

# DOCUMENTARY II

## RELATING SHOSTAKOVICH

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Both of these stories took place at the main music school of Azerbaijan in 1986 and 1993 respectively. Seven years - not a particularly long period of time perhaps, but for the author, and for other 'heroes' of such stories living in the former Soviet Union, these were extremely long and particularly intense years: the great empire collapsed, Azerbaijan gained its independence, Azerbaijan State Conservatory was renamed Baku Music Academy. Freedom - the marvellous feeling we had dreamed about throughout the long years of censorship and restrictions - the threshold to a new life. I still recall the great enthusiasm, euphoria even, with which we rid ourselves of "ideological rubbish" as new curricula were planned and the contents of courses decided.

Back to 1986, and classes on Opera Dramaturgy for musicology majors. Ludmila Vladimirovna Karagicheva, one of our favourite professors, acquainted us with the most significant opera concepts to have evolved since Monteverdi. This particular class was devoted to Shostakovich's operatic development as reflected in *The Nose*.

"Are you familiar with Gogol's story?"

Ludmila Vladimirovna asked the question quite formally, clearly anticipating our affirmative response. It was to be expected: our small group, "seven intellectual girls" had a good reputation among our professors. Her next question seemed to be equally straightforward:

"Do you know what the main idea of this story is?"

Of course, we did. In all available critical sources, *The Nose* was considered a perfect example of Gogol's humour. Such a point of view seemed entirely convincing, and we obligingly evoked it. After all, isn't it funny that the hero loses his nose and then, after endless adven-

tures, discovers it in a loaf of bread? But to our surprise, when we shared this explanation with our teacher it did not satisfy her at all.

"There is something else, beyond the humorous aspect...", she replied. And continued after a pause: "Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, you are not mature enough for me to clarify this issue fully..."

Our minds began to work at high speed. Her reference to our being "not mature enough" obviously pointed to quite different aspects of human behaviour.

"If you are familiar with the theory of psychoanalysis," Ludmila Vladimirovna articulated each word very slowly allowing us "to digest" the meaning, "you should know that situations and events in human life may signify more than appears at first glance."

Everything became clear at that moment. Although Sigmund Freud had never officially been available to Soviet readers, his works nevertheless found their way to us in innumerable illegal copies. Indeed, in this regard Freud's writings belonged to the activities of a community of intellectuals, united in a hidden purpose - to get to know publications beyond those officially recognized and approved. Such communities were formed at Research Institutes and Universities and were linked within a kind of network, allowing exchanges of illegal copies of books and articles. I still recall leather-bound, carefully typed out copies that we treasured and read secretly, sometimes even during boring lectures on Marxist-Leninist theories. The translation of such works might not have been perfect but this did not at all prevent us from completely immersing ourselves in the content.

Most of Soviet *intelligentsia* was well familiar with Freud's theories, but to discover the link between forbidden Freud, the "Great criticizer of tsarist Russia", Gogol and the "Great Soviet composer

Shostakovich" was so strange, shocking even! This may well have been the first time in my life that I fully realised the



notion of a unity embodying world music and culture, and recognising the truly conditioning character of borders - be they political, ideological, cultural or chronological. And I would have never anticipated that a few years later I would become the part of another, similar scenario: again a class on Shostakovich and once more involving discussions of his music in an indirect way.

I must clearly have become "mature enough" for now I hold a position of lecturer of History of Music; it was in this context that a certain work recently had me recalling the class of Ludmila Vladimirovna and her strategy. The work was, of course, Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony.

I had already been firmly initiated into the story behind this work, i.e. the dedication to Elmira Nazirova, but due to ethical considerations I was not able to share this very personal information with anyone. I felt led by a somewhat instinctive aspiration to keep this information concealed for a certain period: clearly I needed time to comprehend fully the unique situation in which I found myself and secondly it seemed that if I had simply shared this information with my class *without* any reference to a published source, that it would be transformed into a form of gossip, thereby losing its substantial musical and cultural significance.

So, how to reveal the essence of the Tenth whilst avoiding direct reference to these facts. I had no choice other than to tell my students the following:

"The concept of the Tenth has a strong link to Azerbaijan and its music; it reflects certain romantic sentiments that Shostakovich experienced with regard





to a young colleague from Baku. You may judge the significance of this relationship

through the fact that he depicted her name musically in one of the movements of the symphony. Please, do not ask me any further questions, as I haven't yet the moral right to tell you the full story. I hope I will... Soon..."

Of course my students immediately applied all of their instinctive and intuitive abilities to this mystery and after a short investigation many of them discovered who this "mysterious lady" was. (Actually, it was not that difficult: Elmira Nazirova was the only female musician from Baku who had studied with Shostakovich.)

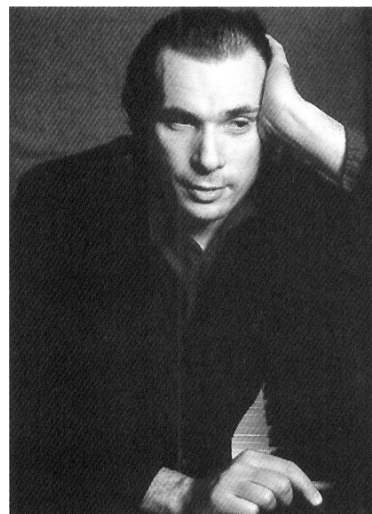
Two years passed, the story of Elmira and Shostakovich was finally revealed and since that time we have been discussing it freely in our class. But I still draw from this experience with the Tenth, considering it a very important lesson in both professional and personal terms. Through it I realised that the truth can often resist being told and that social or political freedom do not necessarily guarantee freedom of thought and self-expression. That the boundary limits of freedom can widen and expand but never disappear...

# Q U O T A T I O N S

## Glenn Gould on Shostakovich

It is commonplace to observe that around 1925 one of the most prodigiously gifted young men of music was Dmitri Shostakovich. As everyone who has heard it will bear witness, his First Symphony, which was written at that time, is as lucid, imaginative, and joyously autobiographical as a first symphony ought to be. It is an extraordinary work, one in which this teenager sampled without inhibition the cultural reservoir of Western music, dipped cautiously into the expressionistic extravagance of Gustav Mahler, borrowed a bit of the motoric rhythms of the neoclassicists, sampled the double-entendre pivot chords of the early Schoenberg, and whipped all of this into a confection that chronicles the adolescence of a young man of such prodigious gifts that he might reasonably be expected to become the great one of the coming generation.

That he did not become so may be counted as one of the genuine tragedies of twentieth-century music. Shostakovich today is occupied with Symphony Number Fourteen or so. He turns out works which no longer speak with the intensity of Mahler because there is no longer anything that he wishes to be intense about. The rhythmic propulsion of the early works has turned into the incessant pulsing of an organism, fatigued and overworked and trapped by a treadmill of his-



torical delusion which shows no sign of relinquishing its incessant demands of productivity. The skilful ambiguities of Schoenbergian double meaning have become frigid and tawdry, stylised clichés embarrassing in their frequency. All that remains is the occasional moment of some strange ecstatic adagio (Shostakovich, like all real symphonists, always had a sense of adagio) to indicate what might have been. Superficially, at any rate, Shostakovich would seem to be a victim of the stultifying conformity that the regime has demanded.

Glenn Gould, *Music in the Soviet Union*, from a lecture delivered at the University of Toronto, 1964; in: *The Glenn Gould Reader*, New York 1990, pp. 177-8.

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