



DOCUMENTARY I

A Musical Joke

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In this essay I'll demonstrate Shostakovich's first compositions to include Jewish elements: The Nose, New Babylon and The Bedbug and I will illustrate the Jewish inflections in the different gallops and waltzes from his early works.

We all know that Shostakovich began to compose *The Nose* in 1927- 1928. We also know that Shostakovich lived at theatre director Meyerhold's home for two months at the same time (1928). Shostakovich was invited by Meyerhold to take part in *The Revizor* or *Inspector General* (Gogol) in 1928. He even played piano in the orchestra in a performance of Gnessin's Suite: *Jewish orchestra at the ball of the City Mayor* opus 41; this work was composed on the request of Meyerhold especially for the *The Revizor*. In this article I will describe some musical fragments from Gnessin's suite that were to be so important for the rest of Shostakovich's life.

Shostakovich had two magnificent 'teachers' at this time. Meyerhold and composer-author Gnessin, who was a member of the Society of Jewish Folk Music and later on a member of the National Jewish School[1]. Both were of importance as regards Shostakovich's way of composing with "laughter through tears" (see Gogol's *Dead Souls*) throughout the remainder of his career.

The Inspector General and its music.

The Inspector General is in reality a play about Russian bureaucracy and corruption under the Tsar in Gogol's time. It is a satirical comedy about a

town where a stranger is seen mistakenly as an inspector sent by the government as a spy.

The governor informs important citizens of his town that an Inspector General is coming. They receive a stranger with open arms. Everybody is trying to make him feel comfortable, which works out rather well. The fake inspector knows how to trick people and even gets himself engaged to the governor's daughter. At the end of the play a grand ball is given in honour of the inspector. When the time comes he disappears again, but not before swindling several people and he leaves with a pocket full of money. The whole town is relieved, however then the real Inspector General arrives...

Shostakovich not only played in the orchestra but also performed a song by Glinka, among other pieces, as one of the guests on stage. The ball scene was added by Meyerhold, who was inspired by another play; Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*[2]. Meyerhold liked the grotesque effect in this play produced by a Jewish band in combination with sophisticated ballroom dances.

Mikhail Gnessin (1883-1957)

Gnessin was a beloved pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov and studied together with M. Steinberg and Stravinsky. In 1906, he met Meyerhold and this was the beginning of a lifelong collaboration. Gnessin taught the actors 'rhythmical recitation', a phenomenon Meyerhold made use of in his later plays like *The Inspector General* where he combined it with 'biomechanism'. This consisted of a doll-like way of moving on stage, and has certain similarities with the rhythmical movements of Dalcroze's school.

Gnessin composed around 80 works and wrote several articles about music. He was Khachaturian's and Khrennikov's teacher and had close connections with Maria Yudina [see *DSCH Journal* No. 21 page 10]. In 1948 he defended several composers who were accused of formalism. Gnessin was a courageous man in this, the time of Stalin.

The Suite

As already stated, among the pieces Shostakovich played in *The Inspector General* was Gnessin's Suite: *Jewish orchestra at the ball of the City Mayor* - grotesque, incidental music that accompanied Gogol's piece. The Suite consists of an Introduction (a Fantasia or salute to the guests) & Quadrille; a Polka, a Romance, a Waltz, a Gavotte, Petits Pieds and a Gallop[3].

It was Meyerhold's idea to hire a Klezmer band to play the music in *The Inspector General*. Gnessin composed an introduction and quadrille including some ballroom dances. The piece is inflected with elements of Jewish folk music and composed in a classic way for a Jewish orchestra or Klezmer band. Gnessin also used a couple of themes composed by his grandfather. This Suite is a piece of music blessed with a wonderful sense of humour.

The Quadrille[4]

The Quadrille was a feature among certain 19th century composers. It had different meanings:

- * Originally for cavalry, to which horses (traditionally four horsemen and their horses) made different figures and 'danced' in twos
- * A French ballroom dance with five different figures or dance-rhythms





* A vehicle for musical jokes or parodies for composers, including dances on 'borrowed themes' - creating comedy effects by using well-

known song themes or instrumental compositions and adding certain rhythms from the ballroom.

Klezmer music

This is music played at wedding parties and is an invitation to dance. This is typically the kind of music referred to as depicting 'laughter through

tears', due to the shifting minor mode. It has frequent syncopation and many oompahs accentuated by *cassa* (Turkish drums) and other percussion, such as cymbals. The main instruments found in a Klezmer band at the beginning of the 20th century were also flute, oboe, clarinet, trumpet, cornet and strings.

Mozart

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik



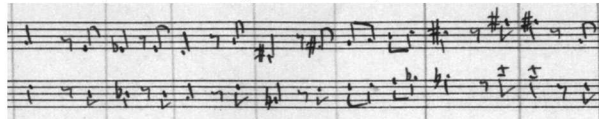
Gnessin

Galop (6-me figure)



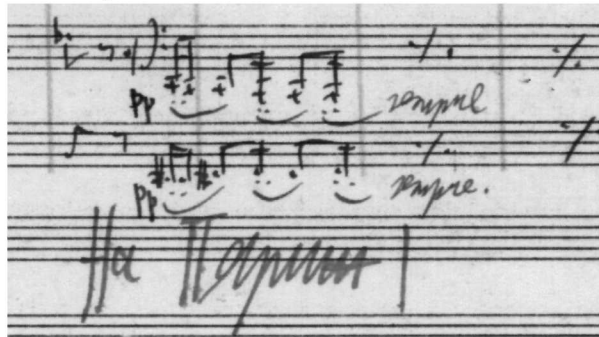
Shostakovich

New Babylon - Working men's army



Shostakovich

New Babylon - To Paris



New Babylon - Prussian Cavalry



Figure 1

Gnessin's article[3]

Gnessin gives a description of the music of a Jewish orchestra at the ball of the City Mayor in an article and in a letter to a friend. The music should be seen more as a kind of parody. He describes how he used Jewish themes by his grandfather and how he made use of Mozart's *Ein Musikalischer Spass* ('A musical joke') in the Quadrille.

Waltz and Gallop

The Waltz in the Quadrille

In his letter about the Waltz in the Quadrille, Gnessin tells us why this is a 'non-Waltz'. The music moves in duple and triple metre together with many after-beats, rendering it grotesque through its wrong notes. Gnessin declared that this Waltz was precisely inspired by the *Presto* of *Ein Musikalischer Spass*. This *Presto* has false notes in the horns, a gallop rhythm and there's an odd 'non fugue' concluding in a smirking endgame totally out of tune. Gnessin's use here of a Waltz mixed with the other ballroom dances is odd enough, while the Waltz (according to the composer) itself is a stranger to Jewish folk music.

The Quadrille - The Gallop

Gnessin describes this last movement as the most vulgar of the dances he ever wrote. It's a Jewish dance theme based on a *Beigele* (or *Beygele*) and derived from a melody written by his grandfather.

The gallop is made up from a continuous syncopation with off-beat or oompah statements on drums and wind accompanied by nervously whirling flutes. The oompah is



accentuated by Iambic primes and by the returning weak and strong beats caused by the multitude of grace-notes through all instruments. Although Gnessin gives a full explanation of the entire suite, he does not mention one word about the incorporation of the rhythm from the beginning of Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*[5]

This appears after a short introduction, featuring a prominent theme[6] played on trumpet. Those familiar with this music might try to find it or tap the rhythm while listening to Gnessin. And finally combine the melodies to Mozart's rhythm. A neat example of a musical joke or a parody among composers!

Shostakovich and the dances

Where does Shostakovich fit into all of this? Well we know about his fondness for dances, already noticeable in his work as a young composer. Additionally, ballroom dances were extremely popular in the twenties.

The Nose

Comparing the gallop of *The Nose* in connection with Gnessin's work: ponder the following text:

'On stage was a mass of running and whistling policemen, civilians and functionaries. "Ring the bells!" a headman cried out. And a cacophony of sounds burst out accompanied by noisy drums. In the midst of all this chaotic activity an orchestra plays a grotesque gallop[7].'

This is *not* a description of the a scene from *The Nose* where Kovalez runs to the police-station in a 'gallop' accompanied by whistles, cymbals and drums on the wrong beat. This is a description of the staging from 1926 by K. Rudnickiy of the final scene in the *Inspector General* for which Gnessin composed the Gallop in the Quadrille. In Shostakovich's opera the continuous oompahs, syncopations on drums and cymbal and the vulgar trumpet and trombone with, in the background, whirling flutes = the description of Gnessin's Gallop already evoked.

It's evident that the scenes have much in common. Compare Shostakovich's gallop in the first scene of *The Nose*

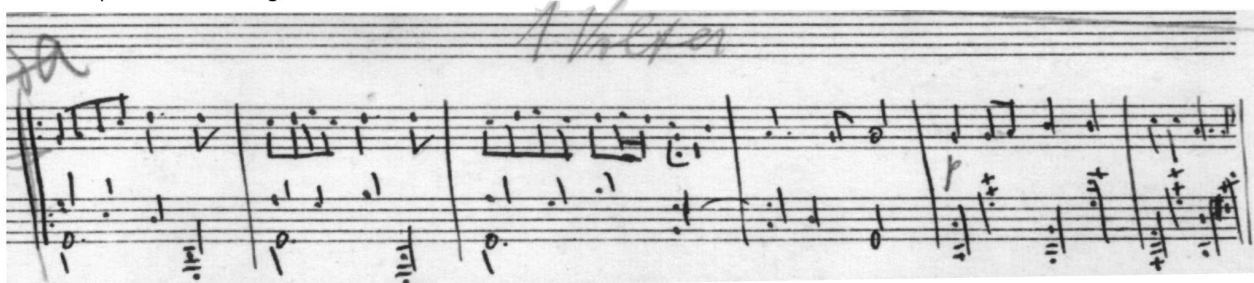


with Gnessin's piece, combined with the background noise. No doubt Shostakovich saw and heard *The Inspector General* before 1928 and it would be interesting to determine when he experienced the theatre piece for the first time. Perhaps he played Gnessin's piece earlier than described[7a]?

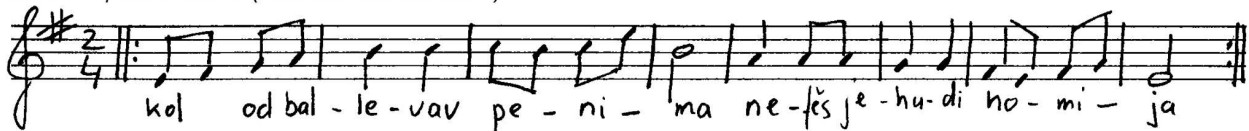
New Babylon

Because of the upcoming war the goods of a big department store New Babylon are going cheap. The store director invites the young saleswoman Louise to a ball. She accepts the invitation and sits at a table with the director, while everybody around is waltzing. (Actually it would be of interest to study the dances in *New Babylon*, and not only the can-can played to a waltz melody.

Shostakovich
New Babylon - French song



Zionist Hymm Hatikva (National anthem Israel)



Tchaikovsky
French song



Figure 2





There are men dancing in a circle, hats are flying in the air and there are signs of a *hora*. This could correspond to a

Jewish square (circling) dance called *sher* in Russia (often connected with the quadrille) and a *hora* from Israel, which is a common dance in Klezmer wedding music. Taken together, this constitutes a truly grotesque joke in *New Babylon*, while as already stated (by Gnessin) a waltz doesn't even belong in Jewish folk music)

Suddenly the news arrives that the Prussians are coming. Everyone is summoned to defend Paris. On the battlefield an officer along with his workers' army await the Prussian army.

New Babylon and its Gallops

The introduction to *New Babylon* begins with a gallop. The same gallop Shostakovich reused in Meyerhold's *Bedbug* in the piano version. As in Gnessin's gallop it has much syncopation and oompahs through drum and cymbal and vulgar trumpets. Then we find a waltz, out of tune and with wrong notes and missed beats - exactly as in Gnessin's piece. After this there's a grotesque melody with "tweeting birds", a so-called Romantic Waltz, ending with the gallop: end of introduction. The film continues with a long, distorted out-of-rhythm waltz with bizarre notes. Fragments of the melody are recognisable as the

waltz from Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène* but shrouded in a rather peculiar combination of Mozart and Gnessin's motifs. Finally there's a kind of threatening melody with galloping horses announcing the beginning of war just before TO PARIS[8]. To illustrate the next scene, from Shostakovich's article on *New Babylon*[9]:

"For example at the end of the second reel the important episode is the German cavalry's advance on Paris though the scene ends in an empty restaurant. Silence. But the music, in spite of the fact that the cavalry is no longer on screen, continues to remind the audience of the approaching threat (similar to Wagner's leitmotif technique). I constructed a lot of the music on the principle of contrast

The Contrast with a little help from Gnessin and Mozart

After the *can-can*, on an empty battlefield with a flag and a horse, the music moves on with a newly-born kind of gallop featuring Mozart's *presto* rhythm and the opening rhythm of *Eine Kleine Nachmusik*, and has close connections with Gnessin's gallop (see score 6). It's repeated several times in the film, particularly clearly at the moment when the officer stands before the workers' army. The effect is to hear the threatening approach of the cavalry while the leader speaks to his men. Musically we hear the rhythmical portrayal of galloping horses[10] belonging to the approaching Pruss-

ian cavalry, combined with the soft-sounding out-of-tune melody which here gives the impression of the sound of speech (Gnessin studied declamation/recitation in combination with drama and music) along with the rhythmic pulse of Mozart[11].

In *New Babylon*, the *Marseillaise* is quoted in a distorted form, and there is also a quotation that closely resembles the *Hatikva*[12a+b] which, translated, means 'hope'[13] and which later became Israel's National Hymn[14]. Tchaikovsky used a strikingly similar melody under the title *Old French Song* in his *Album for the Youth*. [15].

Unmistakably, Shostakovich made frequent use of Gnessin's compositional methods in *New Babylon* (the 'Promised Land for the Jews'), most notably in his waltz and gallop. Gnessin's parody of Mozart's rhythm becomes a grotesque parody in Shostakovich's *New Babylon*. It's a special Shostakovich technique which in Dutch is called a *Droste Cacao tin* effect, better known as the *Russian Matruska*[16] effect.

The Bedbug

In Shostakovich's music to *The Bedbug*[17] I referred to the gallop that Shostakovich re-used from *New Babylon*. But maybe the *Closing March*[18] is of even more importance. It contains the heavily accented rhythm from the opening of Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachmusik*. The melody not only begins with the interval of a fourth, although heavily twisted with grotesque down beats,

Mozart

Eine Kleine Nachmusik



Shostakovich

Bedbug - Closing March

Figure 3



but also moves along in the same way as Mozart's theme. This is followed by a distorted *Farewell Song*, often used in Klezmer.

Finally

The question whether Shostakovich's interest in Jewish music was purely aesthetical is easily answered. For the reason he used Jewish elements in his music, read the following in connection with Gogol and music:

"Ideology in my view can be demonstrated in this manner. Let us take literature... here we now have two compositions on the theme of *The Factory*. Which of them is close to us? Clearly, Petrov's. In this way it is the attitude of the composer to a particular subject he wishes to illustrate that defines his ideology.....[19]"

Resume

The influence of Meyerhold and Gnessin was significant for Shostakovich's compositional style. The first works with Jewish inflections are *The Nose*, *New Babylon* and *The Bedbug*. Earlier, Joachim Braun[20] and Rita Flomenboim[21] mention the influence of Gnessin in *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, op. 79 and Shostakovich's Second Piano Trio op. 67. Esti Sheinberg points to the Gnessin grotesque elements in Shostakovich's *The Nose* and other works but doesn't indicate the precise emplacements. Gnessin's gallop and waltz in the Suite and in Shostakovich's *The Nose*, *New Babylon* and *The Bedbug* have much in common. Gnessin's Quadrille was a perfect source of imitation in musical structure and parody.

It was the 'Hanon's Exercise' for Shostakovich's entire life as composer. The many Jewish inflections in many of his works are a living proof of that!

ENDNOTES

[1] Nemtsov, Jascha. 2002, Michael Gnessin, page 133, 205 (Anatoli Drosdow). *Jüdische Musik in Sowjetrußland*, Verlag Ernst Kuhn

[2] Sheinberg, Esti. 2000, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich* page 300-309. Ashgate

[3] Gnessin, Michael. "O jumore v muzyke" [an answer on a letter of Rene B Fisher 1944] 1961 page 196-207

[4] *The New Grove*. 1980, Quadrille, page 489

[5] Mozart. Opening bars of *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (Figure 1)

[6] Gnessin's Suite: gallop (Figure 1)

[7] Hoffmeier, Dieter/Völker, Klaus, Werkraum Meyerhold. 1995, *Aus Meyerhold's "Auf dem Wege zur >>Algebra<< der Biomechanik. Meyerhold inszeniert den >>Revizor<<". Scène 15* page 122 Edition Hentrich, Herausgeber und Roger Melis

[7a] Natalja W. Lukjanowa (*D.D. Schostakowitsch* page 66) describes how Shostakovich already attended a special performance of *The Inspector General* for guests in September 1927. No doubt Shostakovich saw and heard the theatre piece more than once, perhaps even in 1926.

[8] *New Babylon*. To Paris. Shostakovich, Dmitri. Copy of the original score at the Centre Shostakovich, with permission of I.A. Shostakovich

[9] Riley, John. 2005 *Dmitri Shostakovich: A life in Film*, page 10: *Beware of music*. Ibtauris.com

[10] Prussian soldiers (Figure 1) from *New Babylon*



[11] Theme after Gnessin/Mozart by Shostakovich (Figure 1)

[12a] "Hatikva" Shostakovich (score); [12b] Idelsohn, Abraham Z 1992. *Jewish Music* Page 221/222 Dover publications, Inc New York

[13] Zak. Vladimir, 2003 *Die Hoffnung bleibt aus "Samuel" Goldenberg und "Schmuyle"* ssm 27 VEK

[14] *Hatikva* (Figure 2)

[15] *French Song* Tchaikovsky (Figure 2)

[16] Inspired by linguist J. Koster's idea about Russian Matruska dolls and recursion in language.

[17] Shostakovich wrote *New Babylon* (N.B) and *The Bedbug* simultaneously in the period between December 1928 January and February of 1929. The music for N.B is written to the rhythm of the film and to intensify the impressions it makes. It would be interesting to check which pieces Shostakovich composed first. In my view Shostakovich re-used fragments of N.B in *The Bedbug*.

[18] Closing March of *The Bedbug* Shostakovich, Dmitri (Figure 3)

[19] Wilson E, 1994 *Shostakovich: A life Remembered* pages 79, 80 Faber and Faber

[20] Braun, Joachim. *Shostakovich's Jewish Songs*. Introductory essay.

[21] Rita Flomenboim in correspondence with Henny v/d Groep 2004

