Eggs and the Historical Moment: Interpretations of Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5

Susan Zakaib

When we think of art illuminating history, we tend to think of art forms such as literature, film or visual art. Usually, these forms have identifiable topics, characters, historical settings and viewpoints which we can associate with historical moments. Instrumental music, on the other hand, is generally far more difficult to pinpoint in terms of subject matter and perspective; thus, if it is to illuminate history, it must do so in a different way than literature, film or visual art.

A particularly fascinating piece is Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5, which was composed and premiered during Joseph Stalin's Terror in 1937. This work is the subject of intense discussion among musicologists due to the tense political and artistically critical atmosphere in which it was created, as well as the unclear emotions expressed in the piece—particularly in the fourth movement, the finale. This essay will examine the atmosphere in which Shostakovich wrote the Fifth Symphony, which will set a background against which the opinions of various musicologists regarding interpretation of the symphony can be articulated. These interpretations vary considerably, and each requires a different interpretation of the historical moment. This suggests that our understandings of the symphony and of the historical moment are fundamentally intertwined. The enormous variance in interpretations of the Fifth Symphony implies that its relationship to history is different than that between history and other forms of art. This is because the symphony does not offer the audience a clear interpretation of history; rather, historical opinions and musical examination inform the symphony's interpretation.

The atmosphere in which Shostakovich wrote his Fifth Symphony was extremely tumultuous. Stalin's Terror involved a litany of arrests, executions and propaganda, such that at its height half a million people were executed by the state, and by 1938 an estimated one in ten adults were imprisoned.[1] The Terror—also called the Yezhovshchina, named after Nikolai Ivanovich Yezhov, Commissar of Internal Affairs from 1936 to 1938—is considered by many to be the bloodiest political terror in history.[2] The infamous 'show trials' and purges began in 1936, wherein political enemies of Stalin were "forced into abject confessions and humiliation prior to their liquidation."[3] Moreover, the arts were strictly controlled by the state; as the Terror progressed, it became increasingly dangerous for artists to deviate from state-instituted aesthetic requirements.

In July 1925, the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party passed a resolution for literature which supported the proletarian writer in principle, and allowed for a fair amount of creative flexibility. A similar attitude was held towards music.[4] This attitude changed drastically in December 1928, when the Central Committee passed a resolution that established strict ideological controls over the diffusion of art.[5] The resolution emphasized the importance of art serving the political aims of the Party. By 1932, the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM) had enough members and state-appointed control that it had monopolized authority over the Soviet music world. The RAPM policy involved the re-education of musicians and listeners in the Marxist image. As such, it objected to any musical style that supposedly bore bourgeoisie connections, such as Western, jazz and modern music.[6] The Central Committee passed yet another resolution in 1932, titled "On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Associations." Artistic associations were to be liquidated and replaced by single unions, each containing a Communist faction.

---

[1] Ian MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 122.

[2] Richard Taruskin, "Public Lies and Unspeakable Truth: Interpreting Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony," in *Shostakovich Studies*, ed. David Fanning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 24.

[3] Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994), 120.

[4] Boris Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia, 1917-1970* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1972), 48-49.

[5] Taruskin, "Public Lies and Unspeakable Truth," 19.

[6] Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 57-58.

Membership—crucial in this political climate—was only open to artists "upholding the platform of the Soviet regime and striving to participate in Socialist construction."[7] With this resolution, all artists and their works came under control of the Soviet regime, and any remaining creative flexibility after the 1928 resolution was demolished.

A few years later, Shostakovich came under direct attack as a result of such tight artistic control. On 28 January 1936 an unsigned article was published in the USSR's main newspaper, *Pravda*, called "Muddle Instead of Music." The article attacked Shostakovich's recent popular opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* for rejecting easy, accessible musical language and the principles of classical opera. [8] The opera was also accused of pandering to the formalist tastes of the bourgeoisie. Formalism is technically defined as the separation of form from content, but is hard to characterize in musical terms. More importantly, the 'formalist' accusation meant that the opera apparently did not meet the requirements of the regime—the concept of 'Socialist Realism' demanded that music be accessible, tuneful, stylistically traditional and folk-inspired in order to be worthy of the working class, and thus the Soviet state.[9] The actual authorship of the *Pravda* editorial is disputed, but it is certain that the compelling force behind it was Stalin himself.[10]

On 10 February 1936 Platon Kerzhenstev gave one of his first speeches as leader of the All-Union Committee for Artistic Affairs, which had recently been formed by the state. In this speech, he made it clear that the reach of the criticisms laid out in "Muddle Instead of Music" (as well as another *Pravda* editorial, attacking Shostakovich's *The Limpid Stream*) extended to all Soviet music, as well as other art forms. Kerzhenstev publicly advised Shostakovich that he should begin to write Russian folk music, and that he should travel the Soviet Union, acquainting himself with a variety of musical folklore.[11] In December of the same year, Shostakovich decided to cancel the premiere of his Fourth

[7] Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 109-110.
[8] Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000), 84-85.
[9] *Ibid.*, 88-89.
[10] *Ibid.*, 304. See note 67.
[11] *Ibid.*, 89.

Symphony—most likely out of fear that it did not conform to the musical restrictions of the state.[12]

Alongside Shostakovich's troubles with state criticism came the increasing intensity of the Yezhovshchina. By 1937, many of his friends and colleagues had disappeared. As well, his brother-in-law had been arrested, his sister had been exiled, and his mother-in-law had been sent to a labour camp.[13] This is the tense and dangerous atmosphere in which Shostakovich wrote his Fifth Symphony in 1937; he was under great pressure to create music which would please Stalin, or he would put himself—and his family and friends—at great risk of imprisonment or execution.

Despite the previous year's criticisms of *Lady Macbeth* and Shostakovich's suspicious cancellation of his Fourth Symphony, the Fifth premiered in November 1937 to tremendous audience approval. One reviewer, Alexey Tolstoy, interpreted the new symphony as an example of 'Socialist Realism'—music which properly served the Soviet state. The only interpretation Shostakovich himself offered was that it was, to some extent, autobiographical, concerning the "suffering of man, and all-conquering optimism." He also released a statement in which he expressed pride in creating art for the Soviet state and people.[14] The symphony was interpreted by the authorities as conforming to the values of the Soviet state, and Shostakovich did not make any statements to the contrary; thus, he had succeeded in creating a symphony that would not endanger himself or his family.

Most musicologists' interpretations of the Fifth Symphony previous to 1979 are similar to that of Tolstoy, in that there is no sense that Shostakovich rejected the aesthetic rules of the state. In 1972, Boris Schwarz even suggested that Shostakovich's cancelled Fourth Symphony did not reject Soviet artistic ideals, and that he was submissive to the *Pravda* article's criticism only due to fear of alienation: "It is wrong to picture him as a misunderstood rebel oppressed by an inimical regime. Even at the height of his modernism… he never thought of challenging Marxist-Leninist aesthetics."[15] The interpretations by Tolstoy and the

---

[12] Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 94-95.
[13] *Ibid.*, 97-98.
[14] *Ibid.*, 100-102.
[15] Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, 130.

Soviet authorities are informed by an understanding of the Soviet Union in the 1930s in which people—or more specifically in this case, musicians—did not desire to challenge state authority, because creating music to serve the state and the people was honourable. According to this interpretation, the restrictions imposed by the state were not actually restrictions, but guidelines for better music-making, which would improve the Soviet state and the lives of the people living within it. Schwarz does not indicate whether Shostakovich desired to conform to state guidelines or not. However, according to Schwarz's historical interpretation, Shostakovich's desires are of no consequence—dissidence was too dangerous for a composer who wanted a successful career.

In 1979, Solomon Volkov published *Testimony: The Memoirs of Shostakovich*. This book reveals a Shostakovich who, as opposed to previous interpretations, was quite bitter towards the Soviet state and its oppressive measures. Volkov's Shostakovich states that the optimism of the finale of the Fifth Symphony is false and meant as a criticism, not a glorification, of the Soviet state:

> The rejoicing is forced, created under threat… It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, 'Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing,' and you rise, shaky, and go marching off, muttering, 'Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing.'[16]

Since then, however, many scholars have argued convincingly that *Testimony* is most likely the work of Volkov himself, rather than Shostakovich.[17] Authentic or not, *Testimony* caused scholars and musicologists everywhere to re-evaluate Shostakovich's music and the context in which it was created.[18] The depiction of the historical moment conveyed by Volkov's interpretation of the Fifth Symphony is almost opposite that offered by the previously discussed authors. Volkov's history involves two opposing factions: the good—comprised of

---

[16] Solomon Volkov, *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1979), 183.

[17] Laurel E. Fay, "Shostakovich versus Volkov: Whose Testimony?" *Russian Review* 39 (1980), 485.

[18] Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, xi.

Shostakovich and other innocents oppressed by the state; and the bad—Stalin and his regime. The historical moment is depicted as a bleak battleground in which rebellion is possible only in musical form, and only if it is sufficiently inexplicit. For Volkov, Shostakovich is the quiet hero who manages to express the dissident sentiments of the people and simultaneously gain the favour of the state.

Despite strong criticisms of *Testimony*, its reversal of the traditional interpretation of both the Fifth Symphony and its historical context could not be ignored; thus, its influence was felt almost immediately. The very year it was released, Roy Blokker and Robert Dearling portrayed Shostakovich similarly in their description of the Fifth Symphony, arguing that it did not represent any sort of submission to the *Pravda* criticism: "It was as if he were providing his critics with an answer and then silently laughing at them."[19]

The effects of Volkov's book were evidently still felt in 1990 when Ian MacDonald's *The New Shostakovich* was published. MacDonald, too, agrees with Volkov's revisionist interpretation of the Fifth Symphony. Like Volkov, he portrays Shostakovich as a hero in repressive times: "[The Fifth Symphony], stripped of its protective shell of nonsense, is so outspoken an attack on Stalinist tyranny and the sinister inanities of Socialist Realism that one can only marvel at its composer's courage and self-belief…"[20] However, while Volkov's Shostakovich contends that audiences immediately understood exactly what the Fifth Symphony was about, MacDonald argues that even the conductor who premiered the symphony—Yevgeny Mravinksy—did not understand it. MacDonald examines the testimonies of audience members present at the premiere, arguing that they felt intense emotion rather than complete understanding of what Shostakovich was trying to say. [21]

MacDonald attempts to come to a complete understanding of his own by examining the symphony and associating musical ideas with the events, people, ideas and emotions experienced under Stalin's reign. For instance, he contends that a series of one-note figures followed by a series of two-note

---

[19] Roy Blokker with Robert Dearling, *The Music of Dmitri Shostakovich: The Symphonies* (New Jersey: The Tantivy Press, 1979), 65.
[20] MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich*, 133.
[21] *Ibid.*, 124-125.

figures is representative of a master-slave relationship, because two-note figures signify brute authority in *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*: "Are these configurations musical ways of saying 'Stalin'?"[22] He goes on to argue that the next passage, with a menacing theme, represents a political rally—again, the source of the menace is supposedly Stalin. The slow movement, the third, apparently speaks for the Russian people. MacDonald contends that this tragic movement caused the audience at the premiere to cry because it is easy to understand; "particularly if half your family have been arrested and you are alone and terrified and trying to smile."[23] The glorious-sounding finale, MacDonald argues, is in fact sarcastic optimism: "If this is to be a new and brighter day, it is evidently to be a conformist one."[24] The historical moment informing MacDonald's interpretation is similar to that of Volkov and Blokker and Dearling. Unlike these authors, however, MacDonald argues for an extremely inexplicit form of musical resistance within the symphony. According to his interpretation, rebellion not only had to be hidden within music, but veiled as a novel which can only truly be read by a musicologist; others understand it only through emotions. Perhaps this suggests that at the time, rebellion could only be understood by those who shared the experience and emotions, but decades later, after the danger has passed, the true narrative can be decoded. In this sense, the Soviet regime was so oppressive that rebellion can really only be understood today in historical memory, but not when it was actually occurring.

Laurel E. Fay, the author who in 1980 exposed *Testimony*'s lack of authenticity, wrote her own biography of Shostakovich in 2000 titled *Shostakovich: A Life*. She states in her introduction that her purpose in writing the book is to come as close as possible to the truth, portraying Shostakovich's life as objectively as possible.[25] Thus, in her discussion of the Fifth Symphony, she offers little of her own interpretation. Instead, she provides the few clues given by Shostakovich and disproves some common myths in the interest of offering an objective history. Fay notes that "A Creative Answer of a Soviet Artist to

---

[22] MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich*, 128-129.
[23] *Ibid.*, 130. Presumably, MacDonald means that the audience understood the emotions Shostakovich was trying to convey, rather than the actual criticism of Stalin—otherwise, he would be counteracting his previous point.
[24] *Ibid.*, 132.
[25] Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 4.

Unjust Criticism"—popularly considered to be Shostakovich's official subtitle for the Fifth Symphony—was in fact only a critical interpretation given by someone else which "gave [him] great pleasure."[26] Fay contends that Shostakovich never accepted the criticism from "Muddle Instead of Music" or from Kerzhenstev, partially because the subtitle was not his, and also because the Fifth Symphony showed no signs of acceptance of the advice to write folk music or of "any of the other most obvious recipes for rehabilitation."[27] She notes the widespread belief that the jubilance of the finale was intended to convey a sense of forced rejoicing under duress, but does not make any claims for or against the truth of this interpretation. Rather, she notes Shostakovich's unwillingness to speak specifically about the meaning of his music. This, she says, was an instinct for survival under Stalin's reign which stuck with him all his life. She also acknowledges Shostakovich's preference to let his music 'speak' for itself: usually, when asked about his music, he would simply direct the questioner to his scores.[28] Fay takes a largely neutral position on the subject of interpretation of the Fifth Symphony, but in doing so she rejects the interpretations of Volkov, Blokker and Dearling, and MacDonald, as well as earlier interpretations which portray Shostakovich as a good Soviet Communist. Fay's neutrality regarding the meaning of the symphony is, unsurprisingly, backed by a fairly neutral stance toward Stalin's regime. She discusses the criticisms of Shostakovich's previous work and the disappearances, exiles and imprisonments which must have influenced his mindset when he wrote the Fifth Symphony, but she conveys only what are considered to be established facts and quotes—she states no personal convictions regarding the historical moment or the symphony.

In "Public Lies and Unspeakable Truth: Interpreting Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony," Richard Taruskin much more actively and vehemently opposes the idea that Shostakovich was a rebellious hero. He presents the two main sides of the argument over interpretation of the Fifth Symphony, asserting that the deciding factor is whether the coda of the finale fails by accident or on purpose; if it fails on purpose, then the symphony is characterized by mockery. If one interprets it in such a way, Taruskin argues, one judges Shostakovich to be a

---

[26] Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 102.
[27] *Ibid.*, 103.
[28] *Ibid.*, 104.

dissident—a judgment Taruskin believes is a "self-gratifying anachronism."[29] He contends that there *were* no dissidents in the Soviet Union in 1937; by then, any old opponents had been executed or imprisoned, and no one dared speak out against the regime for fear of these same punishments. Taruskin quotes Adam B. Ulam, who argues that even a casual remark to an old friend could produce dire consequences in this atmosphere. According to Taruskin, "dissidence resulted from the loosening of controls, not the other way around"—no one could even verbally rebel and escape the consequences until the mid-1950s.[30] Taruskin contends that the anachronism of dissidence during the 1930s is simply an empty comfort for people who want to believe that resistance existed, and that Shostakovich acted as we would have liked to in his place: "now that the dissidents have won, it seems nobody ever really believed in the Soviet way of life."[31]

Taruskin also attacks MacDonald's literal, local interpretation of the Fifth Symphony, arguing that it is built on selective evidence.[32] He asserts that Shostakovich created the sounds of the finale's coda using dissonances and melodic progressions, which he employed in other works to evoke a gloomy mood. This, he says, does not suggest that Shostakovich was attempting to be rebellious, but rather to give voice to tragedy, like in the third movement: "this may be viewed as irony, perhaps; but it is not mockery."[33] Taruskin argues primarily for a reading of the Fifth Symphony and its historical context which is not black-and-white. If we acknowledge the grey areas, he says, we can learn a great deal from such cultural artifacts of the era.[34] This is a strange statement for Taruskin, as it is evident that his historical interpretation informed his musical interpretation, not the other way around—his argument refuting the presence of mockery in the finale is based on what he considers to be a historical truth, that dissidence was not possible under Stalin's reign.

In another article, entitled "Shostakovich and Us," Taruskin contends that Soviets living under Stalin's regime probably *did* sense protest in

---

[29] Taruskin, "Public Lies and Unspeakable Truth," 45-46.
[30] Ibid., 46.
[31] Ibid., 47-48.
[32] Tarushkin, "Public Lies and Unspeakable Truth," 53.
[33] Ibid., 52.
[34] Ibid., 56.

Shostakovich's music, whether he intended it or not. They sensed it because they needed to, for consolation; whether Shostakovich intended this or not, he argues, is irrelevant.[35] He again attacks MacDonald, asserting that attempting to define or paraphrase music as he has done is to limit and control it. To label the Fifth Symphony as an attack on Stalin and the Soviet regime, he says, is to undermine its achievement as a musical work.[36]

Inna Barsova, in "Between 'Social Demands' and 'The Music of Grand Passions': The Years 1934-1937 in the Life of Dmitry Shostakovich," argues for a more ambivalent interpretation of the Fifth Symphony. She contends that the presence of two diametrically opposed planes in the work—one triumphant, the other representing a more mournful 'final journey,' counteracting the triumphant plane—is obvious and intended. Some believed the optimism of the finale to be genuine, while others believed the opposite; Barsova argues that this is because both these planes of meaning exist in the finale.[37] This interpretation may be in keeping either with Volkov's—that rebellion was possible if hidden correctly—or Fay's more neutral stance, since Barsova does not necessarily associate the 'final journey' plane with an attack on Stalin. Barsova's interpretation may be informed by an ambivalent view of the historical moment: there are two understandings of life under the Stalinist regime, and of the emotions present in the finale—we each choose for ourselves which understanding we believe based on our own experiences and beliefs. According to this view, there is no actual truth about whether or not rebellion existed under Stalin's rule; rather, there is only personal opinion regarding the matter.

Solomon Volkov published a new biography (as opposed to testimony) of Shostakovich in 2004, titled *Shostakovich and Stalin*. His statements are perhaps best taken with a grain of salt, considering the widely-believed claims regarding the authenticity of *Testimony*; however, in his preface he states that he has tried to keep quotes from the earlier book to a minimum, and refers to *Testimony* as 'collaborations' and 'conversations', which may be taken as a sort of

---

[35] Richard Taruskin, "Shostakovich and Us," in *Shostakovich in Context*, ed. Rosamund Bartlett (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

[36] Tarushkin, "Shostakovich and Us," 12.

[37] Inna Barsova, "Between 'Social Demands' and 'The Music of Grand Passions': The Years 1934-1937 in the Life of Dmitry Shostakovich," in *Shostakovich in Context*, ed. Rosamund Bartlett (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000), 94.

acknowledgement of the criticisms directed towards him in the past.[38] Nevertheless, despite the assertion of authors like Fay that Shostakovich never provided any definite insight into the Fifth Symphony, Volkov insists that Shostakovich interpreted his own finale as a "procession of the condemned to their execution: a shocking and horrifying yet absolutely accurate, almost naturalistic image, if we remember the Great Terror and the mass hysteria of the period."[39] He also notes that some scholars have found quotations in the finale from works of composers like Berlioz and Strauss which are known to depict execution processions. These finds, he argues, lend extra support to the notion that the finale is not meant to be purely jubilant.[40] Moreover, Volkov contends that the finale cannot possibly be wholly optimistic if one considers the political atmosphere in which it was written.[41] Here then, as in Taruskin's writings, historical interpretation directly informs musical interpretation.

Shostakovich himself might have scoffed at most or all of the preceding interpretations of his Fifth Symphony, as he was quite averse to the study of musicology. He offered his own definition of a musicologist: "Our cook, Pasha, prepared the scrambled eggs for us and we are eating them. Now imagine a person who did not cook the eggs and does not eat them, but talks about them—*that* is a musicologist."[42] Besides Shostakovich's few statements regarding the symphony, we have no way of knowing its actual meaning. Even those statements might not be entirely useful; those from the 1930s could have been driven by fear of the regime, and the more recent ones may be supported by memories distorted with time. It seems, then, that there is no one true interpretation of the symphony.

The major difference between history and art is the historical moment is gone, and yet the art remains as an artifact. Literature, film and visual art can affect our historical memories by re-enacting the moment; they create pictures in our minds of what happened, and who was affected positively or negatively.

---

[38] Solomon Volkov, *Shostakovich and Stalin* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), x-xi.
[39] *Ibid.*, 148-149.
[40] *Ibid.*, 149.
[41] *Ibid.*, 148.
[42] David Fanning, "Introduction. Talking About Eggs: Musicology and Shostakovich," in *Shostakovich Studies*, ed. David Fanning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.

They necessarily subject our historical memories to specific interpretations of events, because written or visual language can clearly convey specific events and relay specific opinions in an understandable fashion. Instrumental music, on the other hand, normally does not convey such clear, specific messages, as evidenced by the large variety of interpretations of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony. Any interpretation of the symphony generates a certain view of the historical moment in which it was created, but the fact that it is impossible to tell exactly what the symphony means suggests that it cannot definitively direct our views in one way or the other. Some interpretations may be more convincing than others due to levels of scholarship (especially in Volkov's case) or to newly discovered facts regarding the creation of the symphony or Shostakovich's life at the time; but if one listens to the symphony without checking these facts, one does not find a definitive answer or interpretation of history. Barsova's ambivalent view of the symphony's finale is significant—one's interpretation of the symphony is informed by previous historical understandings regarding the historical moment, as opposed to the symphony creating an historical understanding for the listener. MacDonald's writings suggest this as well: he believes that, without any in-depth musical examination or historical study, all the audience understands in the Fifth Symphony is emotion. The audience at the premiere might have equated this emotion with their own trials and tribulations under Stalin's regime, but only because their experiences informed their interpretation of the music. Taruskin's argument that those who see Shostakovich as a rebellious hero do so because they want to is also significant; again, this is the application of historical interpretation to interpretation of the symphony.

Shostakovich wrote his Fifth Symphony during what historians consider to be a tremulous time for Soviet politics, human rights and artistic license. Several people close to Shostakovich were victims of Stalin's Terror, and he himself was the target of intense artistic criticism from the state. One would imagine that such an intense atmosphere must have had some effect upon the creation of the symphony. However, we know little more than this regarding the actual meaning of the symphony. The symphony itself does not offer much help in this matter—the sheer variance in interpretations of the symphony (especially the finale) attests to that. Each interpretation requires a different understanding of the historical atmosphere in which it was written, which means that

interpretations of the symphony and of history are fundamentally intertwined. However, the relationship between the Fifth Symphony and history is different than that between history and other art forms. Literature, film and visual art create specific and understandable ideas for the audience regarding the historical moment, whereas the Fifth Symphony cannot, as it lacks clarity in terms of its own point of view. Instead, one's historical opinions inform one's interpretation of the symphony. In some sense, the Fifth Symphony gives us a clearer view of historical truth than do other art forms, precisely because it offers no definitive truth—history is not made up of a single truth, but rather of a series of interpretations, and the same can be said for the Fifth Symphony.