May 1924 Stalin had noted that

"Things are going badly in the cinema. The

cinema is the greatest means of mass agitation.

The task is to take it into our own hands."

The late 1920's saw a series of conferences on the arts which fittingly culminated in one on 'the most useful' from 15th to 21st March 1928. Kozintsev and Trauberg had probably returned from Paris by then and if so would have participated. The conference was the climax of a campaign against Sovkino's 'philistinism' ie lack of ideological content and on April 15th after an acrimonious debate it was announced that 13 foreign and 5 Soviet films were being withdrawn from circulation for ideological reasons.

Meanwhile difficulties in synchronising *New Babylon's* music with the on-screen action and the film's political divisiveness meant that orchestras wanted to replace the music with the usual pot pourris of old tunes. Shostakovich asked his closest friend Ivan Sollertinsky to come to the cinema to defend the score.

"After the film there will be a discussion of my music. Can I ask you, unofficially, to do what you can to rehabilitate me if they hurl abuse? If Vladimirov says my music can't be played...say it can. Say they must use the piano reduction and orchestral parts."¹²

Trauberg recalled in his interview with David Robinson:

"The Russian cinema orchestras of 1929 could never get it right. The images and the music never came together, so that Shostakovich's marvellous counterpoints and ironies like the montage of the *Can-Can* and the *Marseillaise* (that was my idea) were completely lost."¹³

Critics were disturbed by the film's expressionist techniques which they felt would alienate the proletariat. It had a deliberately confusing sense of time and space and the cameraman Moskvina used long focal length lenses to throw the point of focus into sharp relief against out of focus and often moving backgrounds or foregrounds. Article 12 of the Sovkino Workers' Conference (December 9th 1928) said that 'an essential part of any experimental work to be artistic expression that is intelligible to the millions.' *New Babylon* seemed to run directly counter to this and Trauberg answered the charge in an article in *Zhizn Iskusstvo* (1/1/29) arguing that the conference was demanding 'NEP style ideology' and mere 'agreeableness in this battle with public taste.'¹⁴

But the critics were proved right. Virtually all

theatres reported that the film was badly received by all sections of the public and one cinema's takings fell by 50% when the film was shown.¹⁵ Trauberg defended Shostakovich's music:

"It was the film they hated. They couldn't understand our montages. The audience stamped their feet and accused the projectionist of being drunk. They always blamed the projectionists: they'd say 'Come down out of that box - you're no projectionist, you're a cobbler.'¹⁶

But FEKS's approach to film making was well known as their early films had been criticised for using avant-garde techniques. As for the music; an article by Shostakovich appeared in *Sovietsky Ekran* (12/3/29) a week before the premiere in which he described his technique of not always illustrating what was on the screen:

"For example at the end of the second reel the important episode is the German Cavalry's advance on Paris but the reel ends in an empty restaurant. Silence. But the music, in spite of the fact that the German Cavalry is no longer seen on the screen, continues to remind the audience of the approaching threat. I constructed a great deal of the music on the principle of contrast. For example when Jean comes across Louise at the barricades he is filled with despair. The music becomes more and more cheerful and is finally resolved in a giddy and almost 'obscene' waltz reflecting the Versailles army victory over the people of the commune. An interesting process is used at the beginning of the fourth reel. While the rehearsal of the operetta is on screen the music plays variations of Hanon's exercises which take on different nuances in relation to the action. Sometimes it is gay, sometimes irritating, sometimes languid and sometimes frightening. Much use is made of the dances of the period (waltz, can-can) and melodies from Offenbach's operettas. Some French popular and revolutionary songs (*Ca Ira*, *Carmagnole*) [In French in the original text] are also heard. Based on a wide variety of sources the music maintains an unbroken symphonic tone throughout. Its basic function is to suit the tempo and rhythm of the picture and make the impressions it produces more lasting. Bearing in mind the novelty and unusualness (especially for cinema music hitherto) I tried to make the music dynamic and convey the passion of the film."¹⁷

Despite Trauberg's belief that it was the film that people objected to Shostakovich's music must

have been very disturbing as the principle of illustration whereby the music reflects and reinforces on screen events was replaced by 'the principle of contrast'.

The film rapidly became notorious and negative critical and public reaction meant that it was quickly withdrawn from circulation. Though Kozintsev and Trauberg continued to work together for many years (often employing Shostakovich) it was the last film to be released under the FEKS label.

But it was not only in the Soviet Union that the film encountered problems. The left wing American magazine *Experimental Cinema* (1929 number 3, page 14) carried an article on the fate of Soviet films in the USA in which they reported a screening in Hollywood that year:

"Moscow is Moscow, but Paris is almost as much America as it is Paris - that is politically speaking...It all gets too close to home: the faces begin to look too familiar...There were no less than seven complaints several of them distinguished for their moneyed viciousness. These came from members of a certain notorious patriotic society known for its kindly habit of blowing up the homes of starving foreign workers. These particular important individuals were overheard to threaten Filmarte with "investigation". Their country's saviours pronounced *New Babylon* corruptive, subversive and dangerous. Perhaps they would call attention to the case at headquarters..."

It was banned on general grounds in Britain. However London County Council certificated it though prints which were usually incomplete and of poor quality. Other countries edited it to suit local sensibilities; in Holland the night club scenes were cut on moral grounds.

Oddly enough amid all this controversy *New Babylon* had a successful run at one Moscow cinema but it was very much the exception.¹⁸

Looking back many years later the Shostakovich of *Testimony* said:

"Films have meant nothing but trouble for me, beginning with the first one, *New Babylon*. I'm not talking about the so-called artistic side. That's another story, and a sad one, but my troubles on the political side began with *New Babylon*. No-one remembers this any more, and now the film is considered a Soviet classic and has a wonderful reputation abroad...Things could have ended very badly and I was only in

my early twenties then. And there was trouble with every other film."¹⁹

The *New Babylon* affair was one of several that pointed to a change in Soviet artistic life in the late 1920's and early 1930's as the avant garde/proletarian split was forced together and pushed down the proletarian path. RAPM (The Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians) were in the ascendant but ACM (The Association of Contemporary Musicians) was hardly a counterbalance to it as, despite its name, it was only a little more avant garde. Shostakovich was disillusioned with it very quickly and this seems to have been the cause of an early falling out with Boris Asafiev who had been co-opted (possibly without his knowledge) to head ACM's board.

Shostakovich must have seen what was happening and began to take an active part in the productions of Leningrad Youth Theatre whose proletarian credentials were beyond doubt. Up to this point other work had been his excuse for doing no work for them in two years despite being on the musical staff but the time had come to buy some time and he quickly knocked out music for a couple of frankly propagandist plays. That neither of these proved popular must have been frustrating as he was writing them to show that he could write populist works. The pressure to prove his worth to the state was increased by the failure of the ballet *The Golden Age*. As the libretto had won an award it may have been thought that the reason for its failure was Shostakovich's music. Thus Shostakovich's first years in the cinema must have left him with mixed feelings. He could feel satisfied at his contribution to the improvement of the relationship between image and music. He had undoubtedly gained improvisation and piano practice (he may even have used his time there to improvisationally work on his compositions). The films that he accompanied would have confirmed many of his ideas about the role of humour in art and may have opened his eyes to cinematic ideas of structure. But these benefits must have come largely in the early months of two years of drudgery. All this was against a background of artistic and political changes that cast a serious light on the failure of *New Babylon* and any relief that he was taking from writing a score for Kozintsev and Trauberg's new film *Alone* must have been mitigated by the knowledge that his future work and especially any collaboration with the directors would be closely watched.

¹ The opera was to wait seven months for a concert performance and a further six months for its stage premiere (both occasions were causes celebres one critic describing the work as "an anarchist's hand grenade"). Its failure did not deter the Bolshoi from suggesting Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin* as a subject for an opera. He turned the commission down on March 30th 1930 by which time *New Babylon* had been completed, premiered and vilified but perhaps someone in the theatre was well disposed towards him and saw it as a chance for the composer to rehabilitate himself. He no doubt recognised the kind of tub-thumping piece that they wanted and had no desire to get involved.

² Later still in his book *King Lear: The Space of Tragedy: The Diary of a Film Director* (Heinemann 1977) Kozintsev claimed to have heard the opera only after finishing *New Babylon* though this may refer to the stage premiere which took place after the film had been finished. Kozintsev claimed that Shostakovich had, during his time in the cinema, accompanied his and Trauberg's film *The Devil's Wheel* but Trauberg thought not. Released on May 10th 1926 at the end of Shostakovich's accompanying career if he did see it either at work or as a customer he certainly would have enjoyed the highly stylised comedy. Like *New Babylon* and the stage production of *La Comedie Humaine* for which he wrote music it has a restaurant scene. Aged 18 Shostakovich obviously saw them as symbols of decadence and wrote to his girlfriend Tanya Glivenko boasting of not being a NEP man and of never having been to a restaurant. (DSCH XX).

³ *Sovietsky Ekran* 11 1929 p. Reproduced in Grigoriev and Platek. *Dmitry Shostakovich: About His Life and His Times*. Progress Publishers. Moscow. 1981 p 22.

⁴ *Eccentric Manifesto*. An English translation of the 1922 manifesto was published by The Eccentric Press (London) in 1992

⁵ Sollertinsky, Dmitri and Ludmilla. *Pages From the Life of Dmitri Shostakovich*. (Robert Hale. 1980). The reference to 'machines' is interesting in the light of the future Soviet view of society as a machine in which people were cogs.

⁶ *When Film Making was all about Circus and Scandal* Leonid Trauberg interviewed by David Robinson. London Times 20/1/83. p8.

⁷ Sollertinsky p55. Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandrov published their Statement on *Sound in Germany* on July 28th 1928 and there is a similarity between their idea of 'counterpoint' between the image and sound track and Shostakovich's 'principle of contrast'.

⁸ Shostakovich seemed unsure as to which score some of the pieces should go into; some themes were used in both

scores and the manuscripts of March and The Young Pioneer's March from *The Bedbug* are marked 'Opus 18/1' and 'Opus 18/2' respectively. However this may simply be because he still had not decided on the allocation of opus numbers. *New Babylon* became opus 18 and *The Bedbug* opus 19.

⁹ *Eccentric Manifesto* introduction. Derek Hulme claims that Shostakovich's music was not used at the Leningrad premiere but was introduced at the Moscow showing where Ferdinand Krish was the conductor. D and L Sollertinsky are ambiguous. Mention is made of someone called Vladimirov though it is unclear whether he was the conductor, cinema manager or leader of the debate. The whole subject of where, and in what form the film was premiered is further confused by the following recollections of Trauberg.

¹⁰ Trauberg/Robinson interview.

¹¹ *Why We Have No Soviet Cinema* by Pavel Petrov-Bytov. *Zhizn Iskusstvo* 21/4/29. Translations in *The Film Factory*. Selected and Edited by Ian Christie and Richard Taylor. Routledge. (pages 259-262) and *Politics of the Soviet Cinema 1917-1929*. CUP. 1979.

¹² Letter from Shostakovich to Ivan Sollertinsky March 22nd 1929. Sources disagree on the actual date of the premiere. The earliest (*Kino*. Jay Leyda. Page 399) is March 13th. D and L.Sollertinsky (page 56) claims that hostility from orchestras and conductors led to the score being dropped "on the second day". Whatever the actual timing it is clear that the score was in trouble very quickly.

¹³ Trauberg/Robinson interview.

¹⁴ Translations of the articles of the conference and Trauberg's reply appear in *The Film Factory*.

¹⁵ *Stenogramma diskussii po obsuzhdeniiu kinofilma Novyi Vavilon i otchet po izucheniiu vospriiatia filma zritelei* (1929). See also Denise J Youngblood. *Soviet Silent Cinema 1918-1935*. UMI Press.1980. (pages 18-19)

¹⁶ Trauberg/Robinson interview.

¹⁷ *Sovietsky Ekran* 11/29. Grigoriev and Platek p 23.

¹⁸ Ivan Martynov. Dmitri Shostakovich: *The Man and his Works*. p32.Philosophical Library. 1947.

¹⁹ Volkov p 114. The controversy surrounding the film continued for many years. As late as 1967 the film was criticised in the USSR for its unintelligibility. On the centenary of the commune in 1971 President Pompidou insisted that ORTF in Paris did not broadcast it as it was "an incitement to riot". In 1978 Trauberg was refused entry to Britain by the Foreign Office and in 1984 America followed suit. This is particularly ironic in the light of the fact that in 1949 the Soviet Union banned Trauberg from making films



for being "a leader of cosmopolitanism" (ie Jewish). Kozintsev and Shostakovich were of course allowed into both countries. Trauberg died in November 1990 but interest in the film had been rekindled by Rozhdestvensky's discovery after Shostakovich's death of orchestral parts that made accompanied screenings possible and Trauberg was able to attend some of these.

ARENA

*As with most "first editions", readers' letters are few: please use **Arena** to air your views, ask questions, answer questions etc. etc. etc.*

From Mark Roberts, Canada

Graham Brooker warned in DSCH XVII of a nine-bar cut in the first movement of Karajan's legendary 1966/67 recording of Shostakovich's 10th Symphony on Deutsche Grammophon's *Galleria* reissue (amounting to about 17 seconds, cut from the first movement at figure 54 (15'11")).

I am happy to report that the flaw was corrected with no trace of editing, with DG informing me that all copies now on sale are intact. Cautious buyers can confirm this themselves, as the first movement is listed on the CD back sheet as lasting 22'00 in the good version, and 21'47 in the flawed one. DG has done us a terrific service by going to the trouble of returning this indispensable recording to health!

From Hugh Davies, London

Readers of the DSCH Society's Newsletters (DSCH II, DSCH XIX) may recall two articles on the "theremin" - an instrument developed in the early part of this century and used by Shostakovich in one of his film scores (*Alone op.26*). Sad to report, then, the death of its inventor, Leon Theremin, in November of last year, at the age of 97. The instrument is often referred to as being the forerunner of the modern synthesizer, inspiring Robert Moog (who built a theremin at school) to his own career. Hitchcock - even the Beach Boys made use of its eerie-sound - a far cry of Theremin's school days in Russia, his imprisonment in

Siberia following KGB accusations of "anti-Soviet propaganda" during his successful stays in New York in the 1920's and 1930's. Nicolas Slonimsky described him as - "a blithe spirit - a scientist whose imagination spilled over into science fiction." His name had long disappeared from Soviet publications - in spite of his approbation by Lenin, when in 1959 he "disappeared", amid rumours that he had gone back to Russia and had been shot for dealings with the Germans in the Embassy in Washington. Shostakovich was asked by Slonimsky if he might know of Theremin's whereabouts, to which "He merely blinked and said, "About Theremin I can say nothing." "

Theremin returned to the US for the first time in 1991 to receive Stanford University's Centennial Medal for his contribution to electronic music.

From John Riley, London

I am currently working on a project on Shostakovich's film work. Eventually I hope to write a study of this aspect of his work but initially I am compiling a filmography listing:

- 1) Films for which Shostakovich wrote an original score
- 2) Films for which Shostakovich provided a score comprising selections from existing works.
- 3) Film versions of his dramatic works.
- 4) Films which use Shostakovich's existing works with or without his or the Soviet State's permission.
- 5) Documentaries on Shostakovich or dramatisations of his life which use his works as background music or include filmed performances of it. Documentaries not about DS or other films which use his music are excluded though they may be used in passing.
- 6) Filmed performances of his concert works are included if they have a substantial documentary attached. Those with brief introductory comments fall outside my brief but some can be listed in an appendix with basic details.

For the purposes of the filmography the word