

THE HEART OF THE TENTH SYMPHONY

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Discoveries concerning the Tenth Symphony comprise one of the best-documented stories to emerge within Shostakovich studies in recent times. Following Nelly Kravetz' revelations surrounding the contents of correspondence between Dmitry Shostakovich and Elmira Nazirova, a pianist and composer from Azerbaijan[1] a number of articles appeared in which aspects of the Tenth Symphony were now viewed in the light of this new biographical data: broadly speaking, the emotions the composer experienced towards his ex-student[2] and the place these emotions forged themselves in his work.

The author of this article was probably among the first in whom Elmira Nazirova confided this chapter of her life. This was in August 1990, just prior to her emigration to Israel. "We need to talk, Aida", she requested during a phone conversation. "It's really important. Could you stop by my place, please?" We were already very close - Nazirova was more than merely my piano professor at college and then Conservatory, she was my genuine spiritual mentor and had a tremendous influence on me as a musician and as a person. It was no accident that I devoted my first scholarly article to my favorite teacher[3]. At the appointed time I entered Nazirova's nice, cozy apartment in downtown Baku. I dearly loved this place as it reminded me of my piano classes, Nazirova's enjoyable birthday parties and meetings with her wonderful family. At that time I often simply stopped by to say hello or to share problems, both professional and personal.

Our confidential talk seemed to last an eternity. It was my exposure to another, parallel world that had remained hidden beneath the surface - a surface with which I was very familiar. I had always known that Nazirova and Shostakovich had been well acquainted with each other; I had

admired for many years Shostakovich's portrait containing his written dedication "To dearest Elmira from Dmitry Dmitriyevich". And, quite symbolically, our conversation took place right next to this portrait, hanging on the wall in Nazirova's study. She didn't seem to be excited; rather, what I noticed in her eyes was an immense sense of relief as she spoke, able to reveal so much after so many years of silence.

Nazirova's preoccupation was for her precious manuscripts. "We are all aware of how complicated the issue of emigration is," she said. "Passing through customs and a lot of various official channels: I really don't know what the destiny of these letters will be. That's why I request you read them now: I hope you will write about this story some time."

What I heard about and read about that day was so startling that my article formed itself in my mind almost immediately, but because of many reasons it has not been published. More than ten years later and these facts have lost their sensational edge, but to my mind the full story of Dmitry Shostakovich's sincere, pure and quite desperate love remains to be told. When and in what circumstances did Shostakovich and Nazirova meet and how did their relationship grow? How were the facts that surround this episode of the composer's life sublimated in the music of the Tenth Symphony? And, above all, who is this woman who entered the life and the music of the great man?

They first met in the autumn of 1947 in Moscow. By this time Elmira was already known in Azerbaijan as a promising young musician. She had been a genuine child prodigy and at Baku Music School, operating under the Azerbaijani Conservatory, Elmira was admitted into a separate group for gifted children. Nazirova's first professional achievements were so impressive that in 1942, at the age of 14, she was honoured with membership of the Azerbaijani Composers' Union! In 1944 Elmi-

ra presented her Piano Preludes during the 'Decade of Music of the Transcaucasian Republics' in Tbilisi, Georgia, where her composing and performing talents were highly regarded by many prominent Soviet musicians including Reinhold Gliere[4]. However, the person here who played a crucial role in Nazirova's future was Uzeir Hajibeyov, revered in Azerbaijan as a national genius and the founder of classical music in the country. Hajibeyov suggested that Elmira should continue her education at the world-reputed Moscow Conservatory: and so it was that she moved to study piano there with Yakov Zak and composition with Dmitry Shostakovich.



She spoke to me quite nostalgically about the unique atmosphere in Shostakovich's class, where the students were encouraged to delve into the inner workings of certain composers' creative minds, where heated discussions occurred on a variety of issues in literature and in art and where performances took place of Haydn and Beethoven symphonies on two pianos, and so forth.

At this time Elmira witnessed the deeply tragic period in Shostakovich's life following the infamous 1948 Decree in which the composer was singled out for particular criticism. She remembers how, during one of the concerts in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, she chose a seat somewhere near Shostakovich or, more precisely, within the 'vacuum' around him, and how the composer asked her, surprised, "Aren't you scared?"

Nazirova rejected the idea of her having been aware of anything different, or special in Shostakovich's manner of relating to her at this time. "I could not even imagine anything of that kind - I was so abashed in his presence!" she explained to me.

“And he never verbalised his feelings.” However, certain emotions, unconsciously perhaps, had already begun to grow in Shostakovich’s heart. How else to explain the paragraph in a letter to Nazirova dating from July 29th 1953 where he describes his excitement in noticing Elmira among the people who came to meet him in Baku. In 1948, after her marriage to a student of the Azerbaijani Medical Institute Miron Fel, Elmira returned to Baku and resumed her studies in the Azerbaijani Conservatory with Georgiy Sharoyev (piano) and Boris Zeidman (composition). But the intensely active musical life in the former Soviet Union soon brought her into contact with her mentor once more. Shostakovich’s close associations with many Azerbaijani musicians led him to pay frequent visits to Baku.

In 1952 he came to the city twice: in March he participated in a concert devoted to his own works and later, in December, he attended the premiere of the ballet *Seven Beauties* by Kara Karayev, his former student and close friend. Elmira, in turn, often went to Moscow, participating in various projects organized by the Soviet Composers’ Union: discussing professional issues with her colleagues from the Moscow Conservatory, giving public performances, and so on. In 1951, together with Sviatoslav Knushevitsky, she performed her Cello Sonata in the Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatory. And so again and again she met with her guru, her own special listener yet remaining a severe and demanding critic.

Their relationship evolved at this time into one of a new and ever-growing intellectual intimacy. They met frequently, took long walks, listened to Beethoven and Mahler symphonies, arguing on different issues related to either music or life. Shostakovich made suggestions to Elmira about her new compositions, encouraged the young composer to turn her attention to specific genres or forms and, at the same time, shared with her his own creative ideas.

Nazirova still treasures the scores of Shostakovich’s Preludes and Fugues, the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies as well as Robert Schumann’s *Frauenliebe und -leben*, all of which the composer presented to her, along with his

written dedications. On April 4th 1953 Elmira received Shostakovich’s first letter, in which he detailed misprints in the first edition of his Preludes and Fugues. This was the beginning of a correspondence that was to last for three and a half years. Every line of these precious documents contains



Elmira Nazirova

valuable information. Shostakovich shares with Elmira his philosophical ponderings about the irony of life, the essence of a composer’s work in general and correlated with his own experiences. But above all these letters reflect his incredibly profound and complex feelings in which love and admiration for Nazirova were combined with the deepest respect and appreciation of her professional abilities and successes. Almost all the letters feature this unique blend.

Sometimes Shostakovich chooses a humouristic way of expressing his feelings; in a letter from June 21st 1953 he simply includes the music phrase from Lensky’s *arioso* with its original words “I love you!” Here, too, he expresses his great interest in the works Nazirova was composing at the time - Variations for Piano, Etudes, a Piano Concerto and so on, asking her for the details of her own compositional process. “I wish you to compose a great deal of music and become a true composer. You have all the prerequisites”, he writes in his letter from January 25th, 1954.

He alludes to the apparent unattainability of their relationship when writing “Will our paths ever get together? Perhaps, never. There are many, too many reasons for that.” (July 29th 1953). Nevertheless, he calls his feelings toward Elmira “the most important event” in his life at the time (July 25th 1953). In the same letter Shostakovich informs Nazirova about getting started on his Tenth Symphony. From this point in time the intensity of their correspondence greatly increases. During the period of June 25th to October 30th Elmira received eighteen letters from Shostakovich. The composer informs her about each and every development of his work in

progress. In a letter from August 10th 1953 Shostakovich tells her about his seeing or, more precisely, hearing the



music of the third movement in a dream. Finally, on August 21st Elmira receives the striking news concerning the third movement theme depicting her name! “This is the result”, he writes in this letter. “Even if I had not arrived at this result, I would be thinking of you constantly - whether or not this fact is recorded in my worthless manuscripts”.

The purpose of this paper is far from that of a detailed musicological analysis of the Tenth Symphony; my objective is to reveal the psychological and conceptual inspiration behind this work and to discover how the composer’s real life emotional experiences are transformed into musical ideas. From this standpoint the alternating musical signatures D-Es-C-H and E-A-E-D-A allude to the deepness and profundity of Shostakovich’s feelings, the enigmatically beseeching qualities of the motive E-A-E-D-A denoting unattainability.

But just how was this emotionally-ground lyricism integrated so smoothly into the tragic concept of the symphony? I have already mentioned the source of the extreme hardships that Shostakovich endured at the end of the 1940s: a personal tragedy had unexpectedly trespassed his life. But it was at once this tragedy that proceeded to transform itself into a ‘musical countermeasure’: the emotional stimulus which, along with other parallel elements, won him back to life. The Tenth Symphony embodies the realization of this process, along with its resulting culmination. After undergoing a series of metamorphoses in the third movement, the composer’s musical signature is proclaimed at the final *coda* as a symbol of wisdom and as a vigorous will to live.

There is one more element to the story of the Tenth which reveals the essence of Shostakovich’s and Nazirova’s relationship: the similarity of the E-A-E-D-A motive to the theme depicting the ominous cries of the monkey in *Das Lied von der Erde* by Gustav Mahler.





In his letter from September 17th 1953 Shostakovich expresses his sincere astonishment at this connection, stating it as “interesting food for musicological research.” That Shostakovich heard Elmira’s “name” through Mahler’s musical language might reasonably be deduced as a consequence of his admiration of the Austrian composer and through the much-documented similarities between their styles. However, the most vital aspect is the semantic closeness of Mahler’s and Shostakovich’s themes; both portraying tragedy (symbolizing death in case of Mahler’s theme and doomed love in case of Shostakovich’s).

The composer invited Elmira to the Moscow premiere of the Tenth which took place on December 28th 1953 in the Great Hall of the Conservatory under Yevgeny Mravinsky. As she told me, she felt the author’s constant gaze during the entire performance. One year later the symphony was performed in Baku under Abram Stasevich. Shortly afterwards the score of the Tenth Symphony, including its dedication to Elmira Nazirova arrived at the Azerbaijani Composers’ Union along with the composer’s request to pass it on to the recipient. Nazirova smiled when she recalled how the leaders of this organization were perplexed at this gesture by such a nationally distinguished figure to his young colleague from Azerbaijan.

And so their correspondence gradually began to run out. In 1954 Elmira received only five letters and in 1955 and 1956 - one only in each year. In his final letter (September 13th 1956) Shostakovich informs her about his getting married to Margarita Kainova.

For Nazirova the mid-1950s signified a period of important professional accomplishments. She undertook an extensive tour as pianist, traveling in Russia, Georgia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Egypt and Iraq whilst performing with several orchestras conducted by Niyazi (Azerbaijan), Rakhlin, Stasevich (Russia), Satanovsky (Poland) etc. Nazirova also achieved success as a composer; for example her Etudes, the Piano Concerto on Arabic Themes and the Suite for Two Pianos on Alban Themes (these two pieces being co-authored with Fikrat Amirov). Indeed,

her works were of great importance in the development of piano music in Azerbaijan. In 1971 Elmira Nazirova became Professor at the Azerbaijani Conservatory and in 1972 she held the position of Chair in the Piano Department. Her activities gained official recognition and she was awarded the title of Honoured Art Worker of Azerbaijan.

Later, through attending various music forums around the Soviet Union, she was able to meet with Shostakovich once more, although now very infrequently. In March-April 1956 Shostakovich attended the First Assembly of the Azerbaijani Composers’ Union as an honoured guest; in May 1964 he participated at the Decade of Russian Culture in Azerbaijan. Fate also brought them together in July 1968 during a summer vacation at the Composers’ Union Resort Centre in Diligan, Armenia. They appear to have met for the last time in October 1972, in Baku during the Decade of Russian Literature and Art. Of course, the heightened emotions of the 1950s were now confined in the distant past; yet there remained alive a secret that tied their two hearts for good.

The musical world has long honoured figures such as Clara Schumann, Meta Abegg, George Sand, Mathilde Wesendonck, Harriet Smithson, Emma Debussy as muses of the great composers, becoming the important part of their biographies and music legacy. However for certain reasons Shostakovich was not able to reveal the secret of the Tenth Symphony. Primarily, he was guided by his ethical striving not to disrupt the peace in their respective families. Besides, such a “frivolous” musical dedication as that to be found in the Tenth would have run counter to the dogmas of Socialist Realism, contradicting the very image of the Soviet Composer.

All the same, the real story behind the Tenth Symphony was finally revealed. Elmira Nazirova’s name has been integrated into Shostakovich studies and new information has already been included in recent biographical and research work devoted to Shostakovich.

This story of the genius Shostakovich and his idealised love will stay with us forever. It is depicted through the reminiscences of a gracious, and highly talented woman distinguished by her charisma and unbelievable magnetism. It is mirrored in the words from the nervous, jerky hand of the composer that lavish the many stiffening, yellowing letters.

And, most of all, it remains symbolized in the immortal music of the Tenth Symphony where those two musical signatures - “Dmitry Shostakovich” and “Elmira” will stay beside each other forever.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Kravetz, N.(1994) *A New Insight Into the Tenth Symphony of Dmitry Shostakovich*, paper, Michigan University, 28 January 1994; Kravetz, N.(1994) Revelations - the Tenth Symphony (a lecture in the series “Shostakovich - The Man and His Music” - Michigan University, January 1994). In: *DSCH Journal*, Summer 1994, p. 24-25; Kravetz, N.(1996) *A New Insight Into the Tenth Symphony of Dmitry Shostakovich*. In: *Dmitry Shostakovich. A Collection of Articles (90th Anniversary of his birth)*. St. Petersburg: Kompozitor; Kravetz, N. (2000) *A New Insight Into the Tenth Symphony of Dmitry Shostakovich*. In: *Shostakovich in Context*, ed. by Rosamund Bartlett. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

[2] Fay, L.(2000) *Shostakovich: A Life*. New York: Oxford University Press; MacDonald, I.(2000) Writing about Shostakovich/Dating the Tenth Symphony. In: *DSCH Journal*, Summer 2000, p. 10-14; Meyer, K(1998) *Shostakovich: Life, Works, Time*, St.Petersburg: “DSCH”, Kompozitor; Wilson, E.(1994) *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, London, Boston: Faber and Faber.

[3] Behbudova, S. & Huseynova, A. (1988) Elmira Mirza Riza gizi Nazirova. In: *Prominent Representatives of the Piano Culture of Azerbaijan*, Baku: Ishig, p. 115-29

[4] “Among many young composers we should credit Elmira Nazirova who performed in the concert several simple but nevertheless very expressive preludes”, Reinhold Gliere mentioned in the *Baku Worker* newspaper on December 29th 1944.

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