



WRITING ABOUT SHOSTAKOVICH

A Notable Deadly Game

Themes and motifs in the First Cello Concerto

by Henny van der Groep

In his Cello Concerto no. 1, op. 107, composed from 20 July to 1 September 1959 in the village of Komarovo on the Gulf of Finland, Shostakovich uses quotations of and allusions to songs in specific musical motifs. Furthermore, the work is inextricably tied to historical, political, and cultural circumstances. These various contexts help us to extrapolate Shostakovich's would-be "unspoken words," as well as the role of sarcasm in the piece. In addition, frequently-repeated motifs connected with the symbolic numbers three and seven correspond to a part of the musical "game" in the work. Regarding this concerto, Shostakovich commented, "I took a simple little theme and tried to develop it."¹

CONTEXT

The Young Guard

In 1948 Shostakovich composed film music (op. 75) for *The Young Guard*, directed by Sergei Gerasimov. The film was based on a novel by Alexander Fadeyev (1945), the author who supported Andrei Zhdanov's resolutions and attacked the poet and writer Boris Pasternak in 1946, long before the publication of his novel *Dr. Zhivago*.² The subject of the film is the "heroic death" of the Komsomol (young Communist) members who fought against the Nazis in World War II.

In 1949, Shostakovich was one of the Soviet delegates sent to the peace conference in the United States, together with Fadeyev and Gerasimov.

Margarita Kainova

In 1956, Shostakovich married his second wife Margarita Kainova, an employee of Komsomol; they divorced in 1959.³

Boris Pasternak

Pasternak had a hazardous relationship with the Soviet system, and his relationship to Stalin bears certain similarities to that of Shostakovich. Shostakovich made use of Pasternak's Russian translation of Shakespeare's Sonnet no. 66 in his op. 62, written in 1942:

*Tir'd with all these, for restful death I cry
As to behold desert a beggar born,
And needy nothing trim'd in jollity,
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,*

*And gilded honour shamefully misplac'd,
And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
And right perfection wrongfully disgrac'd
And strength by limping sway disabled,
And art made tongue-tied by authority
And folly-doctor like-controlling skill,
And simply truth miscall'd simplicity,
And captive good attending captain ill:
Tir'd with all these, from these would I be gone,
Save that, to die, I leave my love alone.*

In 1957, Pasternak completed his masterpiece *Dr. Zhivago*, whose publication was refused by the Soviet authorities. Following the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958, Pasternak and his wife were the subject of protests that followed a smear campaign initiated by the journalist David Zaslavski, author of the *Pravda* article "Muddle Instead of Music"—and the Komsomol shared Zaslavski's opinion.⁴ From that moment on, all of Pasternak's works were forbidden,⁵ and many other artists in the USSR suffered from the widespread lack of artistic freedom. Shostakovich expressed his attitude toward this problem in several works, notably in op. 107, and later in his String Quartet no. 8, op. 110.

Prokofiev

In 1957, Prokofiev received the Lenin Prize posthumously for his final work, the Seventh Symphony. In both this symphony and in his *Sinfonia Concertante* the timpani have a prominent role. In respect of his Cello Concerto no. 1, Shostakovich's remarks about Prokofiev's symphony are of interest, in particular regarding Tolstoy's character Natasha Rostova and how she is evoked in Prokofiev's music for *War and Peace* and the Russian revolutionary, philosopher and Marxist theoretician Georgi Plekhanov (who was associated with Historical Materialism).⁶

Musorgsky

In 1957/58, Shostakovich composed the operetta *Moscow, Cheryomushki*, op. 105, which contains quotations from and allusions to folksongs. We also find such quotations in the First Cello Concerto.

In 1959, the premiere of Musorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov*, with Shostakovich's orchestration, took place.

In 1958/59, Shostakovich re-orchestrated Musorgsky's *Khovanshchina*, op. 106.

In 1962, Shostakovich orchestrated Musorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death*, sans op. V, from the original cycle for piano and voice.



Musorgsky's compositions played an important part in Shostakovich's creative awareness at this time, leaving a notable impact on his music of this period.⁷

**The story behind Cello Concerto no. 1
and its first performance**

Mstislav Rostropovich played through op. 107 for the second time for Shostakovich alone, prior to the arrival of Gabriel Glikman for a third rehearsal. While waiting, they finished a bottle of vodka—such was their excitement and joy at the new work. Rostropovich joked that he didn't remember exactly what he had just played (which is, of course, a soupçon of artistic exaggeration), because of his euphoric state of mind.⁸

Rostropovich mentions two works that had inspired Shostakovich to dedicate op. 107 to him. One was Prokofiev's *Sinfonia Concertante*, dedicated to, and premiered by Rostropovich. The seven blows on the timpani were among other things in the piece that inspired Shostakovich.⁹ The other was the Saint-Saëns concerto, which, to Rostropovich's surprise, Shostakovich said he thought was well structured and had the best orchestration of any cello concerto.¹⁰

ANALYSIS¹¹

1. Allegretto

The very first measure contains a four-note motif (Ex. 1) that resembles Shostakovich's monogram.¹² The specific notes, however, match with a short theme from *The Young Guard* (1948). As Elizabeth Wilson observes, this is a tiny four-note theme (E-flat-C-G-F-sharp) from "Procession to an Execution"¹³ (the same theme as "Death of the Heroes") resolving to C minor. This pattern is transposed up a third to E-flat major in the opening of the Cello Concerto.¹⁴

This four-note theme evolves from a clear suggested connection between the Kontakion¹⁵ for the departed and the Dies irae (cello, mm. 33–36) to Shostakovich's monogram E-flat-D-C-B.¹⁶ According to Malcolm MacDonald, it points (mm. 36–39) to the melody/text from Musorgsky's "Trepak" (*Songs and Dances of Death*).¹⁷ This is the second theme (Ex. 2) featuring the motif DSCH, although the notes appear in a different order and are spread over three bars.

It would appear that the substance of what I refer to as the "Heroic Theme" is connected to death in different ways,¹⁸ and is to be found in the text of the songs and the composer's monogram DSCH. This connection with the "Heroic Theme" results in an extremely dark, sarcastic undertone through the entire work.

Malcolm MacDonald describes the link with "Trepak" extensively: "In the text of the Musorgsky song, Death invites a wandering, drink-sodden peasant worn out by work and sorrow, to dance the eponymous dance."¹⁹

"Trepak"²⁰

*Forests and glades, not a soul in sight.
A blizzard wails and howls.
In the darkness of night,
It is as if someone is being buried by some evil force:
Just look—it is so! In the darkness,
Death tenderly embraces a peasant,
Leading the drunken man in a lively dance...*

Chizhik-Pyzhik

Furthermore, the above verse has strong similarities to "Chizhik-Pyzhik", a popular Russian children's song, which Gerard McBurney describes in an essay on the subject.²¹ This is the third theme that appears in mm. 96–105 (Ex. 3, three times in succession) and again connected with the H, C, D, S (E-flat) theme and death theme. This so-called "Chizhik-Pyzhik" theme can also be found in the op. 107, mm. 96–102, piano reduction. In addition, there are similarities with the "Overture-Prologue" for *Moscow, Cheryomushki* that Shostakovich composed in 1957/1958.²²

The text of this song goes:

*Siskin-piskin where have you been?
On the Fontanka, drinking vodka
I drank one glass, I drank two;
My head started spinning.²³*

To my ears this text fits perfectly with the following piercing passage in the cello at mm. 106–111 (Ex. 4).

When Shostakovich returns to his first theme from *The Young Guard* (m. 129) with the horn, this marks the beginning of an interesting dialogue between cello and horn, which continues in a struggle where the above themes alternate, circling around the DSCH monogram until the passage ends with the first theme (the "Heroic Death" motif). The monogram returns hidden in various kinds of inversions and chords, as well as in two timpani blows at the movement's end.

2. Moderato attacca

The second movement begins with a melancholic melody that leads, as described by Malcolm MacDonald, to another theme which itself harkens back to the second subject of the song "Trepak" (mm. 16–19).²⁴ In m. 23, the strings (celli) play the notes C-B-B-flat-A (BACH, but not in the right order), and after repeating the subject for a second time, the string accompaniment (mm. 27–34) changes to descending and ascending chromatic minor seconds ("three [holy] tones"),²⁵ creating an inconsolable lamenting backdrop for the cello. The cello melody in mm. 31–32 bears a strong similarity to the first phrase of the Kontakion for the Departed. In m. 37, the cello evokes once more the notes A-B-flat-B-C (BACH). In m. 49–50, this sequence returns in the strings, together with



a fragment of the DSCH/Kontakion in the cello. The cello then returns with the sad melody of the opening of the movement. At rehearsal 57, the cello produces an otherworldly sound (through the use of high harmonics) that fuses with the celesta and combines into a striking unity. This manner of rounding off a movement with a “dialogue on death” is not particularly unusual in Shostakovich’s oeuvre, with its symbolism of eternity (as does, for example, Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde*, “Abschied”). After the notes of the celesta vanish, the cello plays, in a voice laden with fragility, a succession of themes that suggest the Shostakovich DSCH monogram, the Dies irae and the Kontakion. In the last four bars, the notes of the BACH monogram appear again (in the strings), although again not in the right order. The section concludes with a low timpani roll heard three times.

3. Cadenza: Moderato–Allegro attacca

The bridge between the first two movements and the final movement constitutes a virtuoso cadenza for the cello, serving as a *pièce de resistance*. As the music builds through a whirlwind of moods and sounds, the different themes of the first two movements are heard.

4. Allegro con moto

It was in this movement that Shostakovich surprised Rostropovich with an unexpected, concealed theme played by the strings in mm. 33–37; Stalin’s favourite song, “Suliko.” This highly popular folksong relates to a lost soul:

*I was looking for my sweetheart’s grave,
And longing was tearing my heart.
Without love my heart felt heavy –
Where are you, my Suliko?*

*Among fragrant roses, in the shadow,
Brightly a nightingale sang his song.
There I asked the nightingale
Where he had hidden Suliko.*

*Suddenly the nightingale fell silent
And softly touched the rose with the beak
“You have found what you are looking for,” he said,
In an eternal sleep Suliko is resting here.”²⁶*

The movement begins with a short introduction that quickly leads to the fragment of the song “Suliko.” Beginning with a four-note rhythmic motif that appears in the timpani (mm. 24–25, Ex. 5), it returns *eight* times in all (a sequence of seven followed, thirty bars later, by

a final confirmatory statement).²⁷ It is as if Shostakovich sought either to emphasise the specific passage featuring orchestra and cello in which the hidden fragment of “Suliko” (Ex. 6 mm. 33–37) appears. Another striking feature here is the brief motif of three “mocking” notes (m. 35, woodwinds) that returns consistently throughout the movement. The timpani then appear in mm. 40–41 for a second time, followed by a threatening Eastern bourdon drone (in the strings), just as Shostakovich used it in his Ninth Symphony (mm. 43–57). When the timpani return for the third time (mm. 57–58), they are followed by a chromatically descending scale in the woodwinds (which also returns three times, at mm. 64, 72, and 96) that develops into a grotesque dance. It is “grotesque” as here (mm. 65–76) in the dance section of the movement, the “Suliko” theme is woven into a Jewish idiom (Freygish), as identified by Joachim Braun.²⁸ Indeed, Shostakovich used the same technique in the last movement of the Ninth Symphony, in which the Jewish dance is a forced march in military boots.

The ghost of “Suliko” flows continuously through the last movement. It goes hand in hand with a dance motif for the second time at rehearsal 69 and moves on to the “Suliko” motif on clarinet seven times, mm. 227–248 (Ex. 7). This leads to a humorous outburst in the cello in m. 249. The dance motif appears for the third time at rehearsal 76. This motif undergoes a metamorphosis (at rehearsal 77 it changes key to the original E-flat major) and returns with the same notes of the “Heroic Death” theme (mm. 288–289) as in the opening of the concerto. Suddenly, the horn sounds again (rehearsal 78), but this time in triumph with the famous four-note motif followed by the cello before finally leading to an unmistakable “*Danse Macabre*” à la Saint-Saëns (rehearsal 80).²⁹ Here Shostakovich openly thumbs his nose at the Great Leader. He completes the work with the oft-repeating four notes of the “Heroic Death” theme in woodwinds and horn.

Hence Shostakovich concludes the work with precisely the same four notes (Ex. 8) as in the opening. And as an extra gesture of emphasis, Shostakovich finishes the work with the “holy seven blows” of the timpani (referencing Prokofiev) highlighting the number seven.

It is well known that Shostakovich often repeated words to emphasise a point, and so it is in his first Cello Concerto, in which he repeats the same tiny fragment melodically and rhythmically three, and then seven times.³⁰

Hence, in this deadly game of numbers, motifs, and textual quotations, Shostakovich was able, metaphorically, to throw off the shackles of his artistic chains.³¹

About the author:

Henny van der Groep is based in the north of the Netherlands. From an initial career in biological sciences she moved into the field of musical pedagogy at the Amsterdam Conservatorium, embarking on a career of 37 years teaching pupils aged between 7 and 18 years. She is currently a freelance lecturer and writer, focusing on music and nature preservation. Bach, Shostakovich, and butterflies are her principal interests.



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- 4 Krzysztof Meyer, *Dmitri Shostakowitsch* (Zurich: Atlantis Musikbuch-Verlag, 1998), 386–387.
- 5 His novel is best known throughout the world thanks to the American film version: *Dr. Zhivago* (1965).
- 6 Shostakovich, quoted in the article “A symphony of light and *joie de vivre*”, *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 23 April 1957, republished in Meyer, *Dmitri Shostakowitsch, Erfahrungen* (Leipzig: Verlag Philipp Reclam June, 1983), 128–133. Here, Shostakovich presents impressions of Prokofiev’s Seventh Symphony, regarding Rostova: “Here, in this enchanting music, lies a tangible kinship with the waltzes of Tchaikovsky, but also, of course, with the waltzes by Prokofiev himself, for example, from *War and Peace*. And what enchanting, pure chastity is poured out in this music; the transparent shadow of Natasha Rostova seems to flit and glimmer in the flight and light movement of these notes.” And citing Plekhanov: “... Be that as it may, one can say with can be said with certainty that any artistic talent of any significant talent considerably increases his creative power if he allows himself to be permeated by the great ideas of freedom of our time. All that is necessary is that these ideas become flesh and blood, and that he expresses them as an artist. [With reference to Flaubert]: whoever thinks it possible to sacrifice form “to the idea” is no longer an artist, even if he had previously been so.” Throughout the article Shostakovich alludes to the concepts of absolute and programme music formulated in *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (1854) by Eduard Hanslick (1825–1904), and his use of certain expressions is highly reminiscent of arguments by Hanslick.
- 7 Solomon Volkov, *Testimony* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979), 186.
- 8 Elizabeth Wilson, *Mstislav Rostropovich, Cellist, Teacher, Legend* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 132.
- 9 Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: a Life Remembered*, 364–365.
- 10 Elizabeth Wilson, *Mstislav Rostropovich, Cellist, Teacher, Legend*, 134–135.
- 11 The score used is that published by Hans Sikorski, Hamburg, 1960.
- 12 In the fourth movement of the Eighth Quartet, the same theme returns as an unmistakable quotation connected with the text of the revolutionary song “Tormented by Grievous Bondage.” David Fanning, *Shostakovich: String Quartet No. 8* (Ashgate, 2004).
- 13 See op. 75a, Suite for orchestra assembled by Levon Atovmyan in 1951, *Death of the Heroes*.
- 14 Alexander Ivashkin and Andrew Kirkman, *Contemplating Shostakovich: Life, Music and Film* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 14.
- 15 Iain Strachan, “Shostakovich, Britten, Beethoven and the Russian Kontaktion for the Departed.” *DSCH Journal* 11 (Summer 1999), 54–62.
- 16 A. Ivashkin, “Introduction,” Dmitri Shostakovich, *New Collected Works* Volume 46, Cello Concerto no 1. (Moscow: DSCH Publishers, 2011).
- 17 Pauline Fairclough and David Fanning, *The Cambridge Companion to Shostakovich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 120.
- 18 In Late Romanticism composers like Berlioz, Musorgsky, Rachmaninov and Saint-Saëns often incorporated a fragment of the Dies irae to symbolise death in their works. Shostakovich connects this theme with Kontaktion, as did Benjamin Britten.
- 19 Pauline Fairclough and David Fanning, op. cit., 119–120, 126–129.
- 20 Translation © Philip Ross Bullock, provided courtesy of Oxford Lieder.
- 21 Laurel Fay, *Shostakovich and His World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 242–244.
- 22 See Mc.Burney’s essay in Laurel Fay, *ibid.*
- 23 The author of the song is unknown, as is the time of its first appearance.
- 24 See the article of Malcolm MacDonald in Pauline Fairclough and David Fanning, *The Cambridge Companion to Shostakovich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 120.
- 25 In this case three “holy” tones moving chromatically down. In the Baroque period this figure of speech is called Lamento (J.S. Bach’s music includes many examples in his works, with or without text, evoking sorrow).
- 26 Translated from the original Georgian written by Akaki Zereteli (1840–1915): see <http://ingeb.org/songs/suliko.html>
- 27 Shostakovich seemed to have said to Mark Lubotsky: “You have ‘to stomp’ on the spot before you move on.” Kirkman and Ivashkin op. cit. 39.
- 28 Joachim Braun, “The Double Meaning of Jewish Elements in Dimitri Shostakovich’s Music,” *Musical Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (1985), 68–80.
- 29 See also Saint-Saëns, Cello Concerto no. 2 second movement.
- 30 Alexander Ivashkin and Andrew Kirkman, op. cit. 14, 39–42.
- 31 I would like to thank Emmanuel Utwiller for his unfailing help. I’m also much obliged to Bob de Groot, Anneloes ter Horst and Elizabeth Wilson.

