

(DSCH hopes to have a fuller review of these books in the near future.)

A Little Bit of Shostakovichian Cinematic Pre-History

Discussion of Shostakovich's career before his First Symphony is usually restricted to relatively brief comments about him working as a film accompanist. This may be because musicologists are not expert in the rather arcane area of early post revolutionary Soviet cinema (even film critics overlooked it until recently having been dazzled by the Soviet films of the late 20's - an astonishing flowering that seemed to come from nowhere and has traditionally been seen as dying back almost as quickly). Or perhaps they do not see it as being directly applicable to a study of him - yet he did it for over two years.

It is difficult to know for sure which films he actually accompanied though contemporary adverts and cinema schedules exist.¹ But it may shed some light to know the kind of films that he would have seen and the general conditions under which he was working.

On August 27th 1919 Lenin signed the decree *On the Transfer of the Entire Photography and Cinematography Trade and Industry to the Jurisdiction of the Peoples Commissariat for Education*. The Commissariat's director, Anatol Lunacharsky, was an avid cinephile writing screenplays and appearing in at least one film. Lenin preferred newsreels but they agreed on the propoganda value of cinema.

However the decree wasn't enacted until the following spring and even after that several studios and many cinemas remained in private or co-operative hands. The government probably realised that the industry faced so many problems that it was preferable, even necessary, to tolerate private activity rather than distract their attention from larger issues or attract

charges of incompetence in what was a very popular form of

entertainment. Thus nationalisation was only nominal.

After 1919 the industry declined for several reasons. The poor exhibition infrastructure and size of the country made it difficult to cater to the scattered population; it was easier and more profitable to concentrate distribution on towns and cities. Revolution, Civil War and War Communism left the economy debilitated and led to shortages of everything including film stock and skilled personnel. Production fell and as late as 1924 the country was importing 85% of films

for exhibition and 100% of its raw film stock and

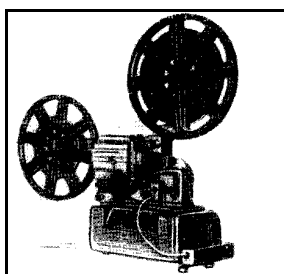
had taken to stripping the emulsion from unwanted prints to recycle the base. The problems were exacerbated by the erratic electricity supply and frequent breakdowns of ill-maintained equipment leading many cinemas to close and putting the industry into a cycle of decline.

Added to this was the state's ambivalent attitude to the entertainment arm of the industry; while taxes raised much needed revenue the state felt that scarce materials should be channelled into agitational films. The lack of rural cinemas meant that peasants had probably never seen a film. To build cinemas all over the country would be slow and not cost-effective.

However the Party's atheism was of practical use here and decommissioned churches were used amongst other things as cinemas. In 1923 Trotsky suggested that taverns could also be used² thus weakening the grasp of two of the strongest 'opiates of the people'. Lunacharsky agreed: "cinema is the main instrument in the fight with taverns and churches, that is with physical and psychological narcotics."

But even this combination could not serve the programme that was needed and so agit-trains and the less well known agit-boats evolved. The idea was that these could turn up at remote villages quickly attracting an audience for propoganda and films on hygiene and improved working methods.

They also carried printing presses and, most



excitingly, cameras, processing and editing facilities so that peasants could be filmed and see themselves soon afterwards. The peasants' would thus see the Party as bringing both technology and progressive social policies and be persuaded by their message.

However the practical experience was that peasants lacked even basic cine-literacy and misunderstood the films or failed to connect what they saw with reality.

The equipment was difficult to maintain and distribution racked by largely ideological policy disagreements but this failure to connect was the last straw and the trains fell out of use by the mid 20's as part of a move away from unpopular educational films towards more 'realistic' (ie fiction) films.³

Urban cinemas divided into two sorts; commercial cinemas and the smaller workers clubs and village cinemas. In the late 1920's commercial sites totalled about 17% of exhibition units but took roughly 80% of box office revenue. They showed the popular films that clubs could not have afforded even had they been ideologically acceptable and charged up to ten times more. Thus the market was split with well-run commercial cinemas showing the latest and most popular films to an audience popularly regarded as NEP-men whilst clubs showed a poor selection of inferior prints on faulty equipment to a less well-off audience.

However one similarity was the type of programme that both showed. This would comprise a newsreel or educational short followed by the main feature often with an animated short between the two. Music was played from the opening of the first short through to the end of the feature though this, as I shall explain later, was often not the only sound to be heard in the cinema.

In order to satisfy demand when the home industry could not produce the volume of work needed many films were imported and, to subsidise production, a tax of up to 33% was imposed on ticket sales at commercial cinemas. This was later reduced to 10% but it was only by 1928 (after Shostakovich had stopped accompanying work) that the majority of films shown

began to be home produced rather than imported. Hence the films that he accompanied would have been overwhelmingly foreign indeed they would have mostly been American as even by that date the USA dominated the world market.⁴

Outrage over importing 'bourgeois propaganda' was countered by the arguments that popular foreign films raised revenue and that in any case they were re-edited or given new intertitles to make them politically acceptable though this attracted complaints that it made them difficult to follow.⁵

We normally think of 1920's Russia as the crucible wherein the theory of film montage was being forged and whilst this is true the films of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Vertov et al were very unpopular.

One of the most popular Soviet films was *The Little Cigarette Girl From Mosselprom* (*Papirsnitsa ot Mosselproma*) but the two most popular stars at the time were Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks.⁶

Popular Soviet films derived from 19th century melodrama where emotions were usually negative. Even the "Art Play" often tended toward this emotional tenor. In the cinema it became a convention that positive endings only happened in films that were set abroad. Indeed films began to be made with two different last reels - a negative one for the home market and a more positive end for export though this was beginning to change by 1926 as, probably encouraged by the wealth of upbeat imported material, public tastes changed.⁷

More to Shostakovich's taste were Harold Lloyd and Charlie Chaplin who with the German Harry Piel were the most popular comedians in the Soviet Union and their knockabout humour appears in some of his early scores. Chaplin was a particular favourite his anarchic humour appealing greatly to the young composer.⁸

Whatever his political feelings Shostakovich pragmatically decided to work in the commercial sector - the pay was doubtless better and he relished the prospect of seeing many films. Indeed he enjoyed them so

much that his wife Nina told how:

"Dmitri's direct spontaneous nature caused his downfall. An American comedy was being shown with huge success three times daily. Every time certain scenes flashed onto the screen, the piano was silent and the audience heard the piano player burst into laughter, enjoying the antics of the comedian. For this unseemly behaviour the administration decided to part company with the youthful pianist."⁹

As far as sound and music in the cinema was concerned the technology to give films synchronised sound tracks did not exist and many Soviet cinemas would not have invested in it even if it had. In 1936 nine years after Al Jolsen had told American audiences that they "ain't heard nothin' yet" talks took place to allow non-political Soviet films into the USA in return for the installation of American sound equipment in Soviet cinemas¹⁰.

It was only by 1937 that 100% of Soviet films in distribution were synchronised prints!

Anyone who has watched an unaccompanied silent film will testify that it is an unsettling experience and more difficult to concentrate than when the film is accompanied. This along with the fact that it covered the projector noise has been used to argue for the introduction of music yet silence was not the problem that it might seem; another problem had already generated a solution.

Illiteracy rates meant that in the provinces silent films' intertitles were largely useless so cinema managers acted as 'film reciters' reading the cards aloud and explaining historical, ideological or technical points that the audience might not understand. They also covered the pauses between reel changes (many outlets had only one projector), the frequent equipment breakdowns and lapses in the electricity supply. In features actors sometimes stood behind the screen and spoke the lines. To have heard the projector above all this would have been impossible.¹¹

Working in the commercial sector where literacy was higher Shostakovich would not

have had to contend with reciters but his audience would still have been quite vocal.

But though music was used in the cinema it was rarely specially composed though there had been experiments - some with major composers. In order to help with the provision of music distributors sent out 'cue sheets' with suggestions - they often also rented out the sheet music. Musicians preferred to use these or standard pieces that needed minimal rehearsal and conductors were loath to lose the fees they received for making the arrangements. The difficulty and expense of all this meant that only the biggest commercial cinemas had large orchestras (probably up to about 28 players). As a result film makers were unwilling to commission scores that, because of the lack of enthusiasm, money and musicians, would often go unplayed.

Meanwhile the need to attract customers into the cinema and entertain them while waiting for the film to start led to the foyers being exotically decorated and some cinemas had a larger ensemble there than that which accompanied the film in the pit.

Many musicians no doubt saw it as musical prostitution and Shostakovich used this very phrase in a draft CV that he wrote (and destroyed) applying for a grant for his post graduate studies.

Making little effort to produce anything original they played standard pieces to cover various stock situations - romance, chase etc - threw in some popular songs linking it together with perfunctory improvisations. Thus they were safe in the knowledge that they were doing all that was required of them and could go home at the end of the day feeling that their Parnassian souls had not been sullied too much. The situation was even worse at workers' clubs where musicians seemed to have a chronic inability to choose appropriate music. Why, asked one respondent to a survey, did they always seem to be playing foxtrots at the film's most serious moments? Many clubs eventually gave up the unequal struggle and reverted to reciters.

Some efforts were being made to improve

the situation as the Art Workers' Union (RABIS) introduced an exam for cinema accompanists and Shostakovich sat his at the end of 1923.

"First I was asked to play *A Blue Waltz* and then "something oriental". At Bruni's [a former music teacher] I had not been able to play in the Eastern style, but by 1923 I knew Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherezade* and Cui's *Oriental*. I passed the test and in November started work at the *Svetlaya Lenta Cinema* (The Bright Reel)"¹²

"A ridiculous name" as he said in a letter to his girlfriend Tanya Glivenko.¹³

Yet he worked conscientiously and in common with a few other musicians his playing became as great an attraction as the films. He even had his name on the cinema posters.¹⁴

As a composer however he was known only by a small group in the artistic community as the symphony which would make him famous all over the world was still only half written. When he started at the cinema he was only free on Mondays but it relieved the family's poverty and he saw it as an easier way of earning money than by giving concerts which left him nervous beforehand and exhausted afterwards. He hoped also to be able to persuade his mother to give up her exhausting job as a cashier. Most of all he looked forward to being able to study and compose more.

However in reality the pressure of the work meant that he had little time for composition let alone for going to concerts, the opera and, particularly, the ballet which at this time seemed to be his favourite dramatic art form.

The conditions were not good for his health either; cinemas were cold at the start of the performance but fetid by the end and he arrived home (walking to save money) after work at about 1.00am.¹⁵

His first month at *Svetlaya Lenta* was marked by difficulties in finding people to deputise for him but more importantly he was never paid on time. Eventually he confronted Volynsky the owner only to be

told that as he loved art he should not expect to be paid for it! In early 1925 he left and, with two colleagues, sued for their unpaid wages though Volynsky's reputation was such that people were shocked that such a respectable person should be taken to court.¹⁶

A month later Shostakovich got most of his money and bought 67 sheets of manuscript paper on which to compose the last

movement of his symphony finishing it in July. By October he was poor enough to have to go back to work as an accompanist at *The Splendid Palas* though he wasn't looking forward to it. As it was a state cinema he was guaranteed to receive his wages but against that it was only a two month contract to cover the absence of another pianist. The last cinema in which he worked was the *Pikadilli*. However when one of the pianists failed to turn up and there was no one to cover, a plan was instituted whereby both pianists should be there all day working in shifts. This left him absolutely no time for concerts or a social life and was the last straw.

At last in 1926 the successful première of his First Symphony gave him a measure of independence and he stopped accompanying describing it as 'hack work' and vowing never to return to it no matter how poor he was.

"It takes up every evening and the task of mechanically reproducing human passions on the piano is very exhausting."¹⁷

"My cinema work completely paralysed my musical pursuits."¹⁸

Some time after he had finished accompanying work he visited the cinema with a girl. However as she complained that she saw none of the film it would seem that cinematic art was not high on Shostakovich's agenda that evening!

Shostakovich's love of Chaplin and Keaton has been noted before but I have never seen comment on the sheer amount of films that he must have accompanied.

Seroff claims that there were three shows a day; these would usually have been the same film though it would not have stayed at the cinema for many days. Prints were scarce and other cinemas would want to book them; hence a film could be very popular and have that popularity serviced without being in a given cinema for very long. In the early stages he was working six days a week making 18 shows per week. It's hard to know exactly how much time he spent at the work in total as he left and re-entered it several times under different conditions but, given that he was doing it

over a period of two and a half years a conservative estimate of one year means that his career would have involved accompanying almost a thousand shows! These would comprise maybe 100 different features, the same number of shorts and animations and about 300 different newsreels. Of these the newsreels would have been exclusively Soviet, the animations would have been largely Soviet (it was a popular medium in Eastern Europe from the start), the shorts would have had a high proportion of imports but the features would have been overwhelmingly foreign.

Strangely enough then, it may be easier than it appears to study the influence of cinema on Shostakovich. All we need do is look at the films of Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd and Pickford. After a brief film studies course musicologists need no longer feel excluded!

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¹ A Leningrad cinema's repertory poster from 1924 appears on page 102 of *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents*. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie. Harvard University Press. 1988.

² *Vodka, the Church and the Cinema*. The Film Factory p94. Stalin used the same argument in December 1927 at the Fifteenth Party Congress but later noted that whilst the revenue from the state vodka monopoly amounted to over 500 million roubles cinema brought in only about 22 million.

³ Many cinema workers including Dziga Vertov and Alexander Medvedkin began their cinema careers on these trains and even those who did not go on to become famous gained practical experience. In Chris Marker's film *Le Train en Marche (The Train Rolls On)* (1971) Medvedkin talks about the train, its work and his positive attitude to it. Marker reused the footage in *The Last Bolshevik* (1993).

⁴ Vance Kepley Jnr and Betty Kepley. *Foreign Films on Soviet Screens 1921-1932. Quarterly Review of Film Studies*. Fall 1979 pp 429-442. Also Kirsten Thompson. *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-1934*. BFI. 1985. p132-133.

⁵ This applied to features. Newsreels and shorts were less popular and in any case, as Lunacharsky pointed out, imported science documentaries were often excellent and rarely ideologically contaminated though the Soviet Union still made them - one of Pudovkin's first directorial efforts was *The Mechanics of the Brain*. Eisenstein gained early editing experience by helping Esfir Shub transform Fritz Lang's *Dr Mabuse* into *Gilded Putrefaction* for the Russian market in 1924.

⁶ She was so popular that song titles used her name and sheet music carried her image. The film Mary Pickford's Kiss incorporated news footage of her and Fairbanks' visit to the USSR. Soviet editing was already so skilled that the hero of the film appears to kiss her even though, in reality they never met - indeed the footage of him was shot after she had left the country.

⁷ Even so as late as 1959 the Soviet trade union newspaper *Trud* (Labour) complained that in four British films shown in Moscow (*The Horse's Mouth*, *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, *Genevieve* and *Geordie*) "the struggles and worries of plain people...were pushed aside by the traditional British smile and muffled by refined happy endings".

⁸ In his New York Times review of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* Olin Downes likened the police station scene to the Keystone Kops. The Soviet Union was also gripped by a love of Charlie Chaplin and some critics compared FEKS' work to his though Trauberg strenuously denied it.

⁹ Jay Leyda. *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*. George Allen and Unwin.

¹⁰ *Kinematograph Weekly* 21/5/36 p15. In December 1936 George Antheil's column *On the Hollywood Front* reported that Paramount's new head of music, the Russian Boris Morros, had discharged over half the music staff, contacted the most prominent composers of the day and was "negotiating with the Soviet government for the loan of Dmitri Shostakovich; Paramount in return will trade them several of our best sound technicians - men sorely needed in present-day Russia to judge by the hideous quality of their sound recording."

¹¹ *Film Seance: The Role of Speech in Soviet Film Exhibitions of the 1920's*. Vance Kepley Jnr. *Wide Angle*. Volume 15 Number 1. January 1993. Pages 6-27.

¹² Grigoryev and Platek. *Dmitry Shostakovich: About his Life and his Times*. Progress Publishers. 1981. Page 13.

¹³ Soviet cinema names went through fashions starting with technological sounding ones and moving through to foreign exoticism (*Parisienne* and *The North Pole*). One of these vogues, evidently at its height at the start of Shostakovich's career, was for names to do with light.

¹⁴ D and L Sollertinsky. *Pages From the Life of Shostakovich*. Robert Hale. 1980 page 33

¹⁵ Victor Seroff adds that the cinema was dilapidated and smelly. Victor Seroff. *Dmitri Shostakovich: The Life and Background of a Soviet Composer* pages 123-124. (New York. Alfred A Knopf. 1943). It is difficult to know how true this is; as we have seen owners were aware of the necessity of attracting customers - the cinema was a place to escape workaday realities; on the other hand money was tight.

¹⁶ Shostakovich talks about Volynsky for almost three pages in *Testimony* (pp 6-8).

¹⁷ *Zhizneopisanie Dimitria Dimitrievicha Shostakovicha*.

Grigoryev and Platek page 10.

¹⁸ *Avtobiografia*. Sovetsky Muzyka 9/66. Grigoryev and Platek p 13. If the article was written at the time of publication (it is not made clear) Shostakovich exhibits fine irony with the comment that he hopes never to return to the work. By this time not only would it have been unnecessary but he was so ill that it would have been impossible. See also Volkov p3ff.

APOLOGY. Some of you may have choked on your cornflakes upon reading in my last article that the music for *La Comedie Humaine* contains a restaurant scene. This is of course arrant nonsense and I can only speculate that the reason was a gross misreading of the cover of *Manuscripts From Different Years*. This contains the music to *The Adventures of Korzinkina* which does have a restaurant scene. Thankfully my basic argument remains unchanged.

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