



# DOCUMENTARY II

## Shostakovich's last song cycle: *Four Verses of Captain Lebyadkin* opus 146

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Shostakovich is mostly known as a symphonist and a composer of instrumental music. But from his early opus 4 to his late opus 146, he composed vocal music: monumental operas and also several song cycles in which he used the texts of a single or a selection of poets. Around a half of Shostakovich's song cycles bear the title *Romances*. This term refers to a literary as well as to a musical form, which Shostakovich applies in a very broad and free sense. The composer attributed the musical title *romance* to texts that were not originally literary romances, suggesting that his musical setting might give the poems a new form or even a new interpretative origin. Only three of his cycles received the plain entitlement of "songs", while the others have titles that he used only once and that evoke a literary genre rather than a musical form: *Fables* (Krylov), *Satires* (Chorny), or *Monologues* (Pushkin). The titles of his final song cycles opus 145 and 146 are also unique – *Suite on verses* by Michelangelo and *Four verses of Captain Ledyadkin*. It would be too simplistic to claim that the *songs* and *romances* are more melodic and musical than the *satires*, *monologues* or *verses* – nevertheless, the titles underlining the literary genre or style suggest that the composer attached a particular importance to the chosen text.

Although Shostakovich was a great admirer of Dostoyevsky, he only made very discreet allusions to the author in his compositions. In the second act of his opera *The Nose*, based on a short story by Gogol, he introduced the text of Smerdyakov's song from the *Brothers Karamazov*. In addition, he composed a sequence featuring the *Marseillaise* and Offenbach's *Cancon* in his score to *New Babylon*, meant to represent the Franco-Prussian war and very probably inspired from Dostoyevsky's description of a fictitious piano piece from *The Devils*, consisting of the *Marseillaise* and a German folk song (the novel also depicts this same historical conflict.) It was only in his ultimate song cycle, composed in the final year of his life, that Shostakovich quoted Dostoyevsky's verses – and even here the composer gave the writer's work an oblique title, as if uniquely addressing Dostoyevsky connoisseurs. This title comes from the name of a character in Dostoyevsky's novel *The Devils* – Captain Lebyadkin (the subtitle *on words by Fyodor Dostoyevsky* is added by some editors). Shostakovich underlines here that Dostoyevsky pretended not to speak for himself, but to let a *yurodivy* speak his nonsense – and the composer does the same in his musical setting: he makes the strange character Lebyadkin sound like an out-of-control marionette, shouting and singing out of tune.

This "shyness" towards one of his favourite authors is rather mysterious and difficult to explain. Dostoyevsky, like Gogol, was critical of the tsarist regime, and his works are full of sarcasm and irony towards the bourgeoisie. He was arrested and even condemned to a death sentence because of his participation in socialist movements: upon his return from a Siberian camp, he began to criticise socialism and to propagate slavophile[1] and certain religious ideas that engendered much suspicion from within the Soviet regime. Dostoyevsky's novels often feature religiously illuminated characters, or those of a mentally disturbed nature (Smerdyakov and Lebyadkin are examples), and who are able to relate disagreeable truths under this cover. Shostakovich also wore the mask of the *yurodivy* to express his politically dangerous ideas, often through sophisticated musical allusions.

Another relevant point to consider is the epic length of Dostoyevsky's novels[2]. On the choice of operatic subjects, Shostakovich related that it was easier for him as a "literary dilettante" to process short stories into a libretto. If I may proffer a particular reason why, finally, Shostakovich did not choose one of Dostoyevsky's short stories, I would suggest that the characters of the great novels are far more "operatic" in the extremeness of their temperament, seeming often to act independently from the main plot of the story, with their own strange thoughts and visions and creating their own short novels from within the epic novels. Lebyadkin is a striking example and Shostakovich chose





the madman’s verses that constantly appear like some kind of unexpected “accidental” or modulation within the novel’s “score”, and made a short “opera” out of them.

The verses in Shostakovich’s cycle are not in the same order in which they appear in Dostoyevsky’s novel. In the first song, *Captain Lebyadkin’s Love*, Shostakovich combined three excerpts that feature Elizaveta Tushina, a young maid to whom Lebyadkin wishes to make a proposal of marriage. The second and the third strophes of the song are over a hundred pages apart in the novel, vaguely connected to the context of the unacceptable proposal. Between them lies the text of the second song, *The Cockroach*. Shostakovich reconstituted the thread of Lebyadkin’s “logic” of love, assembling the disparate verses like leitmotifs. The third and fourth songs of the cycle also invert the order in which they appear in the novel.

A brief analysis of the texts and music follows.

The first and longest song of the cycle includes three different excerpts from *The Devils*, in which Lebyadkin writes ridiculous and naïve love verses to an unattainable beloved. In the first strophe, Captain Lebyadkin speaks of himself in the third person, mentioning his first name Ignat and relating that love exploded in his heart like a grenade, reminding him of Sebastopol where he had lost an arm. (In the novel, he had just introduced himself as a “hi-highly educated man”, but is completely drunk and stammers and shouts the love verses, making them sound silly and lacking in credibility). In the second strophe, he admits – in prose – that he has never been to Sebastopol and never lost his arm, but “never mind, these are great verses, aren’t they?” In the novel, Lebyadkin goes further in denying the meaning of verses; he writes to Elizaveta: “Consider my verses as verses and nothing else, because verses are nonsense anyway, and they excuse all that would sound awful if it were said in prose”. Here Dostoyevsky caricatures great words that are empty of content – and Shostakovich does the same musically.

In the first seven bars, both the piano accompaniment and the voice line “stick” to the note A flat. The German name of the note, “As” evokes the playing card “ace” (*As* in German and Russian) which plays the key role in Tchaikovsky’s opera *Queen of Spades*, a theme from which is quoted in this song. (In addition, the reference alludes to the character of Lebyadkin who considers himself a hero and an “ace” in poetry). The name of Lebyadkin’s beloved, Elizaveta, is also reminiscent of Hermann’s beloved in the same opera, namely Lisa.

The clumsy ternary rhythm imitates the limping of a drunken man and the octave leaps and the repeated notes alternating with chromatic steps imitate stuttering and bad articulation.

### Example 1



The “beautiful rhymes” are musically denied and made ridiculous through a dissonant accompaniment of minor seconds in the low register of the piano, rendering them barely audible:



*Example 2*

The third strophe of the song refers to the “aristocratic child” Elizaveta who can so elegantly ride a horse, like an Amazon. In the novel, Lebyadkin is said to hate Elizaveta because of her equestrian talent that epitomises their difference in social standing. Shostakovich underlines musically the adjective *aristocratic* by having it repeated three times – twice incomplete as if it were really difficult to pronounce, on short ascending chromatic scales, with constantly ascending tones. The second syllable of the word *rebyonok* (child) is sung on a high G, two octaves higher as the first note on which the declamation started, and high above the normal register of a bass, illustrating that Elizaveta is “out of reach” for Lebyadkin.

*Example 3*

The next section of the song is a compliment to the virtuous young maid Elizaveta who does not only ride a horse, but also goes to church with her mother and inspires Lebyadkin to “marital and legal delights”. The quick piano runs are in contrast to the very sober accompaniment of the beginning of the piece and emphasise his exaggerated admiration for the pious face of his beloved. The passage ends with a quotation of Yeletsky’s aria from Tchaikovsky’s *Queen of Spades*; in the opera, Yeletsky sings of his true and unselfish love to Lisa. Here, the quotation is turned into a wild *cancan* on the piano, playing high octaves and bombastic chords to underline the contrast with Lebyadkin’s unreasonable love.





In the last strophe, Lebyadkin wishes his beloved would break a leg by falling from her horse, declaring that he would love her even more if this happened (if she were unable to ride, she would more attainable for him). At the end, he declares that this was “written by an uneducated man after a fight” – denying what he had said at the beginning. The piece ends on A-flat chords in the same rhythm as the Tchaikovsky quotation – the A-flats evoking the beginning of the song and the circle-like aspect of Lebyadkin’s fixation.

The second text, *The Cockroach*, is introduced in the novel as a fable in the style of Krylov and written as a dialogue between Lebyadkin and Varvara Petrovna. Here again, Lebyadkin tries to conceal his lack of erudition and pretends that a good friend of his, a “very e-du-ca-ted person” – wrote the fable. But when Varvara Petrovna asks him if he will recite a Krylov fable, he says right away that he will tell a fable of his own, insisting that he only wanted to show how educated he was and that he of course knew of Russia’s great fable-writer Krylov. The bizarre text about flies and a cockroach in a glass being thrown in a rubbish tin by the old servant Nikifor comport allegorical references to familiar dictatorial authorities (the Tsar for Dostoyevsky and Stalin for Shostakovich) and their henchmen. The old servant Nikifor is described in the last line as an “allegory of nature” – a calamity against which nothing can be done... just like the tsar or Stalin! The typical educative or moralising content of a fable is here completely absent – the story is just absurd and has a nihilist tone, something like: “why bother and complain? We will all end up in a rubbish bin [or a grave] anyway”. Before reciting his fable, Lebyadkin says that he is a great poet who could receive a thousand roubles from his publisher, but he is forced to live in a rubbish bin. “Why, why, why?” does he ask? “Because Russia is nothing else than Nature’s plaything” is his own answer. And the fable should explain this allegory.

The first tones of the accompaniment in the lowest piano register sound like a creeping cockroach.

#### Example 4

Moderato  $\text{♩} = 104$

Жил на све - те та - ра - кан, та - ра - кан от дет - ства, и по - том по -  
 - пал в ста - кан, пол - ный му - хо - ед - ства. Гос - по - ди, что та - ко - е? То есть, ко - гда

*ff* tremolo

Lebyadkin sings the first verses about a cockroach that *one day found itself in a glass filled to the brim with fly-eating* – and is interrupted by Varvara Petrovna asking what *fly-eating* is. The woman’s line is written an octave higher, *forte*, and in quick semiquavers, all in contrast to Lebyadkin’s voice in the low register, piano and in slow quavers. Lebyadkin’s gesticulations and protestations that she should not interrupt him are illustrated through tremolos.

As in the novel, Lebyadkin repeats the verses, this time singing a tenth higher and *fortissimo*. He describes how the cockroach got into the glass and how the flies complained to Jupiter because the glass was too full. The verses end abruptly and Lebyadkin



goes on in prose to relate that they all ended up in the rubbish: the literary apex of the text is that *the cockroach does not complain*. Shostakovich also made this culmination of the song, expressing his own resignation. In the novel, this line is written twice and articulated with dashes; Shostakovich also has it repeated twice in the song setting, with a very minimal accompaniment on the piano, so that the line can be heard clearly. The piece ends most quietly on a long C, breathing out, in the voice line with the imitation in the accompaniment of a heart that peacefully ceases to beat.



The third text, *A costume ball for the benefit of governesses*, is a mocking and provocative episode against bourgeois marriage. The “governesses” are the well educated young maids who are forced into marriage in order to escape their position. The text is first announced as a joke, “but without doubt full of feeling and cheerfulness in spite of its highly realistic veracity”. The verses are read by Liputin who introduces the poem saying that it has been written by a man who wants to preserve his anonymity – but as soon as the first lines are heard, everybody recognises Lebyadkin as the author. The strophes are first interrupted with “hurrah” cries of approval, but at the end, everybody is scandalised and outraged.

The repeated verse at the beginning and at the end contains irony through contrasting elements: a governess can be “retrograde” or a “little Georges Sand” – implying a scandalous woman dressing herself as a man and smoking cigars – it is all the same: she would marry any man, even a sacristan.

This time, the piano accompaniment is bombastic and loud, using the complete register of the instrument in wild runs, chromatic and diatonic scales. The unusual 5/4 rhythm parodies ball music. The end is a wild cancan in 4/4 time reminiscent of the Tchaikovsky quotation in the first song and evoking a derision of love.

The last and shortest song, *A luminous personality* is the most provocative text, politically-speaking of the novel. It relates the story of a man who was ‘not a gentleman from birth’, who was persecuted by the tsar and who fled the country to declare Fraternity, Equality and Liberty. By the last strophe, it becomes clear why Shostakovich inverted the order of the novel’s texts; the concluding words constitute a continuation of the provocative stance that was formed in the mockery of marriage in the preceding text. Money should become the most important thing: church, marriage and family should be abolished. Lebyadkin is not mentioned by name here, being only evoked as “that certain officer” who writes such verses, outside of the country; “he must have been completely drunk and have lost his reason”. But it is also insinuated that he “might not be so crazy”.

This is the only song with a key signature: B major. Although the text has no repetitions, the music is in *ritornello* form. The simple octave doublings in the piano accompaniment, the leaps of fifths, the heavy march rhythm, along with the repetitive form and the shouts “exh” at the end of each strophe tend to lend the song an innocent folksong-like quality and in doing so appears to be looking to diminish the sharpness of its content – just like the supposition that the text was written by a drunk or insane man diffuses its consequence.

Striking is the work’s contrast with its preceding opus 145, the *Suite on verses by Michelangelo*. In the latter, the reason Shostakovich chose the Renaissance artist, who had also been politically prosecuted, is clear. Lebyadkin builds a strong contrast to Michelangelo – at first sight, he does not appear to be a character with whom Shostakovich would have sought autobiographical identification, but presents instead a caricature of life, of love and of dignity.

Shostakovich said about him:

“You know, Lebyadkin is of course a buffoon and a laughing stock. But there is something frighteningly creepy about him”[3].

It was Shostakovich’s last musical laugh before he turned to his serious final opus.

## Endnotes

[1] It was as dangerous to be named a slavophile under Tsar Alexander II as it was to be named a formalist under Stalin.

[2] The problem of a coherent larger musical form in proportion to an entire novel seems to have kept composers from setting Dostoyevsky’s large novels into operas. Janacek composed an opera on the *Notes from the house of the Dead* (1860-1862) and the Swiss composer Heinrich Sutermeister (1910-1995) composed the opera *Raskolnikoff* (1948) after *Crime and Punishment*.

[3] Krzysztof Meyer. *Schostakowitsch*. Mainz 1995, p.511 and Elizabeth Wilson. *Shostakovich. A life remembered*. London 1994, p.458.

