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## Censorship and Creative Freedom in Shostakovich's Compositional Style: Music as a Tool for the State, or the Soul?

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**Censorship and Creative Freedom in Shostakovich's Compositional Style:  
Music as a Tool for the State, or the Soul?**

**Senior Project Submitted to the Division of the Arts**

**By  
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Bard College**

CENSORSHIP & FREEDOM IN SHOSTAKOVICH'S COMPOSITIONAL STYLE



## CENSORSHIP &amp; FREEDOM IN SHOSTAKOVICH'S COMPOSITIONAL STYLE

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“No description - however brilliant - can give a true idea of the power of music. Words cannot rival it in appeal and impact. This is only natural: if music expressed just as much as speech, it would be unnecessary. Music is a means capable of expressing dark dramatism and pure rapture, suffering and ecstasy, fiery and cold fury, melancholy and wild merriment - and the subtlest nuances and interplay of these feelings which words are powerless to express and which are unattainable in painting and sculpture.<sup>1</sup>”

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<sup>1</sup>Dmitri Shostakovich "The Power of Music" Translated in *Music Journal Publication* (New York. University of Washington Press, 1965), 37.

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**Introduction**

Throughout his lifetime and beyond, Dmitri Shostakovich enjoyed tremendous acclaim and celebrity in his native country and abroad. Shostakovich was born on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1906, in St. Petersburg. When Shostakovich died in 1975 in Moscow at the age of sixty-nine, he was the most celebrated Russian composer of his time. During his career Shostakovich composed fifteen symphonies and fifteen string quartets, as well as sonatas for piano, cello, violin and viola. He also produced choral works, music for ballets and operas, and over thirty film scores.<sup>2</sup> For a composer of such stature and popularity, it is surprising just how politically controversial Shostakovich's music was during the Soviet regime. Although he was a prominent teacher, ambassador, and member of the communist party, Shostakovich's relationship with his government remained complex and tenuous for most of his life. Shostakovich came to the West as a representative to the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace in New York City in March of 1949, was a professor at the both the Leningrad and Moscow conservatories between the years 1937 and 1947, and a member of the communist party. Despite these roles representing Soviet musical life, he was publically denounced for writing anti-Soviet music twice during his career, and the contrast between his popularity and the censorship he experienced from the government remained a theme throughout his life.

Laurel E. Fay writes that despite the role that music did play in his environment, Shostakovich's youth was a normal one.<sup>3</sup> Shostakovich was by no means a child prodigy. His parents were both amateur musicians, and their neighbors part of a string quartet that got together

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<sup>2</sup> David Fanning & Laurel, E. Fay, "Shostakovich, Dmitry." (*Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online.*) Accessed March 5, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Laurel, E. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*. (NY: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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in the evenings. However, Shostakovich did not show a great interest in studying music when he was young. In a questionnaire on the psychology of the creative process, published by the Glinka State Central Museum in 2000, Shostakovich recalled that although he heard a great deal of music as a child, “my father sang (as an amateur, although he had some understanding of musical theory), and my mother played the piano (as an amateur). Acquaintances (on the other side of the wall) often convened an amateur string quartet” he loved to listen but had no desire to study music himself.<sup>4</sup> Although he was exposed to music early in life, Shostakovich only commenced his study of piano at the age of eight or nine. As a child, his main exposure to music was listening to his mother and father play together at his parent’s musical *Soirées*, (there are anecdotes about him hiding under the piano during these gatherings) and eavesdropping on his neighbor’s chamber group play Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and Borodin through the apartment wall. “It was music—above and beyond their common Siberian heritage—that had brought Shostakovich’s parents together in the first place.”<sup>5</sup> When Shostakovich did begin to study piano in 1914 it was also a family exercise, as he studied under the careful instruction of his mother. His interest in composition emerged almost as soon as he began to play. “Shostakovich’s desire to compose was kindled as soon as he started to play the piano. Although most of his juvenilia was eventually either lost or destroyed, he was composing steadily from the age of nine.”<sup>6</sup> The young Shostakovich showed immediate musical promise, including absolute pitch and a capacity to learn quickly. He was playing simple Mozart and Haydn pieces within a month of beginning lessons, and his mother brought him to Ignaty Glyasser’s private music school in order to find a

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<sup>4</sup> Roman, Ilich Gruber. “Responses of Shostakovich to a Questionnaire on the Psychology of the Creative Process.” In *Shostakovich and His World*, ed Lauren E. Fay, (Princeton University Press, 2004), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

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way to undertake a more serious study of music. Initially, Shostakovich studied with the director's wife Olga Federovna, but he showed such promise that he was transferred to Glyasser within a year. By the end of 1917 Shostakovich could reportedly play the entire *Well-Tempered Clavier*.<sup>7</sup> In 1918, by the age of 12 Shostakovich was enrolled in the Petrograd Conservatory which for composition and piano. He graduated the Leningrad Conservatory in 1925, well on his way to becoming a young successful composer.

### Musical Language

Shostakovich lived and composed through two world wars, under a regime where the political climate fluctuated between censorship and relative freedom of expression. Because of the ever shifting political atmosphere, and the turmoil of his social and political context, Shostakovich's music incorporates and reflects the deep emotion and suffering he witnessed and experienced. This can be seen in his use of dissonance and atonality, like the menacing rhythmic chords seen in the Eighth Quartet, Op. 110, 1960, and the atonal, off-kilter dance themes and furious war-like music of the Leningrad Symphony, op 60. He is also known for his use of contrast, highlighting the breadth of human emotion and contradiction. This is highlighted by contrasting rhythmic (and satirical) dances with the haunting, chromatic melodies which permeate so much of his work including the second movement of the Fourth Quartet, Op. 83, and his Sonata for Viola and Piano, Op. 147. Much of Shostakovich's music broke tonal boundaries. He used and manipulated classical forms to convey sarcasm, caricature, and uncertainty within works. Shostakovich's musical style uses juxtaposed and fragmented disparate rhythms, themes and motives with abrupt transitions to create poignancy and intensity in his music. The elements

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<sup>7</sup> Fanning and Fay, *Oxford Music Online*.

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that unify his musical language include atonality, chromatic motion, rhythmic drive and dissonance that breaks from style of both the Russian composers that came before him, and the musical guidelines imposed by Soviet politics. The fine balance that Shostakovich was required to maintain throughout the Stalinist regime between the music he wanted to write, and the ideals of the political regime underscores the uncertainty and contradictions of both his life and music.

What makes Shostakovich's overall musical language recognizable is that when writing freely, he often used specific techniques to convey intense emotions clearly and simply. His use of dissonance and melodic contour convey emotion through rhythm which denotes drive, wide leaps that shows intensity of emotion, chromatic motion, and change in instrumental texture that express uncertainty and fear. Shostakovich also contrasted his use of dissonance with a fluid or fragmented melodic lines, and an emphasis on haunting minor diatonic scales. From the slow and singing chromatic melodies one instrument plays almost alone (as in the second movement of his Fourth Quartet,) to the swinging rhythmic dance movements with their characteristic cacophonous voices, the tools which Shostakovich uses break through 19<sup>th</sup> century tonal system to portray the emotion more directly, using contrast to express a wide range of emotion.

Although much of his music has atonal qualities, its easy to understand the importance of leading tones, and the tension and release of dissonance and cadences. The breaks from expected harmony are often changes in direction, used to convey the wild energy of despair, terror and devastation. He used the contrasts between the expected harmony, and its dissonant replacement to create tension and drama, "the music itself—the deliberate "error," confounding the ear of the listener and making him doubt his own expectations."<sup>8</sup> Shostakovich used expected harmony as a

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<sup>8</sup>, Wendy Lesser. *Music for Silenced Voices: Shostakovich and His Fifteen Quartets*. (New York. Yale University Print, 2011), 23.



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medium he could manipulate to create an emotional effect, lending importance to the pauses, the breaks in texture and the dissonances, to create uncertainty and confusion, and then a resolve into clarity again. Shostakovich used his perfect pitch and great talent to bend the rules of composition in a way that was unexpected and frowned upon in Soviet Russia. "That Shostakovich had an extremely delicate ear was never in doubt. But the surprising thing was how he used that ear. Like Zoshchenko, he used it to *create* the false note as well as to detect it. Shostakovich's music is filled with moments where a seemingly stable melody begins and then breaks down into dissonance, or where our expectations have been set up to hear a particular turn of phrase and instead we get something very slightly off from that."<sup>9</sup> Shostakovich's modal language has been described as functioning both linearly and melodically, with the importance of the expression lying more in the linear relationship, contrast and progression of the melody rather than the larger functional harmony. Soviet theorist Aleksandr Dolzhanskii has also described Shostakovich's musical language as diatonically based, and as gravitating towards lowered scale degrees. He claims that Shostakovich places emphasis on melodic modes and 'stepwise melodic gravitation', rather than chordal harmonic function, and that he has a tendency to use "modes that were "minor" in quality but that usually contain additional lowered altered degrees."<sup>10</sup>

Throughout his career, Shostakovich was criticized for composing music that contained modern and atonal elements, which in Soviet Russia were considered corrupting influence from the bourgeois and capitalist West. Elements of modernism and atonalism in Shostakovich's music generated controversy among teachers and composers in the Conservatory as early as

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Jada Watson, "Aspects of The "Jewish" Folk Idiom in Dmitri Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 4, Op. 83 (1949)." PhD diss. University of Ottawa, 2008.

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1920, but had much larger implications later in his life when the political atmosphere tightened and the government began constructing a unified theory about what Soviet music should be. This theory of how music should serve the government set limitations to Shostakovich's compositional freedom, preventing him from openly endorsing modern music and his interest in Western composers such as Alban Berg, Béla Bartók, Paul Hindemith, and Arnold Schoenberg. In shaping music into a tool for propaganda, the USSR and various political groups and committees that rose and fell from power within the Soviet communist regime (such as RAPM and the Ministry of Culture) attempted to create a political framework which elevated some music as representing the Soviet ideal, and censored and suppressed music that did not.

Political and governmental groups, music critics, and the press labeled some music as supportive of the regime and its ideals, and other music as anti-Soviet. The pressure Shostakovich faced to conform to this musical ideology forced him to change course and adapt his compositional style in ways that, in another political and social context, he may not have needed to. Monitored and told to write music that fit into the political ideology of the time, Shostakovich became increasingly careful about what compositions he premiered, and what he disclosed about his music and his life. In order to do this, Shostakovich withdrew, stopped speaking about his music or ideas, and left all interpretation up to the listener and the press. This silence on the part of the composer, as well as his careful balance between his interest in atonalism and dissonance on one hand, and the censorship he faced on the other, created controversy and contention surrounding his music and its meaning. “No other music—indeed, no other body of texts—so radially forces engagement with the most fundamental issues of interpretation.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Taruskin, “Who was Shostakovich?” *Atlantic Monthly* 275: 62-72. (1995).

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**Chameleon**

Interpretation of Shostakovich's music has given rise to much debate and contention with regards to where Shostakovich stood on the political spectrum. Indeed, many musicologists have examined everything from his music, personal letters and public statements, to stories from family and friends, in an attempt to find secret messages or proof that would paint him as either a political dissident or a proud communist. As an incredibly well-acclaimed composer, Shostakovich is the one Soviet composer to "claimed equally by the official culture and the dissident culture."<sup>12</sup> He represented Soviet Russia on international tours, won the Stalin prize and was a professor of the most acclaimed conservatory, but he has also been claimed by Soviet dissident culture, and later by musicologists the world over, as resisting communism and Stalin through his music. However, Shostakovich's own silence on the matter makes it impossible to discern where this private man stood politically. One of the foremost biographers of Shostakovich writes "Shostakovich made a point of speaking through his music, not about it. He was an intensely private person who guarded his personal life and feelings jealously. What all but a very few close friends and family members were permitted to experience of the man was the stiff façade of a civic-minded public servant and consummate music professional."<sup>13</sup> This stiff façade and secrecy that Shostakovich preserved throughout his career was necessary protection to ensure his survival. Even faced with censorship and denunciation, he was able to survive and write his music throughout a highly treacherous and uncertain political time, regardless of what he personally believed. He managed this by refusing to speak about his music and instead leaving the interpretation up to the audience. "Not explaining his music—or any music—except

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<sup>12</sup> Taruskin, "Who was Shostakovich?", 66.

<sup>13</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 1.

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under public pressure, in the vaguest terms, became the Shostakovich defense, and a rule that he even carried over into his private life.”<sup>14</sup> The political turmoil and danger Shostakovich faced, the censorship which pressured his creative impulse, and the secrecy he maintained about his opinions and work, add up to create an environment ripe for speculation and contention regarding his personal opinions on music, politics, and life. In the words of Richard Taruskin, Shostakovich's music is controversial because of the high stakes of the brutal political tyranny he lived under, and the fine balance he had to maintain in his creative endeavors and interpretation of his own music. In other words, the ambiguity of Shostakovich's music and its meaning, compounded by the horrific environment, creates controversy and contention. “Whether viewed internally or externally, whether in terms of their content or of their context, Shostakovich's works are fraught with horrific subtexts that can never be ignored. That is why they have always been, and will always be, objects of furious and manifold contention.”<sup>15</sup> And in the study of Shostakovich, this contention has manifested itself into two main opinions about the meaning of his music, namely whether he was a secret dissident fighting the Stalin regime through music or whether he was the loyal public servant, happy to shift his musical style in order to better support his country.

### **The Shostakovich Mirage**

Ultimately the rift in the historical and musicological studies of Shostakovich is divided into those who are trying to prove whether Shostakovich was a loyal communist complicit in what happened during Stalin's reign, and those who maintain that he was in fact a secret

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<sup>14</sup> Taruskin, “Who was Shostakovich?”, 66.

<sup>15</sup> Taruskin, “Who was Shostakovich?”, 66.

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dissident, fighting the regime with subtext and subtle messages in his music. Many of these claims are unsubstantiated and lack evidence and corroboration, for example Solomon Volkov's alleged memoirs, *Testimony*.<sup>16</sup> However, resolving that debate is not the purpose of the present exploration, and is most likely impossible, due to Shostakovich's own secrecy and the nature of the political climate that surrounded him. Shostakovich acted and spoke publically in such a way that would ensure his survival and the safety of his family. Therefore, most statements Shostakovich made may have hidden agendas, and cannot be verified as representing his own views. It remains difficult to know if Shostakovich even wrote his own public statements, due to lack of documentation or evidence. Likewise, personal correspondence, and testimony of friends and relatives must be read critically, considering that any evidence condemning information could have gotten him killed. In short, Shostakovich was a highly secretive man. He refused to speak about his music, and made a practice of burning the letters he received. He also cautioned friends and relations to do the same. Shostakovich's laconic and cautious nature, due to the danger of his political situation, neither denies nor confirms his inner thoughts, and whatever he actually believed will never come to light. So what can be ascertained about Shostakovich and his music, using the reliable resources that we have?

### **Shostakovich and The Truth**

Discovering the truth about an artist who has died is a difficult endeavor, since portrayals by colleagues, followers and even friends may be tainted with jealousy, protectiveness, or unclear and subjective memories. It is probable that both friends and enemies of important

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<sup>16</sup> Solomon Volkov, ed., *Testimony, the memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).

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people lie in order to make themselves look better or worse, especially during a time when the government reinvented the past and falsified information to fit its political agenda. Laurel E. Fay writes that “Soviet history was always a work-in-progress; people, ideas, and facts that became unpalatable were routinely ‘airbrushed’ out of existence in later Soviet sources. Only rarely was anything so erased later on restored. Shostakovich himself was obliged to reinvent his past on occasion.”<sup>17</sup> The news and the official record was changed and updated as the political environment shifted. This led to even more social instability, and further inspired Shostakovich to keep his own views quiet. In a time when information was precious and potentially condemning, “the artists own secretiveness, or evasiveness”<sup>18</sup> added to the problem. With Shostakovich, his persona; secrecy further confounded the facts. As Wendy Lesser muses in *Silenced voices*,

“to these normal layers of obfuscation, Shostakovich’s case adds many more. Silence was at the heart of the enterprise. It is there in his music (which, especially toward the end, seemed to be pulling the notes out of a deep silence, or sending them back into it), and it is there in his personality (there are numerous stories about his sitting in silence, even in the company of friends), and it is there, most particularly, in the conditions of his twentieth-century Russian life. To speak, in those circumstances, was to betray, and to speak the truth was to betray oneself.”<sup>19</sup>

Her parallel between Shostakovich’s silence in his music, and in his opinions about it, illustrates just how difficult it is to pin down concrete and verifiable information about

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<sup>17</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Lesser, *Silenced Voices*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

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Shostakovich's private thoughts or personal beliefs, regarding his music and the political and social environment that surrounded him. Due to this uncertainty, many musicologists and Shostakovich enthusiasts both in Post Soviet era Russia, and in the West, have attempted to figure out what kind of man Shostakovich really was. In so doing, they created many overblown theories about the nature of his relationship to his music and his country. Many of these theories reinterpret his letters and public statements and search for secret messages in his music that might verify his personal feelings. It is easy to miss the man (and as much meaning as you can attribute to his music) underneath all of the debate and contention regarding his personal beliefs and the images that have been built-up around Shostakovich of either a good obedient communist, or a hidden dissident fighting the regime. Where theories fail, music provides possible answers to Shostakovich's more complex life decisions and creative choices.

### **Beyond Biographical Speculation**

Since ruminating on the personal thoughts and opinions of this intensely private man cannot resolve the controversy, it makes more sense to study the effect of public and political opinion and censorship on Shostakovich's musical output and expression. There are two important time periods where the political environment directly impacted Shostakovich's standing in society, as well as his compositional content and style. These two falls from grace in the eyes of the Soviet government were marked by the publication of the 1936 *Pravda* article entitled "Muddle Instead of Music" after Stalin saw his second opera, and the Conference of Musicians at the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party in Moscow on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1948, where Shostakovich and other composers was attacked and publically denounced for formalism. Both these instances put him in grave danger, made his music virtually unplayable,

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and forced him to write music that conformed to the political ideology of the time. This paper surveys the effects of public and political opinion and censorship on his musical expression, and how the dangerous political environment forced the young Shostakovich to balance between following his own creative interests and conforming to what was considered politically appropriate music. I will explore the important role the political environment played in shaping Shostakovich's musical style through censorship, and the ever developing definition of musical formalism and its political consequences in Soviet Russia. Periods of censorship and the development of the political climate will be contrasted with periods of relative freedom Shostakovich enjoyed, for example after the death of Stalin and the fall of the regime. Specific pieces of music that were deemed inappropriate such as Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtstinct District*, or alternately suppressed by the government or not played until after Stalin's death, such as the Fourth quartet and Fourth Symphony will be examined. How these moments of musical censorship influenced Shostakovich's musical output and creativity in the direct aftermath of the government's chastisement will be compared with the specific elements they were criticized on, and the presence or absence of those elements within pieces of music which were deemed patriotic and true to what Soviet musical style should be. Specifically, it is informative to compare the atonal and modernist pieces which were accused of 'formalism' with some of the commissioned film scores which Shostakovich was forced to write after his music was denounced. Other aspects to consider in the analysis of style and content between periods of censorship and relative freedom include thematic and melodic material, text setting, orchestration, atonality, and the role of outside cultural influences such as jazz, folk and gypsy music on Shostakovich's musical style.



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Throughout Shostakovich's career the uncertainty and danger of the political climate that surrounded him ebbed and flowed. While his own political standing and remains uncertain, what is clear is that Shostakovich had to adapt as the Soviet government changed its definitions of what it meant to be a supporter of the people, and how all artistic production, including music, should serve the state and its political ideals. When the political climate became extreme, Shostakovich was forced to retreat behind a mask, and protect his own thoughts and musical ideas. According to Wendy Lesser in *Silenced Voices*, not only did Shostakovich face direct censorship from the outside, but "Shostakovich often censored *himself*, distorting and suppressing his own talent in order to write the kinds of pieces that were demanded of him as a public artist."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, there is a great difference between the form and content of Shostakovich's compositions when he was under pressure to conform to the Soviet ideas of what music should be, and when he was free to compose as he pleased. The material and the structure of the music which Shostakovich wrote during times of relative freedom—the themes he pursued, the elements of atonality, dissonance, jarring and maniacal sarcasm and indeed the orchestration itself, are very different from the content and structure of the music he was commissioned to write for the propaganda films, and even his popular fifth symphony which served as a comeback from his first denunciation. The elements of his musical style that came under question shifted with time and the ever changing political environment, and accusations against his compositional style, (including dissonance, atonality, 'formalism', lack of continuous melodic material, orchestration that was inaccessible to the people, and the wrong type of thematic material, like Jewish folk tunes, or bourgeoisie western influences such as jazz were all called into question) happened at various periods during his career. In response to these

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 2.

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criticisms and the public humiliation that went with them, Shostakovich was forced to take on commissions of propaganda and film music in order to survive. The difference between his compositional style in these two cases tells a much clearer story about, if not what he felt or thought, what Shostakovich wanted to write about, and what it meant to him.

### **Early Response to Criticism**

By the time he was studying at the conservatory, Shostakovich had already come up against some of the stylistic and political criticism from teachers that would so define his career as a composer. As a young composer, Shostakovich was evidently very confident in his artistic vision, and disliking being forced to adjust his ideas and compositions to fit the ideas of teachers or colleagues. This attitude is in stark contrast to his refusal to speak about his music later, and indicates that he had to learn to censor himself through the danger he faced in the political environment. The young Shostakovich also expressed some resistance to the idea of confining himself to a particular harmonic or theoretical framework. When asked about how he reacted to his education as a young composer, Shostakovich responded,

“During the time I was going through the course in Theory of Composition at the conservatory, I looked on it as an ‘unavoidable evil,’ to which I submitted passively, to some extent. On finishing the course, I felt it impossible to compose freely, spontaneously; I was obliged somehow to ‘squeeze out’ a series of works (in the summer of 1925, a symphony and two movements of a string octet . . . ); starting in the fall of 1925 through December 1926 I kept trying to compose, but unsuccessfully (during that early period after finishing the conservatory, I had turned into too narrow a ‘professional,’ putting matters of technical fluency above everything else, unwittingly trying to make everything I wrote turn out

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‘correctly’ and ‘fluently’): my creative consciousness could not escape the bounds inculcated by academic canons. From the fall of 1926, I turned to the study of contemporary Western composers (Schoenberg, Béla Bartók, Hindemith, Krenek), which apparently provided the immediate stimulus for “liberating” my musical faculties.”<sup>21</sup>

This passage both marks the beginning of Shostakovich's interest in the modern Western composers and their breakdown of tonal boundaries, and shows his initial view on the suppression of creativity by restrictive compositional rules. While this passage only definitively marks the opinion of his youth, these statements are a good contrast with his later response to criticism. It hints that however silent, or obsequious he may have been in response to his two denunciations, there is a possibility that his humble apologies were forced by necessity of survival, or at least were a learned reaction rather than one that reflected his personality and Opinions throughout his life. In another example of his early response to criticism, Shostakovich recalls composing a suite for two pianos in 1922. His Professor, M. O. Shteinberg, did not like the suite and ordered me to revise it. “I did not. Then he insisted a second time that it be revised, and I reworked it according to his instructions . . . After the concert, I destroyed the corrected version and set about restoring the original . . . this was one of my many attempts to “revolt” against the dictatorship of ‘rules.’ Later on, this sort of thing happened when I was composing the Trio, the Octet, and the Symphony, in which I kept everything as I wanted it and wouldn't accept M.O's corrections.”<sup>22</sup> Again, while only highlighting his response to restriction and criticism as a young composer, these passages highlight the contrast between the young

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<sup>21</sup> Gruber, “Responses of Shostakovich to a Questionnaire on the Psychology of the Creative Process”, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 29.

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Shostakovich who, during a time of relative freedom and safety was willing to fight for his own ideas and refuse the criticism of his teachers, with an older Shostakovich who during times of censorship and criticism, accepted criticism, took on commissioned propaganda work, and cautiously refused to speak about his music or his beliefs at all.

### **The Political Development of Musical Style and Censorship:**

The political climate while Shostakovich was developing into a young successful composer, was also shifting towards a repressive and restrictive environment where music and literature were censored for content, style, and their propagandistic function for the Soviet State. The Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians, otherwise known as RAPM, was a political organization that “exercised oppressive control over Soviet music in the period of the militant Communist Cultural Revolution from 1928-1932.”<sup>23</sup> This organization and the movement they created to rid Soviet music of formalism, light music and atonalism, introduced many of the concepts used to denounce Shostakovich later. RAPM did criticize Shostakovich's work before 1928, but it appears that their attacks had a smaller impact than later once these same ideas and critiques were coming from the government itself. In order to understand how music came under the intense political censorship of the later years, its important to understand the development of what Soviet music meant politically, and the guidelines that were put in place to make it a political medium.

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<sup>23</sup> Fitzpatrick, Sheila. “The Lady Macbeth Affair: Shostakovich and the Soviet Puritans” *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*,( Cornell University Press, 1992), 188.

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RAPM formed in the early 1920s, but didn't gain much power or momentum until the Cultural Revolution of 1929-1932.<sup>24</sup> Before 1929 RAPM was mostly a fringe group consisting of young composers and journalists who "had the zeal and militancy of revolutionary activists."<sup>25</sup> Their goal was to control the music publishing business, as well as the repertoire which could be presented in the opera houses, and on a larger scale to rid Soviet music of 'formalism', and influence from the capitalist West. This manifested as criticism in the press of music that they considered formalist or bourgeois, in other words modern music, atonal music, jazz music, and anything that might be considered decadent or bourgeois. They managed to get a complete ban on the publishing of what they considered light music, and during the cultural revolution of 1928 to 1932, they attempted to make it "very difficult for serious composers who wrote in a modernist idiom (particularly those associated with ASM) to publish their works."<sup>26</sup> (ASM was the Association for Contemporary Music). However, the main complication to RAPM's agenda, was that applying political ideology to the arts is a highly subjective process. While a medium like literature is easier to construct an ideological framework for based off of the meaning of the words. Music, especially wordless classical music requires a much higher level of subjectivity to judge or assess. Because of the high level of subjectivity involved, it is much harder to judge through an ideological lens, in any definitive way, and it is also harder to create music that fits into a political ideology. While RAPM advocated for proletarian music, and against formalism, what that translated to in terms of content, form, and technique was never very clear or easy to follow. There were never any concrete rules that defined what music was formalist, and what was a representation of what Soviet music should be. Instead, there was a range of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 189.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 192.

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opinions. "RAPM was a polemical organization above all, defined as much by what it was against as by what it was for. In principle, it was against anything bourgeois in music. In practice, this stance translated into a constant battle on two fronts: with 'formalism' (modernism) on the one hand and 'light music' on the other."<sup>27</sup> Light Music, otherwise known as *legkii zhanr*, included a wide range of folk and variety music, including gypsy music, music hall songs, syncopated dance music and salon romances with western influence. To RAPM this genre of music represented "urban petty bourgeoisie" and was "imbued with Philistine petty-bourgeois values" that were ideologically harmful to the proletariat.<sup>28</sup> They found influence from the west to be particularly bad and corrupting. "The RAPMists and other opponents considered that the modernists' international orientation was evidence that they were spiritually in bondage to the capitalist West, and thus out of step with the Revolution. To them atonalism was a sign of the decadence of postwar art in the West."<sup>29</sup> Jazz especially, was associated with decadence and capitalism. Soviet writers of the 1920s purported that jazz music represented the "decadent eroticism of the Western bourgeoisie in the last stages of capitalism."<sup>30</sup> Even with these main ideas and labels circulating within the political organization and the press, the opinions and guidelines of early RAPM thinkers were highly subjective. Music that one member of RAPM considered to be 'formalist' or 'bourgeois', was often completely different from what another member criticized as embodying those qualities, and there was no formal guide or rules that consistently defined these terms. The same piece could be initially heralded as representing the Soviet Proletariat movement, and then attacked in reviews as representing corrupt formalist

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 191.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 191.

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values. RAPM did have one tangible orchestration which they promoted however, which was “revolutionary mass songs, generally marches.”<sup>31</sup> These were more easily categorized due to their military form and instrumentation (march, with choral vocals representing the people) and their text setting which had clear revolutionary themes and stories. However, on all other fronts there were no unified or specific guidelines. Once these ideas were spread throughout the press, the government and the community of composers, musicians, and teachers, began to use them and circulate them. However, there was no solid definition or framework to explain what would create good proletariat soviet music. Rather, RAPM's mission manifested more in subjective the name calling and finger pointing in the press.

Although they were a fringe organization with limited real governmental power before 1928, during the time leading up to the Cultural Revolution, RAPM managed to gain control of segments of publishing and the news, and made it their purpose to badly review composers they considered to be modernist or formalist. Shostakovich's opera *The Nose*, based on the story by Gogol, was one of the works that came under attack for formalist elements. As Sheila Fitzpatrick writes in *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, “Dmitri Shostakovich, not yet thirty years old, was one of the rising young stars of Soviet Music. True, some of his early work had aroused controversy during RAPM's heyday. His first opera, *The Nose*, which premiered at Leningrad's Malyi Theatre in 1930, was harshly treated by RAPM critics, and a ballet, *Bolt*, had been taken out of the repertoire in 1931”<sup>32</sup> These types of attacks, while not affiliated with the government, were not insignificant, and often resulted in closure or negative public opinion of the works. “Performances and productions of new works by composers on

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 184.

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RAPM's blacklist—notably Shostakovich—were very harshly reviewed by RAPM critics in the regular and musical press, and sometimes had to close as a result. Shostakovich's first opera, as we have seen, and his ballet *Bolt* were among the casualties."<sup>33</sup> *The Nose* was harshly criticized by the proletarian wing for its "avoidance of a Soviet theme; its musical complexity, and its inaccessibility to the masses."<sup>34</sup> One composer even went as far as to say that Shostakovich, "without a doubt, has strayed from the main road of Soviet art. If he does not accept the falsity of his path, then his work will inevitably arrive at a dead end."<sup>35</sup> However, as a young musician, Shostakovich was not yet threatened into silence by censorship, and did not appear to take their criticism very seriously. While bad reviews circulated in the press and the community of composers, RAPM's early accusations of formalism had a much smaller effect on Shostakovich than his later denunciations. At this time, Shostakovich was confident, and had no reason to fear, or expect, what was to come.

Before his public denunciation, Shostakovich was significantly more forthcoming with his opinions on the criticism of the press, and the inconsistency of RAPM's subjective finger pointing. Because he was so incredibly popular and such a public figure, and because he did have associations with other 'correct' organizations which stood for the proletariat ideal, he was able to survive the initial criticism of RAPM mostly unscathed. He was less vulnerable to RAPM's "virulent attacks and harassment" during the cultural revolution of the late 1920s and early 1930s, because he was not dependent on a single organization, and received commissions from various types of institutions and organizations including various theatres, the conservatory, and his concert appearances. "he had negotiated contracts to provide music to order with a broad

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>34</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 55.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 55.



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range of theatres (both musical and dramatic), film projects, and other organizations. His concert appearances also brought him income.”<sup>36</sup> Probably due to his relatively protected position, and his involvement in so many genres including politically appropriate ones, Shostakovich was comfortable expressing his opinions on the criticism he received.

“In April 1929, in the context of a debate on the state of musical criticism, Shostakovich had lamented the incredible polarity of opinions to be found in the contemporary press. He argued for objective, musically competent evaluations capable of explaining—both to the reader and the composer being reviewed—why something is good or bad and how shortcomings could be avoided. In the wake of the operatic debacle, he was justifiably bitter about the volte-faced critics who had repressed their enthusiastic support of only a year or two earlier for his opera. He felt he should be obliged to disclose and explain their conversion publically. What these defections and the tone of the critical rhetoric reflected, as the composer well knew, was the increasingly militant hegemony of a narrowly defined ‘proletarian’ cultural agenda.”<sup>37</sup>

At this point in his life, while still relatively well-protected from the attacks of the RAPM, Shostakovich was successful and popular enough to feel threatened. Here, he was very clear in expressing his dissatisfaction with the discrepancy between the mass opinion, and the opinion of the RAPM critics, who had approved the material and music of the opera before hand, but were then swayed to change their minds. Later in life, Shostakovich would never have responded this way to the influence and opinions of the press.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 57.

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**The Cultural Revolution and Soviet Realism**

These criticisms that RAPM created and spread in the early 1920s brought words like “formalism” and “social realism” into the political and social climates. As the political climate shifted and became more restrictive, these terms and ideas were carried onto the cultural revolution. During the course of the Cultural Revolution, all dissonant and modern music was condemned, and all jazz music was outlawed. The political environment became more tense and much more suppressive. In 1928 when the first Five-Year Plan was instated, RAPM was no longer an up and coming organization headed by young political activists and composers. Now it was a powerful organization that gained control over the musical output of the most prominent musical institutions such as the conservatories, the radio, and the concert halls. At this point in time, RAPM was able to impose intense censorship of music, and suppression of composers and musical styles through the press.

“Control passed into the hands of the RAPM, whose action was swift and drastic. It took over the Moscow Conservatory, replacing the director with a certain Pshibuyshvsky, who announced in his maiden address that soloist must be abolished because only ‘mass’ musicians were needed. Tchaikovsky, Chopin, Scriabin and Rachmaninoff were banned, and only students of proletarian ancestry were permitted to remain in the school. An attempt was made to abolish chamber music on the grounds that it was music for the few. Composers, the RAPM declared, had been indulging in degenerate individual speculations and producing decadent, incomprehensible music for a few debilitated aesthetes. What was needed was rigorous, simple music to stir the masses.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Barbara Makanowitzky, 1965. “Music to serve the state” *The Russian review*, (1965), 268.

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According to the the chapter in the book *The Cultural Front*, this drastic political surge against modern musical styles was a long time in the making. Political ideas such as formalism had been circulating and building up for a long time before the Cultural Revolution and the rise of RAPM. And even after RAPM disbanded and the political climate changed again, these ideas remained. The censorship of modern and atonal music, and the labels of formalism established themselves within Soviet culture even after RAPM was disbanded, and were taken and adopted by the next anti-formalist campaign 'Soviet Realism'. In April of 1936, RAPM was dissolved by order of the party Central Committee, and new "umbrella organizations" were created such as the Union of Soviet Composers<sup>39</sup> to monitor the development of Soviet music. While the name of the organization had changed, the message remained essentially the same.

Although there was an initial claim that this new political idea of 'Soviet Realism' represented a shift away from the repression of the Cultural Revolution, the reprieve did not last. Prokofiev returned to the U.S.S.R., and what was formally labeled as light music came back into favor. "The new slogan of 'socialist realism' (a phrase credited to Maxim Gorky, who defined it was 'socialist ideology in a realistic form') was adopted as the dictum of the government to all creative artists."<sup>40</sup> These new organizations began a campaign against formalism, even as the political atmosphere and sense of oppression lifted. "after the tribulations of the Cultural Revolution, the intelligentsia was breathing more freely."<sup>41</sup> Even Stalin embraced the temporary lifting of restriction when he announced that life had become better. "A new slogan, "socialist realism" had replaced RAPP's threatening demand for proletarian hegemony in culture. But

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<sup>39</sup> Fitzpatrick, "The Lady Macbeth Affair Shostakovich and the Soviet Puritans," 196-200.

<sup>40</sup> Makanowitzky, "Music to serve the state" *The Russian review*, 269.

<sup>41</sup> Fitzpatrick, *The Lady Macbeth Affair Shostakovich and the Soviet Puritans*, 183.

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socialist realism was not a dogmatic orthodoxy and would not be used punitively or for the purposes of exclusion, musicians were assured by the new head of the Moscow Composer's union."<sup>42</sup> At least that is what Stalin said at the beginning of the campaign, although the reality turned out to be a little bit different. It was this new campaign that was responsible for the denunciation of Shostakovich's opera, *Lady Macbeth*. "The *Pravda* editorial of 28 January on *Lady Macbeth* was the first of a series of signals that announced the new antiformalist campaign." This campaign would grow to suppress all art and music that was "stylized, modernist, and pessimistic, and took its inspiration from the West." And this campaign would also grow to define formalism more specifically, encouraging art and music that was "realistic, traditional, and optimistic, and took its inspiration from folk art."<sup>43</sup>

Where RAPM had run a campaign for proletariat control that focused on exterminating western and corrupted formalist influences, the new antiformalist campaign created by Stalin and other leading figures in the spring of 1932, stated its main principles as "a way to depict reality in its revolutionary development... combined with the ideological remolding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism."<sup>44</sup> The main ideals of this movement were that formal structure of music should not dominate the content, that art should express the will of the people and be accessible to the working class, and further should aggressively support the party and construct socialism. Although the accusation of 'formalism' was thrown around frequently during this time much like the previous reign of RAPM, the definition issue of translating

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 184.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 198.

<sup>44</sup> David G Tompkins, "The Rise and Decline of Socialist Realism in Music" *Composing the Party Line: Music and Politics in Early Cold War Poland and East Germany* (Purdue University Press, 2013) 15–94.

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political ideology into specific compositional rules and styles had not been resolved. The definition of formalism was roughly that the formal aspects of the work were more important than the subject matter or content. But what the formal elements were, and how their importance could be judged was not specified. Formalism was associated generally with elements of dissonance, atonality, 12 tone music and cacophony.<sup>45</sup>

Although slightly more specific in its definitions and terms, than the previous anti-formalist campaign driven by RAPM, socialist realism faced many of the same problems of subjectivity as RAPM's Cultural Revolution. This campaign really embodied an extension of the same ideas. The question of how to translate socialist realism into a novel or a painting remained a difficult and vexing question. In music, the official culture preferred compositions that were text based and included ideological content such as mass songs and cantatas. With words, conveying the ideological messages was easier. As a result, Instrumental music was increasingly frowned upon. In order to be accepted, instrumental music had to be easily understandable to the broad masses, and was preferably melodic, patriotic, and uplifting. But even these rough guidelines are entirely subjective, and hard to follow as a specific set of instructions on how to compose, and it is impossible to not see a similarity in the struggle to define these political and ideological concepts regardless in the change of terminology.

“A chronological account obscures the fundamental consistency behind Soviet policy, which has always been based on the premise that art must serve the state by inspiring the masses in accord with the state's goals. What changes is the official concept of how to achieve this, a concept influenced by many factors: economic conditions, international relations, the personal taste of the leaders, the tenor of the times, evidence of failure, and,

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<sup>45</sup> Tompkins, “The Rise and Decline of Socialist Realism in Music”, 18.

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above all, internal politics. The latter are so important that it is impossible to review Soviet policy towards music without referring to all the major changes in internal Soviet politics."<sup>46</sup>

### **Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District**

Shostakovich wrote his second major operatic work in 1931, when he was 24. It was premiered three years later, at the beginning of 1934 in the Malyi Opera Theatre in Leningrad<sup>47</sup>. The opera was premiered around the same time by two different theatres, the Nemirovich-Danchenko Musical Theatre as well as the Malyi Opera Theatre. The Nemirovich-Danchenko theatre took a different approach to the work, "one which emphasized the tragedy and soft-pedaled the satire."<sup>48</sup> They also took a different name for their production, calling it *Katerina Izmailova* rather than *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. The Malyi production opened on January 22, 1934, and the other one premiered two days later. "Expectations for Shostakovich's new opera ran high. Well before its premiere, extensive coverage in the press promoted the significance of the event for Soviet opera. Even the most skeptical of critics, concerned chiefly with issues clarifying the proper social ramifications of the drama or lamenting its lack of a moral force for good (and not, incidentally, bristling with puritanical indignation at the carnal excesses that later became an issue), were swayed by the undeniably originality and power of Shostakovich's music."<sup>49</sup> The caution and skepticism of the press before the opera was premiered was due to its subject matter. The libretto was based off of Nikolai Leskov's book,

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<sup>46</sup> Mekanowitzky, "Music to Serve the State", 267.

<sup>47</sup> Lesser, *Music for Silenced Voices*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* 75.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

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which depicted a lonely merchant's wife who, lonely and sad, commits adultery and murder. Despite some skepticism, the opera was wildly successful after its premiere. The two openings, in Moscow in the Nemirovich-Danchenko Theatre, was so successful that within two years it had toured abroad, had been given a new production in Bolshoi, had appeared more than two times in Moscow and Leningrad.<sup>50</sup> By the end of 1935 the opera had been performed 94 performances in Moscow, and more than 80 in Leningrad. Another production of the opera was launched by the Bolshoi Theatre's second company in Moscow, and the Leningrad production went on tour. This shows that overall, the public reception of the opera was incredibly positive, with so many performances and generally positive reviews from fellow musicians<sup>51</sup> and within two years of its premiere, *Lady Macbeth* had been performed in the U.S., Argentina, Czechoslovakia, Sweden, Switzerland, and England. There were good reviews from other prominent composers and musicians as well. Shaporin called the work "the apex of Shostakovich's creative work" and Gavriil Popov wrote that the opera was "a remarkable, deep, and brilliantly orchestrated composition."<sup>52</sup> In general, after the opening, the reception was overwhelmingly popular. In the Malyi production, the show was predicted to become "one of the most beloved of the mass viewer."<sup>53</sup> This new work was musically, influenced by Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, and encompassed chromatic motion, atonality, and dissonance. Its subject matter as also modern, with depictions of adultery, sexuality and violence on the part of women. It was new and modern and a big leap in breadth for Shostakovich, and the audiences loved it.

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<sup>50</sup> Lesser, *Music for Silenced Voices*, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Fitzpatrick, "The Lady Macbeth Affair Shostakovich and the Soviet Puritans" 184.

<sup>52</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 76.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

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**Muddle Instead of Music: The First Denunciation**

And then disaster struck. It was in January of 1936 that Josef Stalin attended a performance of the opera. According to Fay, Shostakovich knew he would come, and had waited in anticipation for his response to the opera. However, Stalin and his entourage left after the third act, without summoning the composer, and two days later, an unsigned commentary assumed to be ordered by Stalin came out in the publication *Pravda*. On January 28<sup>th</sup> of 1936 the article, entitled “Muddle Instead of Music” denounced Shostakovich’s opera its music and its thematic content, stating, “The opera’s twitching, clamorous, neurotic music titillates the perverted tastes of bourgeois audiences . . . The music wheezes, groans, and gasps for breath in order to present love scenes as naturalistically as possible. And ‘love’ is smeared all over the opera in the most vulgar manner.”<sup>54</sup> Further accusations cite western influences such as jazz and modern composition style, accusing Shostakovich of “copying its nervy, convulsive epileptic music from jazz so as to give “passion” to its heroes. The music shouts, quacks, explodes, pants and sighs, so as to convey love scenes in the most naturalistic manner. And “love” is smeared all over the opera in the most vulgar form. The merchant’s double bed occupies the central place in the stage design.”<sup>55</sup> These accusations were, again, for formalism and bourgeois Western influence.

This first fall from grace occurred when Shostakovich was 30 years old, and just reaching the height of success his success. “For Shostakovich, who was cast down overnight from the summit as the brightest star among young Soviet composers to the abyss as pernicious purveyor of cultural depravity, things would never again be the same.”<sup>56</sup> Before the denunciation his opera had pushed him into a slew of new successes. His opera was also very successful, and despite

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<sup>54</sup> Lesser, *Music for Silenced Voices*, 9.

<sup>55</sup> Fitzpatrick, “The Lady Macbeth Affair Shostakovich and the Soviet Puritans”, 188.

<sup>56</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 85.



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some criticism, well received in the musical community. So what changed in the political climate between the premiere of *Lady Macbeth* and Shostakovich's first public denunciation? One possibility is that in the shift between the end of the cultural revolution, and Socialist Realism getting on its feet, there was a short reprieve. "To many people, including Shostakovich himself, the denunciation of *Lady Macbeth* of the Mtsensk District seemed to come "like a bolt from the blue."<sup>57</sup> However, when the connection between the ideas of RAPM's antiformalist campaign and the later Socialist Realism are examined, the progression of ideas is clear. "The antimodernist, implicitly anti-western attitudes expressed in Pravda's editorial were already familiar in Soviet musical life, most notably in connection with the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM) which had exercised oppressive control over Soviet music in the period of the militant Communist Cultural Revolution from 1928-1932."<sup>58</sup>

Although Shostakovich and others were shocked at the denunciation, in hindsight it is easy to trace the progression of the anti-formalist campaign from its conception in the activities of RAPM and the Cultural Revolution, to the formulation of the Socialist Realism campaign. It is clear that the article in Pravda was one of the first manifestations of the new Socialist Realism campaign that would tighten ideological constraints on music. "The assault on *Lady Macbeth* was by no means the first time the debate over formalism had been engaged. Soviet musicians, like their colleagues in the other arts, had for some time paid lip service to the aesthetic ideal of Socialist Realism. The meaning of the concept, however, was poorly understood . . . exemplified by the fact that the vast majority of musicians and critics had concurred wholeheartedly with the advancement of *Lady Macbeth* as a shining example of the best of Soviet art."<sup>59</sup> In April of

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<sup>57</sup> Fitzpatrick, "The Lady Macbeth Affair Shostakovich and the Soviet Puritans", 188.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 188.

<sup>59</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 88.

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1935, about one year earlier, Shostakovich as a young rising star, confident in his abilities and with the success of his opera *Lady Macbeth* uplifting him had recalled the earlier RAPM attacks on his first opera, *The Nose*, and said, "At one time I was subjected to fierce critical attacks, principally for formalism. I did not and do not recognize such reproaches to the slightest extent. I have never been and never will be a formalist. To disparage any work whatsoever as formalist on the grounds that the language of the work is complicated and sometimes not immediately understandable in unacceptable foolishness."<sup>60</sup> This statement in defense of his work is very informative, as it directly contrasts Shostakovich's response to the Pravda articles where he began his campaign of silence, retreating out of the public eye and refusing to speak about any of his music. Before the Pravda articles, when criticism of his music was coming from RAPM and some composers or critics, Shostakovich made strong rebuttals and went so far as to accuse his accusers of being unacceptably foolish. From a young age, Shostakovich was not fond of listening to critics' opinions of his music. In the conservatory, by his own admission, he sometimes stubbornly returned scores to their original form after editing them, and flatly refused to change a work when a professor asked him to make revisions. While anecdotal, this shift in behavior and the way Shostakovich dealt with criticism over the years indicates the necessity for change, and that his silence about his later works was not sincere, but rather a protective maneuver.

Shostakovich made a practice of refusing to talk about his music, and his political opinions. However, it is possible to trace the culmination of this refusal to speak about music to the aftermath of the first public denunciation. In the year leading up to the denunciation of *Lady Macbeth* Shostakovich had been candid about the influence the music of Western composers on

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 88.

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his work, and his belief that there should be a greater study of them in Soviet music. He mentioned specifically that Berg, Schoenberg, Krenek, Hindemith, and especially Stravinsky had on his work, especially in the three years after the conservatory. In these statements, Shostakovich indicates his own musical ideas, and argues for how Soviet Music should be improved. He both criticized the limitations of his own Conservatory education, “voicing his opinion of the technical inferiority of the new crop of Soviet composers . . . and the pressing need to study the ‘masters’ of contemporary Western Music,”<sup>61</sup> and indicated that he believed further study of Western music would help Soviet music develop into its full potential.

After *Lady Macbeth* was denounced for formalism and course naturalism, and criticized for its relation to the “decadent West”, Shostakovich’s previous ideas that Soviet music should expand and learn from the modern western composers was clearly not supported by the governmental standpoint, and Shostakovich must have realized that in order to avoid further criticism and censorship, he must stop voicing his opinion. To further the predicament that he was in, a second article appeared in *Pravda*, this time attacking his recent ballet. “Lest the gravity of the cultural situation be lost on Soviet artists, on 6 February 1936 a second unsigned editorial, ‘Balletic Falsity,’ appeared in *Pravda*. Here, Shostakovich and his collaborators on *The Limpid Stream* were upbraided for their unrealistic, uninformed portrayal of life on a collective farm. They were criticized for their ignorant avoidance of the folk songs, games and dances that would have contributed authenticity to the ballet.”<sup>62</sup> This criticism, plus the attack on his ballet *The Limpid Stream* not for formalism but rather for not using proper folk music, “an approved recipe for Socialist Realism could be deduced by example. The only musical art deemed worthy

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 85.

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of the working classes, and thus the only music demanded by the Soviet state, was to be defined by its accessibility, tunefulness, stylistic traditionalism, and folk-inspired qualities. It was to be optimistic, aspiring to heroic exhilaration.”<sup>63</sup> This second attack outlined another aspect of the Socialist Realism ideology, which highlighted the simplicity and accessibility melodic material as important. In other words, music should be for the commoner. It should be positive, optimistic and simple in style and form.

### **The Aftermath of the Denouncement**

The shift in political ideology from the Cultural Revolution to the establishment of Socialist Realism, created an unstable environment where the same music (i.e. Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth*) was first praised as embodying the new ideal of “socialist realism” and then condemned as its antithesis. There was no established consensus as to what Soviet Music should be, and “The Soviets themselves have been unable to arrive at a precise concept, and the official pronouncements of Soviet authorities on what is and is not desirable on the part of an artist demonstrate how much easier it is to state a theory than to apply it, particularly to something so abstract as music. These difficulties have led to some of the twists and turns of official favor, For example, Shostakovich's opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, which was called the embodiment of socialist realism in 1934, was officially condemned as its antitheses “decadent formalism,” in 1936.”<sup>64</sup> As the political environment changed, so did the face that Shostakovich was able to show to the world. The infamous 1936 "Muddle Instead of Music" denunciation in Pravda had a major

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>64</sup> Mekanowitzky, “Music to Serve the State”, 269.

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effect in Shostakovich's musical choices. Two trends can be traced from this incident: the composer's unwillingness to speak about his compositions and his retreat from public to private musical genres (he never wrote another opera, and it was at this time that he began composing the string quartets). As musicologist Laurel Fay reveals, for nearly twenty months after the appearance of the Pravda editorials in January 1936, Shostakovich's name had virtually disappeared from the press; before then his opinions and information about works-in-progress had been featured regularly and prominently. He had demonstrated no reticence in speaking about his music. Before the first performance of the Fifth Symphony, by contrast, his only published statement about it acknowledged only the simple fact of its completion. Even after its apparently successful unveiling, Shostakovich's unwillingness to speak about the work continued.<sup>65</sup> Despite the devastating effect the articles had on his work, Shostakovich was able to maintain an income even in the periods when his work was criticized or censured. His main way of doing this was to write music for Soviet plays and films.

After the Pravda article, Shostakovich was obligated to change his musical tactic to conform to the political environment of the time, or risk not only financial destitution and the collapse of his career, but also the real possibility of being accused, tried or executed for anti-Soviet activities. "The choice must have been a terrifying one: stop writing music entirely, or try to write in a way that would not alienate the public authorities."<sup>66</sup> Shostakovich from this point forward, had to adapt in order to protect himself and his family. When asked later about the effect the criticism had on his work, he said, "You ask if I would have been different without 'Party guidance'?" he reportedly said to Flora Litvinova during their last conversation, a few

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<sup>65</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 101.

<sup>66</sup> Lesser, *Music for Silenced Voices*, 24.

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years before his death. “Yes, almost certainly. No doubt the line that I was pursuing when I wrote the Fourth Symphony would have been stronger and sharper in my work. I would have displayed more brilliance, used more sarcasm, I could have revealed my ideas more openly instead of resorting to camouflage; I would have written more pure music.”<sup>67</sup> What Shostakovich meant by ‘pure music’ is not entirely clear, however, it is possible he was referring to his study of modern western composers, and the complex, atonal style he was beginning to make his own.

### The Symphonies

Shostakovich later recalled that after the public denunciation of his opera, “the authorities tried to persuade me to repent and expiate my sin. But I refused to repent. What helped me then was my youth and physical strength. Instead of repenting, I wrote my Fourth Symphony.”<sup>68</sup> The symphony marked the beginning of Shostakovich’s struggle between the desire to compose music that he was drawn to in the style that he wanted to compose in, and conforming to the formula of “socialist realism” and music that would serve the state. In the music of the Fourth Symphony, which he had begun to compose before the *Pravda* attack, his own style won. It is probable that Shostakovich did not yet know the full effect the denunciation would have, and at the very least he could not have known that the snowball effects of that denunciation would suppress his symphony. “the first work of Shostakovich’s to end *morendo*, with the dying of the light, was the Fourth Symphony, on which the composer was at work at the time of his first denunciation, and which was withdrawn before its premiere (we now know) not at Shostakovich’s request but at the bidding of the Composer’s Union leadership.”<sup>69</sup> This

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>68</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 92.

<sup>69</sup> Taruskin, “Who was Shostakovich?”, 70.

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symphony captures the elements that define Shostakovich's compositional style when he was writing what he wanted to write. The elements of atonality and contradiction are all there, as well as the rhythmically driven and dissonant climaxes. "And yet there is indeed something about the symphony that does seem naggingly to foreground the issue of individual integrity and social stress—namely, the extremes within it of inwardness and extroversion, and the manifestly ironic way in which these extremes are juxtaposed and even thematically interchanged."<sup>70</sup> The Fourth symphony consist of three movements, a long sonata form funeral march in c minor, a brief 'scherzo' (*Allegro*) in d minor and then a long coda in C major. While composing symphony No. 4, Shostakovich's anxiety ran high. His public image was tainted by the *Pravda* attacks, and he suffered financially as a result. Shostakovich became a father on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May 1936, and as his expenses grew, his income reduced to about a quarter of what it had been before the denunciation of his music. "Where he used to make 10,000-12,000 rubles a month, he was now barely able to scrape together 2,000-3,000 and had been obliged to cut back on expenses."<sup>71</sup> Despite his difficult situation, the music of the Fourth Symphony is monumental and expressive. Fay writes of the Fourth Symphony, "Shostakovich's expressivity here was couched in monumental terms, in the confrontation of extremes ranging from the banal to the sublime, the trivial to the tragic."<sup>72</sup> These contradictions, and the dissonance and atonality in the work align it with Shostakovich's musical style when he was free to compose as he wished. One might even infer that this symphony was Shostakovich's true response to the situation he found himself in.

Shostakovich attempted to premiere his work, but it was ultimately suppressed. The premiere of the Symphony no. 4 in C Minor, op. 43 was scheduled to occur on December 11,

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>71</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich: A life*, 94.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 93-94.

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1936 with the Leningrad Philharmonic. "In anticipation, Shostakovich admitted he was "trembling with fright. His apprehension was well founded. The concert did not take place."<sup>73</sup>

The reason the symphony was shelved may be attributed to the uncertainty of the political environment and apprehension on the part of the musical community. The response of the musical community to his symphony rehearsals was tinged with the suspicion that the symphony, like his opera, had formalist elements. Unlike the hayday of RAPM, at this point it was not just the press, but the musical culture and communities, that were influenced by the campaign against formalism. And the fear of being associated with it causes fear and doubt to emerge as the symphony was rehearsed. Where Socialist Realism demanded simple tuneful melodies and accessibility, the Fourth symphonies monumental proportions, complexity and technical difficulty could be seen as representing the bourgeois West. And its melodic content was definitely not sing-able. Even at first glance, the symphony did not meet the demand for optimistic patriotic simple music for the masses. It was too complex and involved far too much dissonance and contradiction. The rehearsal atmosphere was filled with tension. Finally, was an announcement in the paper stating that he had appealed to the Philharmonic to withdraw the work, as it "in no way corresponds to his current creative convictions and represents him from a long outdated phase."<sup>74</sup> This, combined with his later statements that he had in fact written the symphony in response to the criticism he received on his opera, makes a strong case for this work being one that he meant to write the way he wrote it, and that it is probably representative of Shostakovich's own compositional desires, before he changed his style to adapt to the pressure he was under. The Symphony was removed under duress. As recalled by Isaak Glikman

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 95.



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who attended the rehearsals, Shostakovich confided in him that the secretary of the Union of Composers showed up at a rehearsal for the Symphony and conversed with the director of the Philharmonic, I.M. Renzin, who insisted that Shostakovich withdraw the symphony himself, “not wanting to resort to administrative measures.”<sup>75</sup>

After the suppression of the Fourth Symphony, Shostakovich survived by writing film music. After his second denunciation, he composed or at least premiered almost no other work. “With the exception of film and incidental music, in the months that followed the completion of his Fourth Symphony the composer produced only the *Four Romances on Texts of Pushkin* in late 1936.”<sup>76</sup> He did not submit these for performance either, rather saving them ‘for the drawer’, when the political climate would be more accepting. The fact that he was not really working was noticeable to the press as well, who, “Reporting on a six-day gathering of members of the Union of Soviet Composers in April 1937, the press duly noted that although in the wake of the *Pravda* editorials Shostakovich was clearly in need of serious criticism and comradely assistance, the leadership of the Union and music critics were colluding in avoiding any mention of Shostakovich’s recent work. In fact, nothing new by Shostakovich had been presented to the concert going public for the past two years.”<sup>77</sup> During the period from the *Pravda* article until 1937, Shostakovich wrote little and presented nothing, and his name and music were avoided in concert halls and the press alike.

Shostakovich’s Fourth Symphony, finished in 1936, has a very different tone than his next symphony, the Fifth, Op. 47. Where the Fourth Symphony is filled with experimental and modernist elements, and is technically complicated and challenging, the Fifth was grand and

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 98.

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more in line with the demands of Socialist Realism. This was the redeeming work that began to bring him back from his public humiliation and ostracism after the *Pravda* article. “The Symphony No. 5 in D Minor was declared a triumph of Socialist Realism . . . with a clear narrative line showing the ‘formation of a personality’; and Shostakovich, in turn, was restored to his stature as highly respected, politically approved composer.”<sup>78</sup> He also finished it forte and in the major, and used a more conventional form, making clearer, simpler melodic lines, and avoiding the elements that were accused of formalism in his previous works. However, he said little about the symphony in public. This was the turning point in Shostakovich’s compositional style, and the moment that separates Shostakovich’s youthful opinions about music, from his later silence on the matter. “From this point in his career onward, it is never entirely clear what he thought about the works he was producing. There was the public statement about the music, and then there was the music itself, and if they didn’t entirely fit together, that was not his concern. He did his best to cover his tracks, allowing other people to develop their own theories about what the music meant, and if those theories served the Soviet authorities’ purposes, so much the better for his own sense of personal safety.”<sup>79</sup> An example of Shostakovich’s quiet covering of his tracks and allowing other people to come up with theories about his work is for instance when a journalist came up with a narrative idea for the Fifth Symphony as “the practical creative answer of a Soviet artist to just criticism”<sup>80</sup> After the success of the Fifth symphony, Shostakovich took a break from almost all composition (other than some music for theatre and film) for a whole year. On May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1938, His son Maxim was born, and later that month, on his daughter’s birthday, he began to work on his first string quartet.

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<sup>78</sup> Lesser, *Music for Silenced Voices*, 29.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

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In late 1941, Shostakovich premiered the 'Leningrad' Symphony, which is how the seventh almost immediately became known. This is an interesting symphony to compare to the other two, since it contains many elements that could be considered formalist, but the context of the work changed the way the public, and the proponents of Socialist realism received it.

“No single work by Shostakovich—no piece of music by anyone in the world, during that time—was listened to by more people with more intense emotion than the Leningrad Symphony in its wartime performances. The circumstances were the stuff of legend, with scores being flown behind the lines, soldier-musicians assembled from the front, and war-ravaged civilians gathering bravely together in makeshift concert halls just to hear this one inspiring composition.”<sup>81</sup>

Written in the middle of the war, there was more flexibility in interpretation, meaning that Shostakovich was able to get away with using more of the compositional style that he wanted to use, and still have his Symphony be perceived as patriotic and fitting into the Soviet ideal. This is also another example of the difference in reception between the public, and the music critics. Because there was such an overwhelming positive response, and his symphony could be viewed as inspiring comradeship and hope during the second World War, causing its atonal and dissonant elements to be overlooked.

However, things were not set to continue on smoothly for Shostakovich. After the War was over, the environment was no longer able to lend a friendly eye on his use of dissonance and atonality. While the war was happening, these elements could be seen as representative of the war itself, and still pro- Soviet, but after the war was over, they could not be as easily construed as patriotic.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 48.

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**The Second Denunciation**

Between the Cultural Revolution and end of the War, the doctrine of Socialist Realism became the "basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism," in which the Party developed rules for appropriate subject matter as well as a vocabulary for artistic criticism. As time went on, the definition of Socialist Realism expanded to include specific guidelines and instructions. "The doctrine demanded of the artist: the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism."<sup>82</sup> Where the attack on *Lady Macbeth* had changed the course of Shostakovich's style, the worst was not yet to come. And as the definition of 'Socialist Realism' developed over time, the devastation of the second denunciation was ever greater than the first. "This was merely a warning, however, for the truly devastating blow came twelve years later, in 1948, during the second cultural crackdown, Stalin's Cultural Revolution - known as Zhdanovshchina. Both of these denunciations had a critical impact not only on Shostakovich's career but on the creative decisions he made in their aftermath."<sup>83</sup>

For Shostakovich, the catastrophe began on January 13, 1948 with the Conference of Musicians at the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party in Moscow, where he, Sergei Prokofiev, Nikolai Miaskovsky and Aram Khachaturian received a public denunciation as

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<sup>82</sup> Abram Tertz, "On Socialist Realism", 27.

<sup>83</sup> Watson, "Aspects of The "Jewish" Folk Idiom in Dmitri Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 4, Op. 83 (1949)", 27-28.

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formalist, cosmopolitan, and anti-people composers.<sup>84</sup> This second denunciation was orchestrated by Andrei Aleandrovich Zhdanov, whose aim was to “to discourage genres that in their wordlessness were less than ideally subject to ideological control.”<sup>85</sup> The term coined later to name this new ideological tendency was ‘Zhdanovshchina’, after Stalin’s right hand man, and the influence of this movement, like that of RAPM, and Social Realism, reached every discipline in Soviet Russia between 1946 and 1948. Shostakovich’s role in all this manifested when Andrei Zhdanov led a three-day meeting of composers and musicians to discuss the problems with Soviet music. This meeting, however, quickly turned into a forum for openly criticizing these ‘Big Four’ (Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Miaskovsky, Khachaturian as well as others) for deviation from Russian classical form and harmony, for their intense interest in ‘bourgeois’ Western trends, and they were blamed for leading Soviet music astray.<sup>86</sup> The three-day events concluded with Zhdanov's final proclamation: “[t]here is a great big hole in the very foundations of Soviet music. The truth of the matter is that the leading part in the creative work of the Composers' Union is played by Comrades Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Popov, Kabalevsky, Shebalin...Let us consider these comrades as the principal figures of the formalist school. This school is radically wrong.”<sup>87</sup>

The abuse did not end with the conference, however, for in the months that followed the meeting, the so called Big Four had to endure further denunciations. This conference was only the beginning however. A second round of denunciations began on February 10 when the Central

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<sup>84</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 32.

<sup>85</sup> Taruskin, “Who was Shostakovich?”, 70.

<sup>86</sup> Watson, “Aspects of The "Jewish" Folk Idiom in Dmitri Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 4”, 32.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

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Committee of the Communist Party published its Resolution on Music under the title "On Muradeli's opera *The Great Friendship*" in the Party's official organ of propaganda, in *Pravda*. This decree was informally known forever after as the Zhdanov Decree."<sup>88</sup> This resolution decreed that the formalist tendency in these leading composer's work was leading to the downfall of Soviet music. They resolved:

"1. to condemn the formalist tendency in Soviet Music as being anti-people and leading to the liquidation of music. 2. To propose to the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. and to the Government Art Committee that they take the necessary steps for improving the state of affairs in Soviet music, and liquidate the faults enumerated in the present decree. ... 3. To call upon Soviet composers to become more conscious of their duties to the Soviet people...and assure a great upsurge of creative activity [that] would lead to the creation of high-quality works worthy of Soviet people."<sup>89</sup>

In addition, the Party and the Union of Soviet Composers demanded that music composition return to a Russian classical form that included clearly defined melodies that could be sung by the human voice. This meant that they should be simple, and derived from folk music. Furthermore, the Resolution outlined the Union's endorsement of certain genres of composition, including opera, symphonic music, songs, choral music (cantatas, oratorios, mass choruses, etc.) and music for ballet, because their larger coordinated groups represented the masses and the common people, rather than smaller groups which were viewed as elitist.

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<sup>88</sup> Lesser, *Music for Silenced Voices*, 86.

<sup>89</sup> Watson, "Aspects of The "Jewish" Folk Idiom in Dmitri Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 4", 34-35.

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Chamber music was not mentioned, as it could be construed as an individualistic art form, or as an elitist Western phenomenon.<sup>90</sup>

### The Aftermath

While Shostakovich was not the only composer attacked, he was the most well known, and the only one who formally responded to the criticism. “On January 13 Shostakovich, who was by far the best known composer under attack at the conference, addressed the assembly for the second time, confessing that his work had suffered from “many failures and serious setbacks,” but that he had always tried “to make any music accessible to the people” and “to work harder and better. I am listening now, too, and will listen in the future. I will accept critical instruction.”<sup>91</sup> Unlike his youth, when Shostakovich refused criticism, or the first denunciation where Shostakovich resorted to silence as a protective method, this time Shostakovich spoke and publically accepted his failings. “In this resolution, not only Shostakovich’s works but also those of Prokofiev, Khachaturian, Miaskovsky, Shebalin, and others were condemned for manifesting “formalist distortions and anti-democratic tendencies.” But Shostakovich was the one who attracted the most attention, and his fall, coming as it did from the highest height, was certainly the most precipitous.”<sup>92</sup>

Shostakovich, while not the only composer who was criticized during the resolution, was the only one who stood up and gave a formal response. Unlike his previous denunciation when Shostakovich retreated from the public eye, or his younger days when he had shown his capability to defend himself against criticism, here Shostakovich was humble and direct,

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 34-35.

<sup>91</sup> Lesser, *Silenced Voices*, 85.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 86.

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accepting the the resolution and its idea of what Soviet music should be. “When, today, through the pronouncements of the Central Committee resolution, the Party and all of our country condemn this direction in my creative work, I know that the Party is right. I know that the Party is showing concern for Soviet art and for me, a Soviet composer.”<sup>93</sup> Singled out to speak, his words were careful and accepting. Forced out of his retreat into silence about his work, Shostakovich donned the mask of civil servant and admitted to his accused wrongdoing.

After this catastrophe, many of his works were banned from public performance, and even those that were not banned fell out of circulation due to his shaky political stance. He lost his professorship at the Moscow and Leningrad Conservatories, and much of his regular income disappeared. From here, he was forced to turn to writing film music to make a living and his family barely scraped by, and even had to borrow money from their long time servant, Fenya Kozhunova, to survive.<sup>94</sup> The second denunciation resulted in a similar suppression of Shostakovich's music. Where after the first denunciation in 1936, Shostakovich stopped writing operas, and had to suppress his Fourth Symphony, after the second there were many more pieces which he could not premiere until after Stalin's death.

“According to the commonly accepted thesis of the history of Soviet culture, Shostakovich was subjected twice to public civic censure: in 1936, for formalism in his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, and in 1948 for the same formalism, but now in conjunction with an opera by a composer born of Armenian parents in Stalin's hometown and raised in Soviet Georgia, Vano Muradeli. The result of the first working over was that Shostakovich never again completed a single opera. As a consequence of

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 86-87.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 87.



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the second, Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony, though completed several years earlier, did not see the light of day until after Stalin's death."<sup>95</sup>

### Shostakovich and Film

Another perspective on the two denunciations which informed the political purpose of the two events is the larger implications they served in the attempt to shape music to fit political ideology. This perspective comes to light by examining the meeting notes of Boris Shumiatsky, Stalin's deputy in charge of the film industry. Documents from the archives show a somewhat different picture of these two pivotal events. "The most complete and detailed survey of Stalin's views on music are to be found in the notes left by his deputy in charge of cinema, Boris Shumiatsky. As the head of the Soviet film industry from November 1930 until his firing, arrest, and execution in 1938, Shumiatsky took notes on the Kremlin screenings of sound and silent movies attended by Stalin and his entourage."<sup>96</sup> These notes show that Stalin became interested in the music Shostakovich wrote for Soviet propaganda films around 1932. Specifically, Stalin became interested in Shostakovich's score to *Maxim's Youth*, as well as the power of Shostakovich' "Song of the Counterplan" written for the film *Counterplan*.<sup>97</sup> Shostakovich wrote a hit song for the film *Counterplan*, a propaganda film which became wildly popular in Soviet Russia. This film was made for the fifteenth anniversary of the October Revolution in 1932, and upon seeing it, "Stalin became fascinated with the song"<sup>98</sup> and its power to raise up the Soviet people, and these notes suggest that after being exposed to Shostakovich's film scores, Stalin

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<sup>95</sup> Leonid Maximenkov "Stalin and Shostakovich: Letters to a 'Friend'", 45.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 45.

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wanted to push other music in the same direction. Stalin watched *Maxim's Youth*, directed by Grigorii Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, with a score by Shostakovich on 15 December 1934.<sup>99</sup> This film interested him because it was the first film to portray a Soviet leader who represented the common man. "This was the first sound film to exemplify the biography of the Bolshevik leader who was simple, not university educated, not an émigré talking endlessly in Paris cafés or scribbling in London's British Museum, that is, a film about Stalin's breed of Bolshevik leader. Immensely rich musically—with original songs, accordion solos, urban songs, revolutionary anthems, and the "internationale" (until 1943, the Soviet national anthem)—the soundtrack was a true revelation. It provided a bright, optimistic, and prophetic dimension"<sup>100</sup> Stalin was so taken by the film that he watched it again on December 18<sup>th</sup>. This time, "during the scene where prisoners sing the revolutionary song "Varshavianka," a song that Shostakovich would later quote in other works, including his Eleventh Symphony, Stalin's audience started singing along. Art turned into reality. Stalin told Zhdanov, "It's very strong. That will touch the masses of spectators." Stalin praised the work of the cameraman and Shostakovich's score as "good, cultured." He singled out in particular Shostakovich's prologue and the "strong numbers played on accordion."<sup>101</sup> These insights into Stalin's own opinion of the film scores lends a new perspective to the Muddle instead of Music article. Seeing music that he thought was a powerful tool in Soviet Film, it is possible that Stalin began to develop a more specific idea of what he thought music should be comprised of in order to serve the Soviet state. "And on 29 January 1936, the day after the infamous editorial "Muddle instead of Music" appeared in *Pravda*, Stalin evaluated the *Lady Macbeth* affair and the editorial not so much from the standpoint of opera,

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 46.

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but from that of music for the cinema. Stalin's strategy for operational organization of the Soviet music world was disclosed to an inner circle of comrades-in-arms—not including anyone actually responsible for the musical front—prior to a regular late-night Kremlin screening session.”<sup>102</sup>

Overall, these notes lend insight into Stalin's personal opinion on music, linking it to the more accessible and easily manipulated medium of film. “Shumiatsky's notes on that late-night gathering on 29 January permit us to draw the inference that what the leader was up in arms against was not so much Shostakovich's opera, but the “unhealthy” tendencies in Soviet film music, about which there was not one word in the editorial. It pointed to a clear-cut evaluation: Shostakovich should continue working and writing important film music instead of useless operas.”<sup>103</sup> This points to a direct design to control the flow of musical creativity, (on the part of Stalin and his entourage) as well as to label propaganda film as important and opera, or more selective forms of music as useless. This move, in combination with the harsh censorship and criticism in the *Pravda* article, marks the final split between Shostakovich's own creative impulse and what he was demanded to write as a Soviet composer, with Stalin's ideal model using words, simple folk tunes, and recognizable, uplifting melodic material.

This political environment was one largely dominated by fear. After the resolution musicians stopped performing Shostakovich's works, and for the second time friends and acquaintances cautiously backed away from him. It wasn't that Stalin decreed that his work should not be played, or that Shostakovich should be left out of the news and the press, but rather that in that time of fear and uncertainty, knowing that Stalin criticized his music, Soviet Russia

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 46-47.

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followed the next logical step. Kurt Sanderling said, “We have a somewhat wrong notion about how things worked. There wasn’t a moment when someone was told by Stalin that Shostakovich should be suppressed; they just sensed that if Stalin was making these remarks, they should draw these conclusions. It’s part of the absurdity of the regime that Stalin personally supported Shostakovich by telling people to give Shostakovich work writing for the movies. Stalin had a very ambivalent attitude towards Shostakovich. He never understood anything about Shostakovich (not to mention music in general), but he understood that Shostakovich was a great personality. And as a musician he could not be dangerous to Stalin, as an author would have been. Stalin wanted to use Shostakovich for prestige—for the Party and the country.”<sup>104</sup>

“for at the end of January 1949 he decided not to submit his “Jewish songs,” as he called them, to the Composers’ Union for approval. Instead, they were put quietly away and were not played publically until 1955.”<sup>105</sup> A similar thing happened to his Violin Concerto. “This piece remained underground—shown only to his fellow musicians, including the violinist David Oistrakh—until October of 1955, when Oistrakh at last performed it.”<sup>106</sup> Shostakovich completed Violin Concerto No. 1, op. 77 in March of 1948 after the two months of denunciations by the Union of Soviet Composers which began with the Zhdanov resolution in January. During this whole year, his only source of income came from one film score (*The Young Guard*), since he had lost both his teaching positions at Moscow and Leningrad conservatories, and his compositions had been banned from performance.

### The Fourth Quartet

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<sup>104</sup> Lesser, *Silenced Voices*, 88.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

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In 1949, after enduring all of the public criticism, Shostakovich turned to chamber music, and began to compose the fourth quartet. He composed the quartet over a period of eight months in 1949. He completed the first movement, Allegretto on May 4, the second, Andantino, on June 1, the third, Allegretto, August 3, and the fourth, Allegretto, on December 27. Composition was interrupted between the second and third movements in the summer of 1949 as the composer turned to the oratorio *Songs of the Forests*, Op. 81 in celebration of Stalin's reforestation program.<sup>107</sup> The Beethoven Quartet began rehearsing the Fourth quartet on February 10, 1950 and on 15 May they played the work twice for the head of the music division of the Committee for Artistic Affairs, Aleksandr Kholodilin in order to attempt to gain permission to premiere it. It was this meeting where, "the decision to withhold the quartet was reached."<sup>108</sup> The quartet was to remain publically unperformed for four years until after Stalin died. both the Beethoven Quartet and the renowned Borodin String performed the work at the Ministry of Culture, in hopes that Shostakovich would be able to receive a little payment for the work. The Beethoven Quartet was unsuccessful in this attempt; the Borodin Quartet, however, succeeded in securing the purchase of the work by the Ministry. Apparently, the official who heard the audition tried to help Shostakovich, and the the Ministry bought the quartet, although it was not played publically until after Stalin's death.

The music of the Fourth Quartet, while deemed inappropriate to perform in 1949 due to its alleged formalist content and possibly its Jewish melodic elements, is a complex, lyrical work filled with dissonance, chromatic movement, and haunting melodic lines. "What one hears in

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<sup>107</sup> Watson, "Aspects of The "Jewish" Folk Idiom in Dmitri Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 4", 44.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 44.

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Shostakovich's Quartet No. 4 in D Major . . . is the suggestion of a singing voice."<sup>109</sup> The integrity of the four voices is really important in this music, each instrumental voice and lone more important than the harmonic progression. Wendy Lesser writes of the quartet's vocal quality, "There is not place for the human voice as such in a quartet, but in the Fourth Quartet Shostakovich appeared to be working hard to incorporate that voice into the music, trying to achieve the kind of direct access to emotion that is normally expressed in song."<sup>110</sup> In the second movement, the first violinist is keeper of the melody. "In this movement, that song belongs to the first violin, which carries the melody at almost every point—sometimes on its own amid the complete silence of the other three, more often against a soft, sweet, gently rhythmic background provided by the viola and the second violin. The cello sits out the first minute and more; when it does finally enter, it carries a melody that echoes in a slightly depressed, low register way, the much higher tune of the violin, lending an added depth of feeling to this already very moving piece of music. But the emotion, though it borders on the kind of pure enjoyable sadness that certain folk melodies evoke, is not easy or comfortable: this sadness is also anxiety-ridden and painful in the usual Shostakovich way."<sup>111</sup> The third movement focuses on rhythm and dance. "if the second movement is song, then the third—fast paced, rhythmically regular, and thrumming with repeated eight notes—is dance. In Shostakovich, dance is always allied to something slightly manic: a forced cheerfulness, a leaning toward the macabre or the grotesque or the satiric."<sup>112</sup> On the last movement: "What begins as a delicate expression of a tender emotion becomes exaggerated and slightly monstrous, self-dramatizing and therefore self-

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<sup>109</sup> Lesser, *Silenced Voices*, 98.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 102.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 99.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

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mocking, even about its own despair.”<sup>113</sup> This quartet can be considered through-composed. “For example, in the first movement, Shostakovich reaches the development section prematurely in the "exposition", and develops theme A before even introducing theme B. The second movement is based mainly on one expanded and developed theme, indeed making it difficult to discern the formal structure. Shostakovich then links the third and fourth movements with new material that, interestingly, returns throughout the final movement.”<sup>114</sup> Shostakovich also pushed tonal boundaries, by using chromatic shifts from tone center to tone center, blurring the individual keys and focusing on the linear and chromatic movement of the voices above the harmonic form. He uses lowered steps and drones to elicit a singing folk tune quality. “he uses a drone pedal in the first movement, the iambic primes in the second movement, and an "um-pa" beat bass line in the rondo.”<sup>115</sup> In the finale, Shostakovich emphasizes the opposition of the rhythm and the harmony, “combines dissonant intervals and lowered altered modes in Hasidic dancelike structures in a manner that draws out more tension. This fusion of sad or dissonant harmonies with the merriment of the dance structure creates a clash of contradictory themes and elements.”<sup>116</sup>

Shostakovich composed String Quartet No. 4 during a period of extreme uncertainty in both his career and Soviet culture. Although the 1948 ban on his music had been reversed in the early months of 1949, the continual denunciations of the previous year had a lasting effect on the composer and his craft. Between the period of 1948 and 1953 the Soviet public heard only film scores and propagandist oratorios from Shostakovich's pen, while he set his more serious,

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 102.

<sup>114</sup> Watson, “Aspects of The "Jewish" Folk Idiom in Dmitri Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 4”, 92.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

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complex works (Violin Concerto No. 1, From Jewish Folk Poetry, and String Quartet No. 4) aside until the political climate had relaxed.<sup>117</sup> In the Fourth String Quartet Shostakovich creates harmonic ambiguity through chromatic modulation, continual flattened scale degrees in an established key area, and elided cadences. Throughout the quartet, Shostakovich gravitates to minor and lowered altered key areas. Typical to Shostakovich's harmonic language, the quartet does not remain in the minor key areas established at the opening of formal sections; the composer quickly flattens pitches and creates modal ambiguity. The first movement shifts between D major and B and D minor, the second movement modulates chromatically from F major to Gflat and Eflat, the third movement begins and remains in C minor with the exception of shifts to G and A major. Because the finale opens with the new and transitioning material from the scherzo, the fourth movement begins in C minor, but Theme A shifts to D Dorian, turning to the "Jewish" modal coloring, which persists throughout the movement.<sup>118</sup> Wendy Lesser in *Silenced Voices*, says "the important point is that two of the most significant works Shostakovich wrote between the Zhdanov Decree of 1948 and Stalin's death in 1953, the Fourth and Fifth Quartets, were never performed in public during that time, though they were repeatedly heard at "rehearsals" attended by a small number of colleagues, students, and friends."<sup>119</sup>

Between the years of 1949 and 1952, Shostakovich was still struggling with his public image. Although the official ban on his music was lifted, his works continued to be shunned, and "his reputation remained under a heavy cloud."<sup>120</sup> During this time, he turned to movie scores

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 134.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>119</sup> Lesser, *Silenced Voices*, 105.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 106.



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and other commissions to get by, and neither was he restored to his teaching positions in either Moscow or Leningrad universities. During this time, in line with the politically angled movies, and commission work, Shostakovich was assigned various political appointments. "In 1950, for instance, he was one of the musicians elected to the Soviet Committee for the Defense of Peace, and in 1951 he was re-elected as deputy to the Supreme Soviet from Leningrad's Dzerzhinsky District. Over the years he was also obligated to attend a number of international and national congresses, often delivering speeches in support of the Party and the USSR which would then be published and distributed under his name. The sense of oppression was still ever present. If the sense of immediate fear had dissipated somewhat, it was only because that particular emotion, like any other intense emotion, cannot be maintained at a fever pitch for long."<sup>121</sup> Shostakovich composed String Quartet No. 4 during a period of extreme uncertainty in both his career and Soviet culture. Although the 1948 ban on his music had been reversed in the early months of 1949, the continual denunciations of the previous year had a lasting effect on the composer and his craft. Between the period of 1948 and 1953 the Soviet public heard only film scores and propagandist oratorios from Shostakovich's pen, while he set his more serious, complex works (Violin Concerto No. 1, From Jewish Folk Poetry, and String Quartet No. 4) aside until the political climate had relaxed.<sup>122</sup>

In May 1949, after his return from the Congress of Peace in New York, Shostakovich began composing String Quartet No. 4, op. 83. This composition was interrupted by work on *Songs of the Forest*, which was premiered on November 15 with Vladimir Ivanovsky (tenor), Ivan Titov (bass) and the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra and Academy Choir with Yevgeni

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>122</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 134.

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Mravinsky conducting at the Leningrad Philharmonic Bolshoi Hall. This work was a propagandist oratorio dedicated to Stalin's reforestation program, and which won him a First Class Stalin Prize and a return to official favor in December 1950, and prize of 100,000 rubles.<sup>123</sup> Between the years of 1949 and 1955, Shostakovich would write the scores for six more films (Belinsky, 1950, Fall of Berlin 1949, and The Unforgettable Year of 1919 in 1951, Song of the Great Rivers, 1954, The Gadfly, 1955, and the First Echelon 1955).<sup>124</sup> Other than this work, the pieces that he wrote during this time include 24 Preludes and Fugues, op. 87 (1950-1), Ten Poems on Texts by Revolutionary Poets of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries, Op 88, which received the Stalin Prize, Second Class in 1952 and The Sun Shines Over the Motherland, op. 90 - as well as several works that were never premiered or remain incomplete.<sup>125</sup>

The next big project that he worked on was the film *The New Babylon*. “Grigoriy Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg were already scouting for a composer to provide the musical scenario for their upcoming film, *The New Babylon*, a story of the Paris Commune of 1871. By late December they had picked the composer they wanted to launch the experiment. For a fee of 2,000 rubles, Shostakovich contracted to deliver the piano score for *The New Babylon* on 1 February 1929, and the full score and parts for a normal fourteen-piece theatre orchestra on March 1, 1929.<sup>126</sup> The panel that screened the film decided that the music was good and appropriate for the mass viewer, and was close to the style and rhythm of the film itself. “This music is distinguished by its considerable closeness to the style and rhythm of the film, by great

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<sup>123</sup> Watson, “Aspects of The "Jewish" Folk Idiom in Dmitri Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 4”, 11.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>125</sup> Watson, “Aspects of The "Jewish" Folk Idiom in Dmitri Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 4”, 39-40.

<sup>126</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 49.

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emotional strength and expressivity. The effect of the picture is greatly heightened. Furthermore, despite the originality and freshness of the form, the music is sufficiently simple and can be appreciated by the mass viewer."<sup>127</sup> However, in this case the official opinion did not match up with the public. The film music was a total flop, because of bad preparation, but this also shows the separation between the theoretical idea of boards that may endorse or oppose a musical idea, and the public perception of the music. In addition to the fact that in this period of time after his second denunciation, Shostakovich wrote almost nothing besides film music, there is little attention paid to this medium of music. It is important however, especially since propaganda film music is really what Stalin wanted soviet music to focus on, and the direction he thought was best to use music as a tool for the state.

### A Contrast in Styles

It is a difficult endeavor to study Shostakovich's film scores, since this medium of his writing is mostly ignored in the field of musicology, and since there is little incentive to create recordings and reproductions of these soviet propaganda pieces. Additionally, many biographers don't even count these works among his serious compositions, skipping over them and saying he didn't write any serious or real music at that time. There is very little written about Shostakovich's film scores, and indeed many of them are hard to come by either in score or recorded form, the claim that the elements of many of his film scores adhere to the rules of the Socialist realism is easily substantiated by a simple analysis of the music itself. Take the melody of the "*Counterplan Song*", from the film *Counterplan*, otherwise known as *Passerby*, or *Encounter*. This film was written in 1933, and co directed by Fridrikh Ermler and Sergei

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 50.

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Yutkevich. Shostakovich wrote the main melody to the song *Counterplan song*, which was later appropriated by Harold Rome and turned into “*United Nations March*”, appearing in Hollywood film “Thousands Cheer” in 1943. This song is hardly recognizable as written by Shostakovich.

For the film *Counterplan*, Shostakovich wrote the famous melody “song of the counterplan” which he then turned into his Op. 33, consisting of a i. *Presto*, ii. *Andante*, and iii. *Song of the Counterplan*. While not many recordings of this music exist, it is included in a CD by the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, conducted by Riccardo Chailly (1999).<sup>128</sup> What is striking about the three movements from the counterplan, is their structural simplicity and linear melodic lines. Where almost, if not all of the music Shostakovich composed in other mediums includes darker richer thematic material, fragmented formal structure and surprising twists and turns that defy classical harmony and tonality, these movements are straightforward, predominantly in major, melodically simple, repetitive and virtually without his usual surprising atonal note, chromatic movement, or through-composed fragmented feel. The *presto* begins with a trill in the flutes and the winds, which starts a dance that the strings then join. Where the winds and percussion march, the strings sing interposed melodies. This movement fades straight into the *Andante*, which begins with a romantic violin melody, in the style of a romance, the violin leads this *andante* completely, and the strings tremolo and hover underneath. It ends in major, with a dance between the violin and short appearances from the harp and the clarinet. The song of the counterplan itself, begins with a woodwind, then the flute takes over, leading into a crescendo /cadence that leads into the the real tune. The form is a simple repeating binary form, and the harmony has a simple arpeggio major triad consisting of the tonic and dominant chords.

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<sup>128</sup> Concertgebouw Orchestra, conducted by Riccardo Chailly (1999)<sup>128</sup>, “*Shostakovich: The Film Album- Excerpts from Hamlet/ The Counterplan etc.*”

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And the melodic voice comes in on the dominant and has a simple melody in major B flat c, b a flat g e flat and g. The focus of this melodic line is very simply on the subdominant, dominant and tonic, and it epitomizes everything Stalin wanted in Soviet music. It is simple, memorable, and understandable for the masses and the common man. It is major, and in fact became so popular after the film that not only was it re-used throughout the years in Soviet popular music, but it traveled to the West. Again, this melody focuses around the tonic and dominant, it is simple, in major, and completely devoid of any atonalism, chromatic motion or any element that could be conceived as being formalist or anything other than simple and patriotic. While this is just one simple example, it holds weight in that this melody is so unrecognizable as Shostakovich that it was later picked up and used by Harold Rome to create the "united nations march". It is so simply patriotic that it is universal. This is the kind of music that Stalin wanted at this time, and this simple song represents a lot of the style that Shostakovich wrote in when he was writing for these films. What is really striking about all of his film music is that overall it uses more standard forms, including dance forms, repetition of material, as well as really clear obvious melodic lines. In addition, there are military qualities to all of them, highlighting marches, drums, horns and other military instruments. Maxim's youth was another film that again typified what Stalin really wanted music to be written as, both in style and forms. The melodic material is simple, and there are folk tunes, dances and military music. All is understandable, simple and there is no trace of atonality or formalism anywhere. Additionally, there are solos for accordion, and lots of signing, choruses, and patriotic instrumentation.

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**The Viola Sonata**

In stark contrast to his film music, the Viola Sonata was the last work that Shostakovich ever composed. Along with the darker symphonies and the music that he wrote for the drawer, including the Fourth and Fifth quartets, the Fourth Symphony and the violin Sonata, it typifies what I believe Shostakovich actually wanted to write in form and style. As the last work that he wrote, there is added importance to its style and form, since Shostakovich at this time was living in relative freedom, and no longer had to worry about his family, or interference and threat from the government. In fact, he was dying, and this was his last statement.

The first movement opens with just the viola pizzicato, and blooms from silence. Gradually, the piano creeps in, and the viola begins an aimless, wandering melody, full of chromatic movement. The middle section swings into motion abruptly. And features an off balance leaping rhythm, using lots of wide leaps, crunchy double stops and a very rhythmic, blocky focus. There is almost no melodic material in this section at all, but the tonal center is redefined through half steps that identify leading tones, and often repetition of the notes around the resolution into the new tonal center. Overall ... the different themes slip in and out, difficult to grasp, reduced to a pure atonal language where the notes relationship to each other, in a linear melodic way is what is most important, there are themes in this movement, but they are more motivic, repetition of certain intervals, contrast between textures and motives. Everything about the second movement is pointed. It resembles a dance, but a grotesque one, like a dancing skeleton. In contrast to the off kilter rhythm, there are beautiful lyrical melodies interspersed. This almost sounds like a conversation with a dancing death. The next really obvious section begins when the viola starts is low chromatic ostinato, and the piano trembles almost inaudibly underneath. It is hard to understand what this music means, but the intensity of the emotion, and

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the contrasts, between the repetitive rhythmic motives, the dance that marks the beginning and the end of the movement, and the lyricism make for a striking conversation. The last movement loses the second movements driving rhythms, and begins *sol* viola, with wandering and reflective melody. Here, the viola circles close half steps with painful tension, and then releases it into the ether, with a melody that starts with incredible simplicity and purpose, and expands to a violent rhythmic middle filled with double stops. But, traces of the reflective tenderness keep returning.

### Conclusion

Although it is unfair and impossible to attribute any political opinions to Shostakovich through his music, a comparison between the works he composed during times of criticism and censure and times of freedom of expression reveal a specific musical language. Shostakovich was a composer who wanted the music to really speak for itself. The viola sonata as the last work that he wrote is the hardest not to give meaning to. And indeed, if there were any piece of Shostakovich that seemed to speak with such clear emotion it is this one. It's impossible to listen to without hearing the depth of pain and tenderness there. I think this effect is due to his ability and desire to use his own finely developed musical language to express the contradictions that he felt and lived. What those might be, or what they might mean, we can only make weak unfounded guesses at. One thing for sure is that this music has long long lines that emerge from silence, and move and grow continuously without breath, before slowly sinking back into the infinite silence they came from.

When taken within the political context, the music that Shostakovich wrote over the course of his career begins to show patterns of style and form. Themes of atonality, modern

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influences of jazz, dissonance and the loosening of formal structure are highlighted during periods of relative compositional freedom in his life. In contrast, there is a return to stricter form, and to patriotic, choral and simple tonal material in response to the censorship and pressure that Shostakovich experienced from his government. Because of the uncertainty and danger of the time he lived in, it is important to look at the music for this evidence, and consider it in relation to the political context, in order to gain a better understanding, if not of what Shostakovich believed about music and politics, at least what he was drawn to and wanted to write.



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