

WRITING ABOUT SHOSTAKOVICH



“Quote,Unquote”

The following extracts are taken from an article on Mstislav Rostropovich, “Great Russian” by Jo Durden-Smith, that appeared in the Nov/Dec 1997 issue of *Departures*, a magazine published for American Express Platinum Cardmembers. Talking about his favourite cause, the rebuilding of Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, demolished by Stalin in 1931, leads Rostropovich into reminiscences about Shostakovich:

“It is symbol of new time for whole Russian nation. There is tradition I go straight there from the airport when I come to Moscow; I have my own hard hat at the site. And I do what I can. I’ve already given four concerts for the cathedral – and I take for it the money from *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* [which Rostropovich conducted at the Kirov in St. Petersburg last year]. But, you know, some stupid people actually criticise me for this. They say that this is sexy opera – so, you know, money goes from phallus to cross. They say this about genius opera for which Shostakovich suffered so much under Stalin! For me revival of this opera is exactly same thing as building cathedral!”

Durden-Smith asks him “about suffering and about the conflict that he has said is necessary to the greatest art. Is this something that comes with Russianness, the by-product, if you like, of Russia’s repressive history? (Rostropovich has gone on record as saying that American composers, for example, are too comfortable; they lack this vital element of struggle, of soul-searching.)

“No, of course not,” he says. “Suffering alone is not enough. It is God who makes geniuses. But you know, if Mozart were alive today and his genius recognised, all the universities would give him doctorates. He would be showered with Rolls-Royces. He would no longer have the gift of possibility to compose. Most geniuses must suffer enormously – people do not understand this – if genius is recognised it is never left alone. Shostakovich, well, the Communists tell him he is absolutely without talent, he must change his profession. He say to me: ‘I will write something to make these idiots understand!’ Ben Britten suffered exactly same thing in different way. He was very angry with music critics, for example. He say to me, ‘You know, Slava, I know the weak points of my compositions much better than all other people. There are things that I am not satisfied with, but not one music critic – not one – has ever recognised what they are.’”

Shostakovich and the Scottish Connection

by Derek Hulme

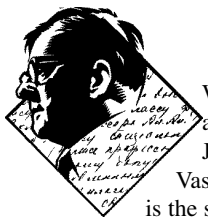
Shostakovich set five or six Scottish texts to music in 1942-43. Four of the verses were by Robert Burns (1759-96) and the fifth by Lady John Douglas Scott (1810-1900). The possible sixth is still not positively identified and will be discussed in a later note.

Burns, as well as being a great poet, was a talented folk-musician collecting many tunes and words of old Scots songs and writing the verses for over three hundred airs. Regrettably only a single musical autograph of many written out for the publishers of James Johnson’s *The Scots Musical Museum* survives and this is preserved at the British Museum. The tune is ‘The Job of Journey-work’, a setting of his satirical verses ‘Here’s his health in Water’. Jean Armour, his wife, speaking of Robert’s habits stated: “When at home in the evenings he employed his time in writing and reading, with the children playing about him. Their prattle never disturbed him in the least [likewise Dmitri Shostakovich!] . . . Was much occupied composing songs, most of which he wrote several times over . . . He chiefly composed while riding and walking and wrote from memory after he came in. Was not a good singer but had a very good ear. Could ‘step a tune’ rudely on the fiddle but was no player. Sometimes took this method of satisfying himself as to the modulations of a tune.”

A friend of Shostakovich, Samuil Yakovlevich Marshak (1887-1964) was a great scholar of British literature and did much to strengthen cultural ties between the USSR and Britain. He translated into Russian works by William Shakespeare, Robert Burns and William Blake, also British nursery rhymes, besides writing popular stories of his own for Russian children. One of the later is *The Silly Little Mouse* which Shostakovich set to music as Opus 56. Marshak first turned to Burns in 1924 and started translating him in the mid-1930s.

Three of the Burns’ settings appear in *Six Romances on Verses by British Poets*, Opus 62, composed for low voice and piano in 1942. These were scored for full symphony orchestra in the following year (designated Opus 62a) and for chamber orchestra in 1971 (numbered Opus 140). The three songs in Marshak’s translation are ‘O, Wert Thou in the Cauld Blast’, ‘Macpherson before his Execution’ and ‘Jenny’ (better known as ‘Coming thro’ the Rye’). In *Eight British and American Folksongs* (numbered Sans op.M in the *Shostakovich Catalogue*) – a work of 1943 inspired by the alliance of the USSR, Great Britain and United States of America – ‘Coming thro’ the Rye’ with its original tune of ‘The Miller’s





'Wedding' and again in Marshak's translation appears as No. 6 and Burns' 'John Anderson, my Jo' to its traditional melody, translated by Sergei Vasilievich Bolotin (born 1912) and T. Sikorskaya, is the second item. These were arranged for middle voice and a small orchestra consisting of double woodwind, four horns, harp and strings.

'O, Wert Thou in the Cauld Blast' was written for Miss Jessie Lewars who helped to nurse Robert Burns during his last illness. The poet presented a set of Johnson's *The Scots Musical Museum* to her placing a twelve line inscription dated 26 June 1796 at the back of the title page of the first volume. 'Lovely Jessie be her name' lived with her Exciseman brother opposite the poet's home and looked after his four sons following the Bard's death at Dumfries on 21 July 1796. The sixteen lines are probably the most heart-rending that he had written, the last four reading:

'Or were I monarch o the globe, (of)
 Wi thee to reign, wi thee to reign, (with)
 The brightest jewel in my crown,
 Wad be my queen, wad be my queen.' (would)

Burns set his poem to the tune 'Lenox (Lennon's) love to Blantyre', a Strathspey in 4/4 time. Shostakovich's lovely melody, marked 'Moderato', is in a gentle rocking croch-quaver 6/8 rhythm with occasional bars in 9/8 time: vocal line and both hands of the piano accompaniment being written out entirely in the bass clef.

The Macpherson of Robert Burns' poem was the illegitimate son of the Laird of Invereshie, born to a red-haired gipsy woman about 1675. After the Laird lost his life in pursuit of a hostile clan to recover stolen cattle, the boy was taken by his mother and reared in a gipsy environment. James, later a famed performer and composer of fiddle music, formed a gang of thieves preying on the rich farmers of North-East Scotland and distributing their ill-gotten gains to the region's poor. Eventually the band was captured, taken to Aberdeen and sentenced to be hanged. Friends managed to rescue the manacled men from prison and fight their way through the crowd awaiting the execution. Following further robberies they were betrayed and tried at Banff. Macpherson was sentenced to be hanged on 16 November 1700.

On the eve of his execution he composed a 'rant' and was granted permission to play this tune on the Banff market place scaffold on condition he offered his fiddle to anyone in the crowd. 'With great glee he danced as he played his 'spring' (lively tune). No one dared to accept the instrument so he smashed it and threw the pieces into the spectators. The fiddle fragments were collected and sent to the clan chief. Apparently there was a last-minute reprieve and its bearer was known to be on the way but the corrupt magistrates, anxious to be rid of this trouble-maker, advanced the town clock twenty minutes thus carrying out the execution before the appointed

time.

The broken instrument, along with part of the mechanism of the Banff town clock, is exhibited at the Clan Macpherson Museum in Newtonmore, Inverness-shire.

Robert Burns set words to Macpherson's Rant in 1788 and the chorus and five-stanza poem is known as 'Macpherson's Farewell'. In his translation Marshak retains the same order of verses but expands the fourth with an extra four lines:

Burns
 I've liv'd a life of sturt and strife; (sturt = trouble)
 I die by treacherie;
 It burns my heart I must depart,
 And not avengèd be.

Marshak
 I liv'd my life in strife,
 I'll not die by the sword;
 A traitor has betrayed me,
 To the hangman's noose.

And before death one thing only
 Saddens my soul,
 That after me in my native land
 I'll not avengèd be.

The Italian violin reached Scotland in the mid-17th century, possibly a little before 1670, and in less than a hundred years became the dominant instrument of Scottish traditional music. The early fiddlers' repertory was passed on aurally and as a consequence tunes such as 'Macpherson's Rant' survived in several versions when they were eventually written down. One, in its simplest form, appears as Example 1 (page 9).

Shostakovich composed an appropriately lively tune marked 'Allegretto' in 2/4 time. The accompaniment has the accent strongly on the first staccato quaver of each bar, breaking into running semiquavers for the lines 'Macpherson's time will not be long on yonder gallows tree', 'And there's no a man in all Scotland but I'll brave him at a word' and 'That after me in my native land, I'll not avengèd be'. (Example 2, page 9).

Fittingly, twenty years after composing the setting to 'Macpherson's Farewell', Shostakovich turned again to its spritely opening theme for the second movement of the Thirteenth Symphony - his setting of Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem 'Humour': obviously prompted by Humour, caught as a political prisoner, breaking into a dashing dance and thumbing his nose on the way to his execution.

Burns revised an old bawdy song, whose first two lines ran 'O, Jenny's a' sweet, poor body, Jenny's seldom dry' and expanded it in the form we know as 'Comin thro the





rye'.

The wanton girl's name is Jenny, not Jeannie as translated in some sleeve notes.

Comin thro the rye, poor body
Comin thro the rye,
She draigl't a' her petticoatie (muddied all her petticoat)
Comin thro the rye!

Gin a body meet a body (If)
Comin thro the rye,
Gin a body kiss a body,
Need a body cry.

Gin a body meet a body
Comin thro the glen,
Gin a body kiss a body,
Need the world ken? (world know)

Marshak altered the words to rhyme in Russian and an approximate translation would read as follows:

Making her way to the gate
Along the field boundary,
Jenny got drenched to the skin,
In the evening, in the rye.

Very chilly was the lassie,
She shivered with the cold,
All her skimpy skirt was soaked,
Coming through the rye.

If somebody called someone
Through the dense rye,
And if someone hugged somebody,
How to tell him off?

And would it really matter
If at the field's bound'ry,
Someone was kissing somebody,
In the evening, in the rye!

Shostakovich composed a delightful tripping melody for Opus 62/140:

(Example 3, page 9).

See also the traditional tune used in Sans op. M

(Example 4, page 9).

John Anderson was a carpenter who died at Invergarry in 1832 at the age of 84. He was an old friend of the poet and is said to have made his coffin. Anderson's grave can be found in Kilchumein burial ground at Fort Augustus at the southern end of Loch Ness.

The poem tells of his wife recalling happy days with her darling husband:

John Anderson my jo, John, (jo = darling)
When we were first acquent, (acquainted)
Your locks were like the raven,
Your bonie brow was brent; (bonny, smooth)
But now your brow is beld, John, (bald)
Your locks are like the snaw, (snow)
But blessings on your frosty pow, (head)
John Anderson, my jo!

John Anderson my jo, John,
We clamb the hill thegither, (climbed, together)
And monie a cantie day, John, (many a happy)
We've had wi'ane anither; (with one another)
Now we maun totter down, John, (must)
And hand in hand we'll go,
And sleep thegither at the foot,
John Anderson my jo!

The traditional Scottish tune quoted in Example 5, (page 9) was touchingly scored by Shostakovich for strings and harp.

The fifth Scottish song is the well-known 'Annie Laurie', with music by Lady John Scott and words adapted by her from the poem by William Douglas. There was a real Anna Laurie - one of Sir Robert Laurie of Maxwellton's daughters - who rejected her Jacobite officer lover William Douglas.

He wrote his passionate love poem but when Anna's ardour cooled he did not 'lay me doon and dee', marrying instead a Miss Clerk in 1706. Anna herself married Alexander Ferguson four years later and she died in 1764. Lady Scott (also known under her maiden name Alicia Ann Spottiswoode) was a collector of traditional songs and wrote 69 of her own, the most famous being 'Annie Laurie' and 'Durrisdeer'. She married a brother of the 5th Duke of Buccleuch in 1836.

There is a rough undated draft of 'Annie Laurie' arranged by Shostakovich for voice and chamber orchestra in the Glinka Museum, Moscow. The song is marked 'Molto moderato' and in a Russian translation.

The first two lines translate as 'Maxwell wood is beautiful, There is a lovely small meadow ...' As it is scored for two flutes, two clarinets, four horns and strings - instruments available for the *Eight British and American Folksongs* cycle - the likelihood is that it was considered for this work and then rejected.





Ex.1- Simple Version of Macpherson's 'Rant'

Musical notation for Ex.1, consisting of four staves of music in G major and common time.

Ex.2 - Macpherson before his Execution (by Shostakovich)

Musical notation for Ex.2, a piano piece in 2/4 time marked 'Allegretto' with a forte dynamic.

Ex.3 - Shostakovich opus 62/140 'Comin' thro the rye'

Musical notation for Ex.3, consisting of two staves of music in a minor key.

Ex.4 - Shostakovich - traditional tune used in Sans op. M

Musical notation for Ex.4, a vocal line in G minor marked 'Slowly' and 'p' with lyrics: 'Gin a bo - dy, meet a bo - dy, Com - in' thro' the rye Gin a bo - dy, kiss a bo - dy Need a bo - dy cry ?'

Ex.5 - Traditional Scottish tune scored by Shostakovich for strings and harp (see text)

Musical notation for Ex.5, consisting of two staves of music in G minor and common time.

