



The Execution of Stepan Razin

Shostakovich and the DSCH monogram

by Anna Timashova¹

Written in 1964, *The Execution of Stepan Razin* (Казнь Степана Разина, hereinafter *The Execution*) by Dmitri Shostakovich sets a fragment of a poem by Y. Yevtushenko.² Soviet musicologists gave mixed reviews, the style of the symphonic poem being at the root of their criticism. In what follows, the opus is analysed from a new angle: those structural and intonational features that suggest the presence of the DSCH monogram (i.e., D, E-flat, C, B). I focus on a fragment that contains clearly defined DSCH traits. Through this, the composer's creative idea, as well as new dramatic meanings and semantic accents, may be uncovered.

Like many choral pieces of the Soviet period, *The Execution* needs careful analysis, free of clichés and ideological bias. The work has remained controversial since its creation; opinions are diverse and, at times, radically opposing. The past two decades have brought little consensus, and so this symphonic poem remains one of the most debated works in the composer's choral heritage.

So which of the work's traits draw our attention initially? In her monograph from 1976, M. Sabinina notes, "Being the culmination of an epic series in the works of Shostakovich... [*The Execution*] significantly fertilised [оплодотворил] the composer's thinking."³ V. Val'kova opines that the story describing Golgotha and the death of Christ was used by the composer; this sacral theme, which is in great demand in contemporary musicology, is of significance in his work as a whole.⁴ L. Akopian (2004) believes that "by turning to *à la russe* style, the composer clashes with G. Sviridov on Sviridov's territory and apparently loses."⁵

As we see from the examples above, the many opinions on this work differ widely. Amongst these is the opinion that, in this work, Shostakovich's musical expressiveness

has personal and emotional themes at its root. This is of particular interest to us, as it refutes the persistent belief that the composer's style is at its least profound in his choral works.⁶ On this subject, musicologist G. Orlov argues that the theme of "hope for consciousness awakening" is key in subsequent compositions by Shostakovich, recurring in many guises and acquiring a distinct autobiographical character. It is noteworthy that this opinion was the closest to Shostakovich's own. As Orlov wrote in his article, Shostakovich personally asked him to emphasise the meaning of transfiguration of the crowd.⁷

In a letter to I. Glikman, Shostakovich writes, "I have written the poem in *style russe*. Critics both favourably disposed and hostile will find plenty of material to occupy them. Quite often I descend to coarse naturalism...not to mention that the whole idea of the piece is essentially depraved."⁸ What did he mean by "essentially depraved"? And why did Glikman, a close friend describing the "home premiere," emphasise how inexplicably excited the composer was? ("Abundant tears flowed down his cheeks. I could not help thinking of how Tchaikovsky wept at the fate of his own creation, Herman. It was almost as though Shostakovich was hearing, not his own, but another's intensely moving music.")⁹

Indeed contradictory opinion surrounds the entire body of research concerning this work. It suggests that, like many of Shostakovich's works, *The Execution* contains hidden meanings and conceals unsolved mysteries. The purpose of this article is to examine such possibilities.

DSCH: General observations

It is well established that one of the most idiosyncratic traits of Shostakovich creative language is his musical monogram (DSCH). Shostakovich uses the monogram in numerous works, albeit predominantly in symphonic



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Example 1

Example 1 shows a musical score for measures 36-40. The Baritone part is in the bass clef with lyrics 'a - - - a - H -'. The Piano part is in the grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and provides harmonic support with chords and moving lines.

Example 2

Example 2 shows a musical score for measures 100-104. The Baritone part is in the bass clef with lyrics 'a a - - a - -'. Above the Baritone line are chord symbols: H, C, D, C, H, Es, D, C. The Piano part is in the grand staff and starts with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic.

pieces. The subject has been well researched, and distinctive features of the monogram have been identified (see M. Sabinina, A. Klimovitsky, and N. Naiko). Numerous sources suggest that the DSCH motif requires certain parameters: (1) the musical pitch must match the notes' alphabetical equivalents, (2) the elements must be equal in terms of duration, and (3) the notes must appear in a specific order. Violating these parameters, researchers believe, is uncondusive to the creation of autonomous units of musical language, thereby lessening the autobiographical subtext. Some writers consider, on the contrary, that the variative use of the DSCH monogram might enhance the communicative potential of the composer's musical language, arguing that this would transform this language with respect to its dramaturgic role and compositional location.¹⁰ A recent article concerning the DSCH monogram (N. Naiko, 2011) discusses several works in which both the *d-es-c-h* sequence and the durational equality of each tone involved are altered. The article concludes that "different note combinations are admissible [because] they occupy a special position in the artistic space of each work."¹¹

Modern musicology thus allows for freer use of the DSCH monogram. It is assumed that the composer deviates from an exact reproduction of the motif in favour of the overall creative idea, in order to emphasise the importance of this element in the composition.

It is worth noting that Shostakovich was a master of melodic development with the so-called monophonic

type of musical thinking.¹⁰ It is thus perfectly conceivable that permutations (re-orderings) of the DSCH sequence were used instead of the original idiom. Since this "violation" of the sequence order is deemed admissible, the odds of an accidental (or subconscious) use of the monogram in the "original" order are minimal. The dramaturgical and compositional function of thus-formed motifs is of unquestionable significance.

DSCH: Connection with the poem

Let us now consider the text of the poem. Y. Yevtushenko emphasises the word "FACES" (ЛИЦА) by spelling it in capital letters. This emphasis is enhanced by positioning the lines to create a staircase pattern, common in the poetry of V. Mayakovsky. Was this accidental? Possibly. But it is unlikely that the composer also would have missed the poet's written emphasis. If we analyse the musical material, and firstly, the intonations and notes that correspond to the words "faces sprout threateningly" (прорастают лица грозно), what is the structure of this motif? Does it appear spontaneously or develop gradually?

In the bass solo, two images are embodied: Stepan Razin and the narrator. The two are melodically separate: a hopping, impulsive, and rhythmically fluctuating melody depicts Razin, whose melodic line has a continuous development; in contrast, the melody representing the narrator is rhythmically stable. The introductory theme morphs into this melody by means of variant



Example 3

Example 4

transformations. *Es, d, c, h* notes appear, in various combinations, in culminating passages of the soloist's part. In the bass solo, melodic development involving the DSCH motif occurs only in the parts referring to the narrator.

Emerging from (and thus intonationally similar to) the orchestral introduction, the narrator's theme develops independently. Its range is narrow (*d-es*), and the notes are limited to *as-a-h-c-d-es* (i.e., A-flat-A-B-C-D-E-flat). This does not seem merely coincidental, given the possibility to derive the DSCH monogram from the notes: *as-a-(h-c-d-es)* (Ex. 1). Note that 'as' appears twice. As part of DSCH, this note is also found in other works by the composer. The *d-s-c-h-a-s-c-h* monogram (the full name of the composer in German) appears in the First Violin Concerto (1948) and Second Cello Concerto (1966). *A/s* can be understood as either A-E-flat (*a-es*) or A-flat (*as*).¹³

The initial theme comprises four of the most frequently used notes: *a, h, c, d* (in that order). *Es* is introduced in m. 78. *H, c, d, es* are most frequently used from m. 100ff (Ex. 2). From mm. 123–38, two notes—*es* and *d*—dominate. Based on these notes, the bass solo and choral exclamations are built up, although this specific phenomenon occurs only between the above measures. From rehearsal number 38, a similar development takes place in the narrator's theme: from *a, h, c, d* to *h, c, es, d*. The entire phrase is built on notes from DSCH. Through repetitions and increased duration of *es*, an *h, c, (d, c, h), es* pattern emerges—a mirror image of DSCH.

Starting with rehearsal number 38, an orchestral group duplicates the bass solo (Ex. 3). This is the first and only such instance in the entire score. The orchestral texture changes drastically, and a varying meter is used to sharpen the perception of lyrics and specific keywords within them. An intonationally similar melody is heard at rehearsal number 7 (see Ex. 1). The initial occurrence of DSCH notes, however, can be viewed as transient, as here the melodic line of the solo is accompanied by a dancing tune in constant meter.

Between mm. 486–91, the narrator theme's rhythmic structure changes, and the theme is lengthened by one measure (Ex. 4). By this lengthening of the note value, and through the use of specific articulation marks, the word "faces" (лица) is emphasized. Moreover, it is this word that falls on the motif *d-d*. It is well known that Shostakovich used to sign his works in different ways: D.Sh., D.Shostakovich, D.D.Shostakovich (Д.Ш., Д.Шостакович, Д.Д.Шостакович). In various memoirs, he is often referred to as D.D. And so the *d-d* may be interpreted as the composer's first name followed by his patronymic (Дмитрий Дмитриевич). Of course, we are not suggesting here that every duplicated *d* in his works has autobiographical meaning. But in this particular instance, it does not seem coincidental: the culminating moment of the poem is marked by motifs related to DSCH. Thus, the monogram becomes key to the intonational dramaturgy of the poem.



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Example 5

The melody accompanying the words “sooner or later faces sprout menacingly...” (если рано или поздно прорастают лица грозно) comprises the following notes: *h-c-d-(d-d)-c-h-es-d-h-c-d-(d)-c-h-es-d-a-h-c-h-a-d-c-a*. A changing meter and rhythm combines nine measures into one phrase in which four combinations, all monogram-based, can be observed: *c-h-es-d*, *d-c-h-es*, *es-d-h-c*, *es-d-c-h* (Ex. 5). In the first combination, *h-es* is an interval of a diminished fourth, which is repeated twice (mm. 519–20, 521–22; see Ex. 5). Consider also the *es-d-h-c* motif in mm. 520–22 (3/2 metre). It is made of *m2-m3-m2*. Structurally, this is consistent with the interval structure of the monogram; compositionally, with the sound of the musical autograph used by Shostakovich. Durationally, the motif consists of two halves—*d-es* and a fourth—*c-h*. My theory here is that these are, in fact, two upper-case (DS) and two lower-case (ch) letters. In the two-segment motif *d-es c-h*, structure and pitch distribution are preserved, but note order is reversed. Thus, the autograph appears in mirror image. To clarify, since the first and the last two sounds are rhythmically indistinguishable, the mirror images are *d-es/es-d* and *c-h/h-c*, respectively.

Conclusion

Based on the above, it can be argued that, in the case of *The Execution of Stepan Razin*, Shostakovich deploys a unique and personal view of the poetic source. While the DSCH motif does not appear unaltered in the work, the pitches, the interval structure, and the distinctive *m4*-based intonation are preserved. Therefore the fragment we have analysed is, in my opinion, crucial.

Consequently, the semantic emphasis in the work may well be shifted from the immortality of a mythologised folk hero to the re-birth and transfiguration of “a mass of people” into the truly diverse (“rich with faces”) Russian nation. The latter subject may have been a source of torment for the composer. And it may explain the “strange,” “inexplicable” emotional state he was in during the private performance he gave in his home, surprisingly even to his close friend Glikman. Something private and deeply agitating for him was concealed in *The Execution*. Speaking in first person as regards the narrator theme, Shostakovich himself becomes the poem’s persona. He authored a monogram that is a “distorted mirror image” of DSCH. The monogram is literally sliced up into consonances, but remains structurally intact. In my view, the monogram was created and structured quite intentionally, in order to assert not only Shostakovich’s authorship but also as a statement of his point of view within the context of new music of this period. In the letter to his friend, the composer also acknowledges the controversy regarding Yevtushenko’s poem. Hence, Shostakovich set to music the notion of immortality expressed in a poetic guise. That the “transfigured” monogram is a part of the orchestra’s role may be viewed as an interplay of two semantically definitive themes bound by the idea of immortality. Here, immortality is a consequence of transfiguration and symbolises the opposition of reality. Moreover, taking into account a series of specific events that occurred at the time *The Execution of Stepan Razin* was created—e.g., the ban on the publication of *The Bratsk Hydroelectric Power Station* by Yevtushenko and backstage vicissitudes surrounding the work’s premiere—the opposition to reality may be seen as an act of directly opposing the political authorities.



Notes:

1. Translated by Nickolai Dobrynin.
2. Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *The Bratsk Hydroelectric Power Station* (Russian: Братская ГЭС).
3. Marina Sabinina, *Shostakovich-simfonist: dramaturgy, aesthetics and styles* (Moscow: Music, 1976), 399. (Translation from: М. Сабинаина, *Шостакович-симфонист: драматургия, эстетика, стиль*. М.: Музыка 1976. 477 с.).
4. Vera Valkova, Calvary plot in the works of Shostakovich. *Shostakovich: between the moment and eternity. Documents. Materials. Article* (St. Petersburg, 2000), 686. (Translation from: Валькова В. Сюжет Голгофы в творчестве Шостаковича. *Шостакович: между мгновением и вечностью. Документы. Материалы. Статьи*. СПб., 2000. С. 679–716.)
5. Levon Akopyan, *Shostakovich: the experience of the phenomenology of creative* (St. Petersburg: Dmitriy Bulanin, 2004), 364. (Translation from: Акопян Л. Д. *Шостакович: опыт феноменологии творчества*. СПб.: Дмитрий Буланин, 2004. 474 с.).
6. This view is shared by many contemporary researchers, including Levon Akopyan, Eric Roseberry, and Laurel E. Fay.
7. The article by G. Orlov was reprinted several times. In 1986, it was published in the third issue of the journal *Das Land und die Welt* (pp.62–75), and in 1989 in *Sovetskaya Kultura*.
8. *Story of a Friendship: The Letters of Dmitry Shostakovich to Isaak Glikman*, trans. Anthony Phillips (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001) 118, 287. Compiled and comments by Isaak Glikman (Moscow: DSCH & St. Petersburg: Composer, 1993), 197. (Translation from: Письма к другу: Письма Д.Д.Шостаковича к И.Д.Гликману. Сост. и комментарии И.Д.Гликмана. М.: DSCH – СПб.: Композитор. 1993. 336 с.).
9. I. Glikman's comments to the letter dated September 15th, 1964. 287 p.
10. Abram Klimovitskiy, "More on the theme-monogram DEsCH" in *D.D.Shostakovich: Collection of articles on the 90th anniversary* (St. Petersburg: Composer, 1996), 249–68. (Translation from: Климовицкий А. Ещё раз о теме-монограмме DEsCH. *Д.Д.Шостакович: Сборник статей к 90-летию со дня рождения*. СПб.: Композитор, 1996. 400 с.).
11. Natalia M. Naiko, Regarding note combinations of the monogram DEsCH in Dmitry Shostakovich's compositions. *Musical Life* 7/8 (Moscow, 2011), 85–87. (Translation from: Найко Н. О некоторых комбинациях тонов монограммы «DEsCH» в сочинениях Дмитрия Шостаковича. *Музыкальная жизнь*, 2011, 7/8. с.85–87.)
12. References can be found in E. Finkelstein, "About the master in a personal tone," *Academy of Music* 4 (Moscow, 1997), 104; and in T. Bershadskaia, "On Principles of monophonic musical thinking Shostakovich," in *D. D. Shostakovich: Collection of articles on the 90th anniversary* (St. Petersburg: Composer, 1996), 334–41.
13. Maria Rechenko, "The variety of sources, the problem of synthesis and development principles thematism in instrumental works by Shostakovich," *International Internet Conference*, http://www.rostcons.ru/intconf_2008/mat_rechenko.htm. (Translation from: М. Реченко. Многообразие истоков, проблема синтеза и принципы развития тематизма в инструментальных концертах Д. Шостаковича).

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