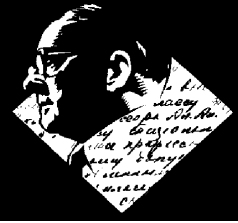


WRITING ABOUT SHOSTAKOVICH

Don't make a martyr of Shostakovich!



An original *DSCH Journal* translation of an interview given to Andrey Scherbakov, *Pravda* (Moscow) for the centenary celebrations of Shostakovich's birth in September 2006

AS: Tikhon Nikolayevich, I'm not the only one who has the impression that the Moscow Philharmonic decided to adorn the jubilee season with the leitmotif 'Shostakovich – Martyr of Soviet Rule'. Manashir Yakubov, the curator of programmes and author of essay in the booklet, again focuses on the well-known resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Soviet Communist Party (Bolshevik) 'On the Muradeli Opera *Great Friendship*.' He places the resolution in the centre of the entire life of the genius composer – thus, by its "barbarism" it, supposedly, destroyed the fate of Shostakovich.

TK: About this resolution, about events of that time I have spoken many times. But all the same the lies continue: that I was almost one of the authors of this resolution, that Stalin telephoned me nearly every day and demanded that I destroy Shostakovich.

In reality the infamous resolution was being prepared when I was not yet general secretary of the Union of Composers of the USSR; the organising committee to create it was headed by Gliere and Khachaturian. And, when this resolution was published, I tried to do everything that could reasonably be done so that our great masters would not suffer.

I want to ask those who continue to lie: "What is it you want me to have done? Should I have gone to Stalin and told him that he is a total ignoramus in music and that he has surrounded himself by bad advisers? Would this have helped Shostakovich?"

Liars don't mention that, not long after this resolution, Shostakovich received a commission for creating the *Song of the Forests* and wrote very colourful music. This music, despite the complete obsolescence of Dolmatovsky's words, is performed even now quite successfully throughout the world, although definitely not here. The composer, by the way, at the time received – in 1950 and 1952 – Stalin [cash] prizes, which in those times were quite large sums.

They don't want to remember that already in 1949 Stalin called Shostakovich and asked him, together with Ehrenburg and with Kostya Simonov, to go with a delegation to America. During the call Dmitri Dmitrievich complained that after the resolution his music was no longer being performed. Stalin expressed surprise and said that this is a disgrace and that he will tell Poskrebyshv to fix the situation. Here, of course, on Stalin's part there was an element of cynical game-playing, but to make a martyr out of Shostakovich seems rather strange.

AS: It seems that Shostakovich had to work on commissions? And even later, as noted by the same Yakubov, he was quite oppressed by having to compose music on commission – especially for the cinema.

TK: I don't know what Yakubov says, but composers almost always have written on commission, and they were inspired to compose music for the theatre or public events. Bach composed on commission, Tchaikovsky composed on commission, and Grieg created his brilliant *Peer Gynt* having received a commission for music for a play by Ibsen.

Sergei Prokofiev was definitely not oppressed when creating peerless music to *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan Grozny*. I think that Shostakovich also took such commissions seriously – remember his astounding music for *Hamlet* at the Vakhtangov Theatre [Moscow, Ed.] or the music for the film *Ovod (Gadfly)*. And moreover it was not a bad way to make money for composers.





I want to say that Shostakovich, even in 1948, which was a difficult year for him, did not want for money. After all, everyone understood that here was a genius, around whom there developed this strange situation. It is not fashionable now to remember how, during Soviet times, orchestral scores were purchased or how commissions were received for music for films and plays. Whereas the most prominent and unique American composer, Charles Ives, had to write music at night because during the day he worked in an insurance company in order to earn a decent living.

AS: They say that it was you who pushed through the cancellation of the unfair resolution of 1948?

TK: In 1957 the Bolshoi theatre staged my opera *Mother* (after Gorky). After the premiere Khrushchev and Mikoyan stopped by to see me and started to share their impressions. And then I raised the question of the need to cancel the resolution 'On the opera *Great Friendship*'. I told Khrushchev that the party and the country are being discredited by dirty, deceitful evaluations of the work of our great masters which nevertheless still retain formal authority. And after a few months a decision was taken by the Central Committee on the revisiting of the resolution of 1948 as one of the expressions of the cult of personality of Stalin, and all the dirty insinuations were removed.

AS: In those years Shostakovich joined the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and wrote his "revolutionary" 11th and 12th symphonies. It is fashionable now to say that he did this again not from the heart but for cover, on commission.

TK: Once again falsehoods, lies. I am certain that Dmitri Dmitrievich was a person who did not do anything falsely. During Khrushchev's time he, in my view, hoped that the country would return to the ideals of the October Revolution, to what Lenin wrote. One should not forget that in Shostakovich's pedigree there were revolutionaries with Polish roots, who were exiled to Siberia for their opposition to absolute tsarist rule.

I am convinced that Shostakovich wrote his 11th and 12th symphonies upon the calling of his heart. Unfortunately, today this brilliant music is almost not performed here; they didn't even include it in the jubilee festival. However, they didn't even find space for the absolute masterpiece of Shostakovich's chamber music – his piano quintet of 1940...

No one ever demanded that Shostakovich write music about Lenin, about the party. Even of me, as First Secretary of the union, no one ever demanded this. When in 1969 Shostakovich wrote his metaphysical 14th Symphony about death, no one offered to move its premiere in order not to spoil the celebration of the 100-year anniversary of Lenin's birth. On the contrary, the premiere was a triumph in Leningrad, where Galina Vishnevskaya sang.



Shostakovich and Khrennikov at a meeting of the USSR Composers' Union

AS: Was there not a wish on Shostakovich's part to become a free artist by moving to the West? If he was so persecuted here, as Solomon Volkov writes, by barbarians, as Yakubov says?

TK: I don't want to comment on the writings of these gentlemen. Shostakovich was always able to travel abroad, and he had many opportunities to stay in the West. It's just that he was a patriot of the Soviet Union and could

not fathom his work without his country. He loved life, he loved soccer... Of course, Dmitri Dmitrievich was a very complex personality, and in his last years for objective reasons his work became more philosophical. But to make a martyr out of him, to make him out as only thinking how to “expose Soviet rule” in a symphony or a quartet, this is just silly. And inde-



When in 1959 we went with a delegation to America, during a press-conference American journalists tried to provoke Shostakovich into a negative evaluation of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as a strangler of the freedom of art in the Soviet Union. Dmitri Dmitrievich immediately responded that he thought the communist party to be the most progressive force on the planet. Most likely he actually thought this in reality. I think that Shostakovich said these words understanding that any criticism in this situation may be used against his country, his fatherland.

AS: They also say that Shostakovich was extremely burdened by his “community service” as the first secretary of the Union Composers of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic and a deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR.

TK: And who got special joy from community service? When I was being elected the general secretary of the Union of Composers of the USSR, Clara and I cried the whole night through, because we understood: it meant the end of most of my creative work.

Community service in Soviet times – this were not only and not so much meetings. This was everyday work in meeting ordinary needs of composers, solving their housing problems etc. What Palaces of Art we had then, what festivals were held throughout the country!

Shostakovich did not in any way show that community service was a burden to him. He attentively reviewed every request and responded in a very disciplined way to all applications made to him. His sole shortcoming was his extremely kind attitude toward all composers who applied to him with requests to review their works, irrespective of their level. Shostakovich was a very diplomatic person and gave evaluations so as not to wound, even with a single word, anyone who applied to him.

AS: Allow me in conclusion to touch upon one personal theme. Why is it that during the historic visit of Igor Stravinsky to the USSR in 1962, the contact of the two musical geniuses of the 20th century was so formal?

TK: I remember this Stravinsky visit well and have written about it more than once. It is true; Shostakovich and Stravinsky conversed only during an official reception given by Ekaterina Furtseva in the ‘Metropole’. In my view, Shostakovich might have been embarrassed by Stravinsky’s words when, during a visit to the USA, I invited Igor Fedorovich to visit his fatherland. American reporters immediately asked me: “Here you are inviting Stravinsky, whereas he speaks so poorly of Soviet music.” To which Stravinsky immediately replied: “I could not speak negatively of Soviet music since I do not know it. I haven’t even listened to a single symphony of Shostakovich.”

I don’t know how sincerely Stravinsky spoke then – he was a well-known master of irony, of the intellectual joke. But Shostakovich was sincerely interested in Stravinsky’s music and was delighted by it.

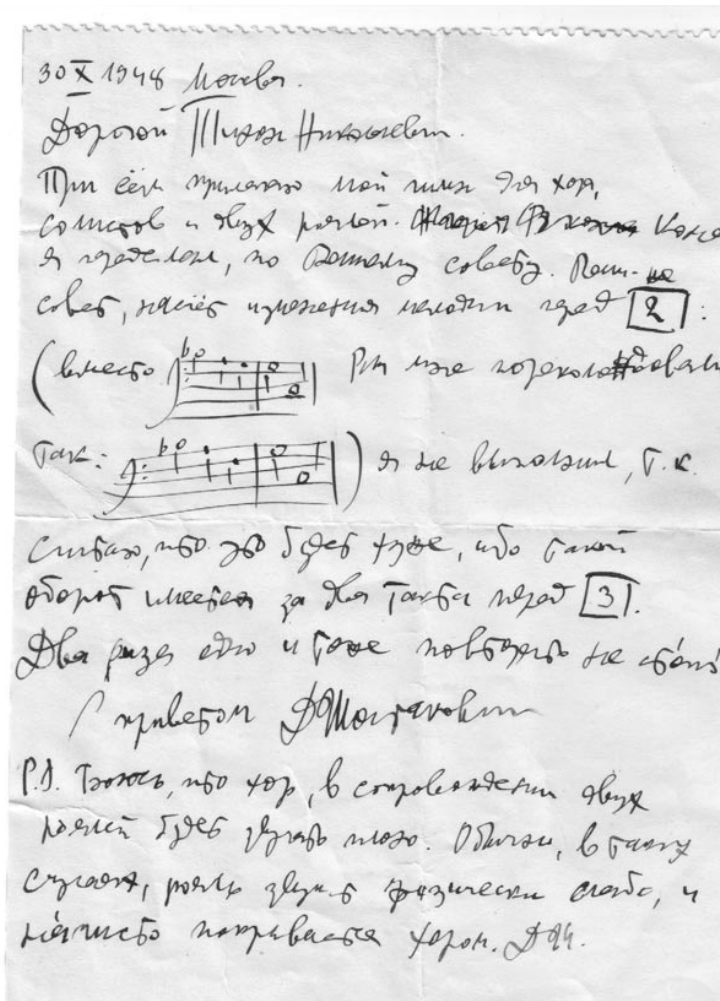
I remember, in 1935, when I was in Leningrad, Dmitri Dmitrievich invited me over to have dinner. On his grand piano there was a score of Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms* in a four-hand transcription made by Shostakovich. And after dinner we played this wonderful music together. How many years have passed since? Seventy one years, but it was as if yesterday ...

Tikhon Nikolayevich Khrennikov, in honour of the Shostakovich jubilee, gave us for first publication a letter sent to him by Dmitri Shostakovich in October 1948, a facsimile of which is given overleaf.





Letter from Shostakovich to Tikhon Khrennikov (1948)



30 X 1948

Dear Tikhon Nikolayevich,

With this I am enclosing my Anthem for chorus, soloists and two pianos. I have revised the ending as you recommended. However, I did not follow your advice on the melody preceding fig. 2 (where instead of [mus. Ex. A] you suggested [mus. Ex. B]) because I believe this would be for the worse since the phrase is heard in this form two bars before fig. 3. It is not a good idea to repeat exactly the same thing twice.

With greetings,

D. Shostakovich

P.S. I am afraid that a choir accompanied by two grand pianos will sound bad. Usually in these cases a grand piano sounds physically weak and is fully covered by the choir. DSCH.

