

DOCUMENTARY II

Spain and a Russian Symphony - 1947

What follows constitutes one of those curious examples of a would-be critical analysis of Shostakovich that occasionally finds its way into the Journal's in-tray and whose extreme waywardness, combined with a very exceptional historical-politico-sociological background almost imposes its inclusion in these pages. My sincere thanks go to Lewis Owens and Nora Klein, for their endless patience in translating the piece from its original Spanish roots:

Alferez Madrid, 28 February 1947

A Russian Symphony

Federico Sopea

In all surveys of contemporary European music made before the war [WWII] appears a very brief section: variations on what little was known about Soviet music. I have tried to impose a little order onto the list of a few names and many topics.

Is there really such a thing as Soviet music? How has it attempted to fit into the world of Marxism? It isn't enough to repeat Lenin's well-known pronouncement concerning Beethoven's *Pathétique Sonata*, from which surely flows the essential posture: music as understood in the West belongs to that soporific system invented by the bourgeoisie. The most revolutionary music in Europe, the music which has been causing heads to turn for the past twenty years - that of Stravinsky - is diametrically opposed to the wishes of the Soviet theoreticians. Stravinsky, friend of order and, let us recall, friend of the Spanish cause during its

most difficult moments, had a marvellous reason to feel like a "revolutionary" in the face of the Soviet idea of music.

During those turbulent political times there was a small symphonic work which passed as a faithful symbol of the Five Year Plan: "The Steel Factory" [commonly known as *The Iron Foundry*] by Mosolov, the final, obligatory work during those free and crowded concerts organized to celebrate the 14th April festival. That childish succession of dissonances was taken as a joyful ode to the machine, an exaltation of healthy music, virile and in no way sentimental. A Parisian conductor got the idea of putting it on the same programme as Honegger's *Pacific 231*. What was, from this entirely European composer, an abstract work of mature grace in a playful spirit with spring-like forward-looking dissonances, was judged by the Russians an old, dry work. Many naive followers wedded this idea with those radically minority experiences, let us not forget, of Soviet film, whose music too, could not compare with the 'creative noise' of a Honegger or a Jacques Ibert. Others, somewhat better informed, presented us with Prokofiev as the musician of Communist Youth - a musician who did not go to Russia until 1937 [sic], tart and modern, instinctive and barbaric but like Markevich, with far from Soviet feelings: this Markevich, the 'Last Idol' of the Parisian salons, whose visits to Madrid in those days were nothing but a show of political posturing.

But now, yes. Now there is Soviet music, no less than a Seventh Sym-

phony, which has filled the American public with enthusiasm: a symphony written by the composer [sic], a young man of thirty plus years, during the siege of Stalingrad [sic], the name united with the symphony. At last the recording of the symphony of Dmitri Shostakovich has arrived. Here all is symbol: music boringly clear, 'romantic,' as one says, clinging to the most feeble symphonic tradition, a music of the conservatory classroom, of tempests without grandeur, naive barbarisms and devoid of tenderness. I re-read now the last and excellent issue of the *Italian Musical Review*. There too, one has heard without pleasure the Stalingrad Symphony [sic]. We had hoped for something else after hearing *The Golden Age*, also by Shostakovich, and clearly its very opposite: a Stravinsky-like caricature of the bourgeoisie. He did not achieve his goal there either, and one has even heard of harsh criticism from Soviet officialdom.

If Andre Gide could become an anti-Communist after seeing an exposition of Soviet painting, the reaction to the Stalingrad [sic] Symphony could be similar. If there is one thing of which it is difficult to rid a European, it is music which has penetrated his soul, especially now when one wishes, with nostalgia, to return to paradise lost. Let us not fool ourselves. If we can like the dry and powerful plastic of Stravinsky the reason comes from the past, from other friendly fields of human and tender music. But both forms - the playful and the tender - are equally tossed about by Soviet critics who now, a little reluctantly, begin to step back. Their criticism is like the Mass in St. Patrick's heard by Molotov.

