



Shostakovich 25 Years On

The Dead are Defenseless?

Irina Shostakovich writing in the *Moscow Times*, No. 31, August 9 - 15, 2000

Twenty-five years ago this Wednesday, Dmitry Shostakovich died.

Throughout these years his music has been on the ascent. The circle of Shostakovich fans has grown a hundred-fold all over the world. Nowadays numerous young musicians are taking the place of the composer's departed contemporaries to serve his music with their art.

Since his youth Dmitry Shostakovich had been much loved and respected by his colleagues. Those people tried to shield and protect him against his persecutors in the darkest days, even when it involved taking great risks and when they were up against powerful enemies. In his person the browbeaten defended their own dignity, their right to creative work. Few dared to speak out, but most musicians flatly refused to join in vitriolic attacks against him. Admittedly there were also enthusiastic persecutors, also informers by vocation, and suggestible people simply too obtuse to know any better.

Dmitry Shostakovich was as defenseless as any of us, but he had much more to lose. He had to consider the future of his works the authorities victimized with gay abandon, the future of his enormous talent which he valued above his person and which he tapped as best he could all his life, evading and confusing his tormentors. He managed to help many a fellow sufferer, and he is gratefully remembered for the support and protection he offered.



I.A. Shostakovich

But not by everyone. When Dmitry Shostakovich was no more, they decided that all constraints had been removed, that the time had come to exploit his name

to rise to prominence, even at the cost of humiliating and insulting his memory. Political pressures had eased and they found their voice. The dead are defenseless...

If all reminiscences by his contemporaries, both factual and fictional, were lumped together and finely shredded, it would not be difficult to combine the fragments in a way that "documented" total lack of talent in Shostakovich and showed him a wily compromise virtuoso, weak and unscrupulous. Or else the opposite.

He has been made into a battlefield. Sucking all and sundry into their murky whirlpool, they engage in slanging matches over the Internet, publish papers and books, write plays about Dmitry Shostakovich: there is even an opera now. They have been trying, with little success, to make him their property... And it does not really matter whether they have been speechifying under the banners of party ideology or the avant-garde: Right and left-wingers invariably converge in the end.

One consolation is that nobody will ever again inflict pain and suffering on the deceased composer, while Time will inexorably put everything in perspective.

I am often asked by interviewers about the credibility of Solomon Volkov's book he published as a set of his own recordings of Shostakovich's reminiscences. Here is what I know of the matter. Volkov used to be on the staff of the *Soviet Music* monthly where Dmitry Shostakovich was one of the editors. Responding to a request from his student and colleague, B.I. Tishchenko, Shostakovich agreed to talk to Solomon Volkov, whom he did not know at all well, on the understanding that the transcripts of the talks would be published in the monthly.

They met on three occasions; each time the meeting lasted for two or two and a half hours, not more, for a longer talk tired Shostakovich so that he lost interest in his interlocutor. Two of the interviews were held in the presence of Tishchenko. Nothing was tape-recorded. The second time Volkov brought with him a camera and asked Tishchenko and then me to photograph them as a memento. When he came for the third interview, he brought the photograph and asked the composer to inscribe it. Dmitry Shostakovich wrote the usual 'For Solomon Volkov, September 16, 1974', but then, as though sensing danger, called Volkov back and added 'in memory of our talks about Glazunov, Zoshchenko and Meyerhold. D.Sh.'

That summed up the topics of their discussions. The list of names suggests that the conversations centered around the musical and literary life in pre-war Leningrad, nothing else. Some time later Volkov brought over the typed transcripts of the talks and asked my husband to sign each page at the bottom. It was a modest pile of sheets, and Shostakovich, assuming that he would see the proofs, did not bother to read them. I entered his study as he was signing the sheets, standing up and without looking through them. Volkov took them and left, and I asked Dmitry why he had signed each page at the bottom, for that was not the usual way. He said Volkov had told him that there were new censorship regulations in place and without his signature the text would not be accepted for publication. Apparently Volkov had already applied for an exit visa and intended to use the material as his first move abroad.

Shortly afterward Dmitry Shostakovich died, and Volkov's plans expanded. The fact of the transcripts' existence had been widely publicized by Volkov himself. That could hamper his departure. He managed to secure a meeting with Enrico Berlinguer, the then secretary general of the Italian Communist Party who happened to be in Moscow on a visit,



and complained, producing the photograph inscribed by Shostakovich, that he, a personal friend of the late composer, was being forcibly kept in the country for political reasons. The Italian Communist daily newspaper *L'Unita* published a feature on Volkov with the same photograph. That did the trick. Chancing upon Volkov at a concert, I asked him to call and leave a copy with me of the text in his possession that Dmitry Shostakovich had not authorized. He replied that he had already sent the text abroad, and if the authorities tried to keep him back it would be published, with additions. Soon he left and I have not seen him since.

The additions were not long in coming. He started looking for a publisher, turning to prominent musicians for recommendation, every time enclosing with his request the same photograph where he was with Dmitry Shostakovich.

Later I read an insert in the booklet for an LP with Mstislav Rostropovich's recording of the opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* issued abroad. It said that Volkov had been an assistant of Shostakovich. Afterward, in his introduction to the book, Volkov wrote that, when alone at home, Dmitry Shostakovich would often phone him and they would meet on the quiet. Here Mr. Volkov lets his imagination run away with him: this was out of the question, if only because at the time Dmitry was too ill to be left unattended. And we were mostly out of town, at our dacha. And anyway, what was there to hide? Volkov's name is conspicuously absent from any letters written by Shostakovich about that time, e.g., from his letters to I.D. Glikman.

Volkov found a publisher in the United States, and a publicity campaign was launched at once. Excerpts from the book appeared in a German magazine and eventually reached Russia where there was a state monopoly on intellectual property. The All-Union Copyright Agency demanded an expert examination of Shostakovich's signature. American experts confirmed its authenticity. The book was published. Each chapter was prefaced with the words "Text read. Shostakovich" in the composer's hand. I know that in this way Dmitry Shostakovich signed texts by various authors intended for publication in *Soviet*

Music; he received them at regular intervals and sent them back the editorial office where Volkov was staff member. Unfortunately, American experts did not know Russian and could not (nor were supposed to) correlate the signature with the meaning of the words that bore no relation to Volkov's book. I believe my theory to be correct, the more so since any speaker of Russian would find it odd that an author should make this kind of inscription on their own text.

As for additions, Volkov himself told me that he had discussed Shostakovich at length with various people, in particular with L.N. Lebedinsky, who later proved an unscrupulous memoir writer and with whom Shostakovich had broken long before that. Volkov was received, at his request, by film director L.O. Arnshtam, a friend of Shostakovich - who later said he regretted it. The story of a telephone conversation with Stalin had been told by him. All those things were incorporated in the book in the form Solomon Volkov chose to give them, on Shostakovich's behalf.

The book was as translated into several languages and published in various countries, except Russia. At first Volkov said his American publishers objected to a Russian edition; then he alleged he had been offered too small a fee in this country; after that, he complained that the prospective Russian publishers were in fact shady dealers; and finally, he announced that he had sold his manuscript to a private archive and it was now inaccessible. Back translation absolves one from responsibility and gives new opportunities.

Dmitry Shostakovich is reproached for having signed a letter by Soviet intellectuals against Academician Andrei Sakharov published in the Communist daily *Pravda*. Indeed, his name is among those printed in the newspaper, but he never signed that letter. That day I answered the numerous calls from the *Pravda* office, saying that Dmitry was out, then that he was at the dacha, and when I was told that they were sending a car there, we simply left home and stayed out all evening when the paper had gone to press. Nevertheless Shostakovich's name appeared among the signatures. A short while ago we asked to see the original of that letter, but the *Pravda* people refused to show it to us, conceding, however, that "such was the way things were done then." I know they were .

The same was done with the letter in defense of Mikis Theodorakis - at the time Dmitry Shostakovich was away in hospital. Trying to dispute the signature after the event was altogether futile.

Irina Shostakovich
Moscow, July 2000

Shostakovich's Testimony

Solomon Volkov replies in the *Moscow News* [No. 34 August 30 - September 5, 2000]

Having to protest one's obvious innocence is both distressing and humiliating. But sometimes there is no alternative. MN No. 31 (August 9-15, 2000) carried a letter by Irina Shostakovich the composer's widow. There she questions the credibility of the book *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitry Shostakovich as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov* that was published in the West 21 years ago. Today I would like to tell, of necessity briefly, the *real* story of the book's writing.

Let me begin at the beginning. Irina Shostakovich assures the reader that when work started on the memoirs, that is in 1971, I was someone "whom the composer did not know at all well." In fact, by then I had personally known Dmitry Shostakovich for over a decade. I was first introduced to the great composer, whom I worshipped as a 16 year-old admirer, after I wrote a rapturous review of his Quartet No. 8's premiere for the Leningrad *Smena* newspaper. That was in 1960. Shostakovich did not meet his third wife Irina till 1962.

But this is by the by.

Our relationship matured over the years: I published several more reviews of his works' first performances; in the spring of 1965, I was one of the organisers and participants of the Shostakovich festival at the Leningrad Conservatory, in which capacity I again met and talked with him. Eventually, Yuri Kochnev, now a prominent conductor, and myself set up an experimental chamber opera theater in Leningrad and staged *Rothschild's Violin* (after Chekhov) written by Veniamin Fleishman, Shostakovich's favorite student who had perished at the front - another first.

