



John Riley

The dramatisation of an artist's life is not an unusual event. Writers, performers, painters, sculptors and composers; all have been so

honoured, and Shostakovich is not unique in having been the subject of plays and films. But this is not the aim of Complicite's *The Noise of Time*. That Shostakovich was born in 1906 is just one of the many facts that the innocent attendee to this show will not learn.

The clue is in the title, *The Noise of Time* - in Russian *shum vremya* - a phrase coined by Mandelstam to convey the idea of the texture, the granularity of time's passing. *The Noise of Time* is a densely woven show that touches on many themes: the mechanics of sound and the act of listening; how to listen to music; how the same piece is different in two different performances; how the same performance is different to two different listeners and how the same performance is different to the same listener at different times. But ultimately it is about the interweaving of memory and death - the preservation of the one and the avoidance of the other.

Appropriately then, much of it takes place in the dark. The show opens with the entry of the Emersons and the darkening of the auditorium. A single light illuminates the

THE NOISE OF TIME

radio that will be a recurrent theme and we hear a series of voices taking us back through time, from the mock BBC announcement of the show's future broadcast, back through the space-flight of Yuri Gagarin, to the war, and beyond to pre-war broadcasts of popular music. The four actors are equipped with tiny lamps to cast soft pools of light on the props - empty costumes which sweep across the stage, a cello doomed to be ripped apart and returned to fragile wholeness, and the ubiquitous radios. The richly textured soundscape comprises contemplations on time, history and the universe, excerpts from writings about Shostakovich and fragments of his music... *Rodina shlyshit*... though space is a vacuum.

Codes too make their appearances with the opening phrase of the Fifteenth String Quartet spelling out the Morse code for the letter D. But more; in shipping code the letter D means "Keep away: manoeuvring with great difficulty". Did Shostakovich mean this second meaning, an ironic comment on his physical and personal plight? Probably not, but it is not director Simon McBurney's intention to 'explicate' the composer or his works or the quartet, a performance of which crowns *The Noise of Time*. He does not subscribe to the reductionist approach of formulating a one-to-one relationship between music and mean-

ing. It is different for us all at different times, and different features will seem more or less important.

The show is planned as an hour-long diminuendo running seamlessly into a performance of the five *adagios* and one *adagio molto* that comprise the Fifteenth Quartet. After the sands of time have run backwards, sloughing off contemporaneity and drawing us into timelessness, the diminuendo focuses us on the act of listening, preparing us for this most extraordinary piece, whose slowness is a confrontation, a reflection and a defiance of death.

Do we come out of the show our metabolisms slowed, prepared to listen differently not just to this piece but to all music, perhaps all sounds? Probably that is the only way to judge this show. To expect an enacted 'pre-concert lecture' is to be doomed to disappointment.

Shortly afterwards I listened again to the quartet and, even without the preamble, I heard it in a different way. Was it the shadow of the show? The show might argue that it is impossible to say how much it was that and how much it was simply the effect of another encounter with the work. But images and sounds have stayed with me, attached to or detached from the music. And I have listened in a different way.

NEW BABYLON IN ROTTERDAM

John Riley

The story of *New Babylon*'s failure has been told often enough but there is a strange modern twist to it. Due to the fact that it was taken off after a few days in 1929, nobody gained any great experience of conducting the music, and the poor performances probably contributed to its failure; but in recent years that has changed with several screenings accompanied by the score. Two such performances took place in the Rotterdam Gergiev Festival during September 2001 and both were conducted by Mark Fitz-Gerald. Having conducted *New Babylon* more than twenty times over the last twelve years he probably has more experience of this work than anyone, so it seemed an ideal opportunity for the *DSCH Journal* to talk to him.

He first conducted the work in 1989 with the Basle Sinfonietta, but confusion over the score and the film print provided left him unsatisfied, though fascinated by its possibilities. One of the legacies of the 1929 failure is that there exist various versions of the music and of the film; it is therefore important that the right ones are chosen in order to make them synchronise correctly.

"I've seen a copy of the German version [a restoration of the film disowned by Trauberg for reinstating footage that he cut] and it just doesn't work with any of the published scores. Act Three [which is much longer in the German version] is just too slow and you have to hold the music back to make it fill the time. No, the version the BBC used for their broadcast is

the one. I'm sure of it. You see, if you look at it from the point of view of the music you'll see how it fits the film beautifully. Over all the times I've conducted it I've continued to refine it and work on the synchronisation and now I can actually get particular moments to absolutely match what happens on screen; but at the same time it works musically. I think that's what so wonderful about this score. But it is very complex. As the conductor, you're thinking way ahead of where you would be in an orchestral concert; you're planning what's going to be on screen and in the music in several seconds' time so that the synchronisation will work. Tiring too, for the orchestra as well as the conductor. It's like playing two symphonies; one straight after the other. I also keep finding echoes of other pieces (apart from the



famous Offenbach and all the others). For example, there's a bit of the First Symphony in there and in Act Five there's a moment that's exactly like the opening of Ulrica's scene from *Un ballo in maschera*, even down to the orchestration."

But the quotations are often changed - I'm thinking of the Tchaikovsky piano piece where he rewrites the left hand.

"Yes. That's an interesting one because you can make the left hand match what you see on screen very closely. I think he must have intended that - otherwise, as you say, why rewrite it?"

Apart from finding the right print, another problem with silent films is that they could be projected at various speeds. Edison's early experiments were at around 40 frames per second (fps) while D.W. Griffith's early films go at about 12 to 15 fps. It was only in the late 1920s, and especially with the introduction of on-film synchronised sound, that 24 fps became the standard that it remains. Obviously the speed that the film runs at dictates how fast or slow the music is played so that it synchronises. What does Fitz-Gerald do about this?

"Omri Hadari [who conducted live performances and the BBC broadcast] changed the speed from reel to reel and we do the same sort of thing. Reel three and seven are at 22 fps but the rest can go at 20 fps. But you have to be very careful about it. I remember once when at the rehearsal they claimed to be following my speeds but it just felt wrong. Then, before the show the projectionist told me I was right - the calibration on their projector was incorrect! And another time, they oiled the projector in between the rehearsal and the performance, so it ran just that little bit faster!"

Changing the film speed in the middle of a performance might seem odd but it was actually common practice in cinemas in the West. However, conditions in the Soviet Union meant that in many places they would have been glad simply to get through the performance. The equipment was often antiquated and the unpredictable electricity supply would cause unexpected changes in the projector speed.

"Oh, absolutely yes! What we're presenting here is not what happened in 1929 but what Shostakovich might have liked to

have seen; the film well-projected with good musicians, who've had plenty of rehearsal with the film."

Turning to the actual score, what kind of state is it in?

"In central Europe the only available score for use with the film is from Sikorski. I don't know where they got the material from but it's significantly different from the score and parts that are held by Boosey and Hawkes in London, which I understand are copies of Shostakovich's own manuscript and the first performance material. The London parts seem to be for solo strings; perhaps it was to be conducted by the leader as the part is so heavily cued, but that's the smallest difference. The first thing I did was to compare the Sikorski edition with the Boosey material." At this point Fitz-Gerald opened the score to reveal a patchwork of cuts and additions that he has had to make, taken from various published scores. "Here, for instance, there's a section missing so I've had to just write it out myself and paste it in. And here they've repeated two bars by mistake, so they're crossed out. There are also a lot of wrong notes I've had to correct and some of the parts are misaligned. I'm still continuing to improve and correct things - even now I see odd wrong notes here and there. I've added a couple of things to the orchestra as well - effects really, as would have been usual at the time; a sewing machine for the seamstresses and the cobbler is accompanied by a little hammer. That would have been usual with the old cinema orchestras. The players have video monitors showing the film and at that point they don't follow me but watch what's on-screen."

Apart from these corrections, his score is also littered with notes about how the music should synchronise with the film and, not unsurprisingly given the state of the materials available, he's very interested by DSCH Publishing's plan to produce a complete edition. Amazingly, this much-corrected score is the one that he uses in performance. "Otherwise I'd have to copy out the entire score." He points to the top of the page to show that "another thing is that the Sikorski edition omits many dynamics and tempo indications. They're essential and can be found in the Boosey and Hawkes score."

There is a final, very brief scene that doesn't appear in the film though an early published script included it. Is there any more music than he performs?

"No, not that I've seen. Perhaps it wasn't even filmed, or was filmed but cut before Shostakovich wrote the music. Certainly all the versions that I've seen end where we end it."

What about other performances that he's seen?

"I have to say that Omri Hadari did an excellent job. Generally speaking that's a good representation."

But there were some unfortunate moments in the broadcast - studio time was limited so there were no retakes, and a wrong note in the trumpet early on is one of several noticeable mistakes.

"Yes, that's true. As I say, generally speaking it's good, though not perfect. But the trumpet parts are particularly difficult. Maybe Shostakovich knew a very good trumpeter. It's a very difficult score - I'm not surprised the 1929 orchestra had such problems with it. They have to be absolutely aware of what the conductor is doing all the time. And staying with the film adds to the problems. There are moments that can be very hard to recover from. In Act One for instance there's a part where, if you get just one bar out of sync with the film it can take five pages of full score to get back. But there are places where he seems to have predicted that and put in optional repeats of very small sections so that you could use those to expand or contract the score to get back into step with the film."

And finally, what about the preparations for these performances?

"We're lucky here. The band comes from the conservatory so we've been able to schedule something like eight or twelve hours of rehearsal just with the music and then even more rehearsals with the film. But it pays off and I think the performances will be really good. It's a little bit larger than some orchestras I've done it with and I think that's good as well." Fitz-Gerald's prediction came true and speaking to him after the performances he said that he felt they were amongst the best performances he'd ever conducted, and the audience certainly enjoyed it. We can only hope he has many more opportunities to conduct *New Babylon* and that the new edition of the score encourages other conductors to take up this difficult but immensely rewarding piece.

