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| Examination/Assessment Session: June <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> November <input type="checkbox"/> | | Year | |

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| Title of Proposal | To what extent did politics influence the music of Shostakovich? |
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My aim is to discover whether the music of 20th century Soviet composer Shostakovich was truly influenced by the politics and oppression of his time, or whether the music had nothing to do with the politics at all, and people were merely associating it with Stalinist Russia. In other words, did the music represent Stalinist Russia or did the association represent Stalinist Russia.

The idea arose from a quote from Stravinsky "For I consider that music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature, etc.", another way of saying "beauty is in the eye of the beholder", and that people's minds create the drama in the music, not the composers themselves.

Some say that Shostakovich was a 'yurodivy' - a Russian term meaning a composer who makes statements in their music with double or triple meaning s. I want to know how true this is, or whether people are reading into the music incorrectly.

My starting point will be looking into the history of Shostakovich's life and the politics surrounding him during his childhood and appointment as a composer. My main resources are to be books which analyse Shostakovich and the composers of the 20th century as well as chronicles, podcasts and documentaries. I also know of some experts and university lecturers to whom I may pose a few questions, and I will be able to ask my music teachers who will have their own opinions and analysis of the works of 20th century Soviet composers. The question posed is relevant to me because I am studying music for A Level and hope to study music at university. 20th Century Soviet music is a personal favourite musical era of mine so I would like to dig deeper into the causes and influences of the music, not only for my knowledge, but to inform my playing.

- Initial Resources
- Testimony - The Memoires of Dimitri Shostakovich - Solomon Volkov
 - The Cambridge Companion to Shostakovich - Pauline Fairclough and David Fanning
 - Shostakovich Symphonies and Concertos: an Owner's Manual - David Hurwitz
 - Shostakovich Against Stalin: The War Symphonies (Documentary)
 - Close Up, Shostakovich, A Portrait (Documentary)

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Stalinist Nationalism in Shostakovich's Music – Command or Choice?

Shostakovich is one of the world's most popular Russian composers of the 20th Century. His works include 15 symphonies, 6 concertos, 29 suites, 16 string quartets, operas, ballets, film music and choral pieces amongst others. His vast collection of compositions and the fierce Soviet regime in which he was living make him a controversial figure. Some see him as another composer trapped in the Soviet Regime whereas others listen closer and try to find hidden meanings within his writing. His works are now a platform of great debate.

To answer my question I intend to examine some of the forces behind his writing by looking at his personal contact with Stalin, how he responded to criticism and his personal circumstances. I will then be able to draw conclusions as to whether his nationalist music was written as a result of the 'command' of Stalin and the great Terror, or whether Shostakovich was writing the 'Russian-glorifying' symphonies out of choice.

Stalin's communist regime rewrote history books, where facts were transformed into ideas that Stalin wanted to share. Since the fall of Stalin, history has been reverted back to fact and the truth about the Soviet regime is now public. A Russian Novelist, Leo Tolstoy¹ wrote about the situation in Russia:

'armies of secret police are continuously growing in numbers'
'at no previous time have religious persecutions been so frequent and so cruel'
'famine which has become a normal condition'

Recent history books too now tell a more accurate account of 20th Century Russia. Some of the major effects of the First World War in 1914-1917 were lack of food supplies, disrupted transport, and poor military performance; over 4 million troops were killed or wounded in the first year of war.

Shostakovich would have been just 8 years old at this time. As a child he would have been seeing the detrimental effects that human warfare can have on civilisation. A life of hardship from the very beginning may have increased the creative intensity of his writing, and given his writing a purpose – to reflect the situation in which he lived.

Throughout Shostakovich's lifetime, Russia experienced three revolutions, two world wars, a civil war, and Stalin's dictatorship. It is assumed that Stalin's dictatorship meant that Shostakovich lived in constant fear of his own denunciation and death, as well as the denunciations of his close friends and family. I will be exploring what effects this may or may not have had on his composing.

In order to more clearly juxtapose the experiences of Shostakovich and Stalin, I have created a time line:

¹ Lee Tolstoy, Russian writer 1828-1910

Shostakovich | Stalin and Russia

| | |
|---|---|
| Born 1906 | 1879 Born |
| Went to Petrograd Conservatory 1919 | 1914 First World War |
| Graduated with 1 st Symphony 1926 | 1919 End of First World War |
| Wrote 2 nd Symphony 1928 | 1924 Stalin became Party Leader |
| Married Nina Varzer 1932 | 1929 Stalin effectively dictator of Soviet Union |
| Divorced then remarried when Nina was pregnant 1935 | 1934 Beginning of 'The Great Terror' |
| Pravda article released 1936 | |
| Wrote 5 th Symphony 1937 | 1938 End of 'The Great Terror' |
| Turned away from military, became a firefighter 1941 | 1939 Second World War |
| Wrote 7 th Symphony 1941 | |
| Wrote 8 th Symphony 1943 | |
| Wrote 9 th Symphony 1945 | 1945 End of Second World War |
| Forced to make public apology denouncing his own work 1948 | |
| Died 1975 ↓ | 1953 Died |

Views about Nationalist Music

As composing is such an open ended activity, many different people in Russia had their own views on what kind of music should be written and for what purpose. Stalin said:

'The development of cultures that are national in form and socialist in content is necessary for the purpose of their ultimate fusion into one General Culture, socialist both as to form and content, and expressed in one general language.'²

This kind of statement illustrates Stalin's desire to use the arts to develop Russia into 'one General Culture' and his need for all Russian music to support his regime. The means by which he did this are questionable. Did the purges which took place in The Great Terror stretch to composers? Did Shostakovich live in fear of such purges? Did this influence his writing? There are some contrasting views which will be explored.

There were specific protocols and features that Russian composers such as Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Khachaturian were encouraged to follow. The main feature was the use of Russian folk tunes which represented different republics of Russia. Dr Marina Frolova-Walker³, an expert on the subject, in her book entitled Russian Music and Nationalism said:

'Without folk material, composers know that there was only the narrowest stretch of dry land between "formalism" on the one side, and banality on the other. Both faults were equally open to condemnation, the former because it ignored the (supposed) needs of the people, the latter because it patronized and underestimated the people.'

² Russian Music and Nationalism; Chapter 6; page 301

³ One of the United Kingdom's leading Russian music experts, Fellow of Clare College Cambridge: Russian Music and Nationalism; Chapter 6; page 316

'those who were locked in a narrow world of shallow, subjective feelings, and who tried to "create [music] out of their own selves" - eventually found that they had departed from the culture of the people. Their false creations were rejected by people, because the people will never tolerate a fraud.'

The latter statement is somewhat fallacious as it describes the feelings of composers as 'narrow' and 'subjective'. It also seems contradictory that 'creating music of their own selves', and being a Russian citizen, could result in 'departing' from the culture of the people. Nevertheless, if this was the attitude of critics at Shostakovich's time of composing, it must have been difficult for Shostakovich to feel like he could compose freely. He could have followed his own 'compositional voice', or alternatively he could have conformed to the nationalist opinions of the time. Whether these opinions were genuine or not are, too, open for debate. Critics as well as composers may have been writing out of fear. This in turn may have meant that nobody was writing freely.

What did Stalin think about how music should be written?

It wasn't just the critics who claimed that composers should follow this protocol. A conversation⁴ took place between Shumiatsky, Stalin, and other soviet leaders about an article which was published in the newspaper *Pravda*. The article heavily criticised Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*⁵.

Shumiatsky: 'Personally, I think that like the majority of composers, Shostakovich can write good, realistic music, but on the condition that he is directed.'

Stalin: 'That's the crux. They aren't being directed. And thus people are throwing themselves into thickets of all kinds of eccentricities. And they are even praised for this, praised to excess. But now when an explanation has been given in *Pravda*, all our composers should start creating music that is transparent and understandable, and not rebuses and riddles in which the meaning of the work dies. On top of this, it is necessary for people to use melodies skillfully. In some movies, for example, you are brought to deafness. The orchestra cracks, squeals, something screeches, something whistles, something jingles, hindering you from following the visual images. Why does leftism thrive so in music? There is one answer: no one is paying attention, no one places on composers and conductors the demands for a clear mass art. ...'

This conversation implies that Stalin took great interest in the music and had strong opinions on specific details about the orchestration. But, in his own argument he uses straw man fallacies with loaded language such as 'screeches' and 'squeals' to make Shostakovich's music seem of poor quality. He also makes an unsupported claim that 'leftism' includes such screeching and squealing. However, he also had the whole nation in the palm of his hand and the ability to enforce his power in many different ways. This kind of power may have meant that composers would have to accept the criticism and thus could never write out of choice for fear of the consequences. Stalin also has a clear vested interest for the country to believe that he is a great leader, and so would have wanted the music to reflect him and 'glorious Russia' in the best light.

Shostakovich's attitude to composing before Stalin

An interview conducted by Roman Ilich Gruber⁶ called 'Responses of Shostakovich to a Questionnaire on the Psychology of the Creative Process'⁷ reveals some interesting points about Shostakovich's thought process whilst composing. Question 10b asks 'Are you aware of periods of greatest creative urgency?' Shostakovich answered:

The urge to compose is constant (with the exception of the period 1925-1926). My period of greatest creative urgency was during the spring and summer of 1927.

This would suggest that Shostakovich always wants to compose, but his situation had prevented him from composing at certain times. Question 25 b asks 'At what time do you usually notice an increase in creative activity: Time of year?' To which he answered

Most often spring, summer, and fall; less often the winter (this is mostly due, it seems, to the fact that winter responsibilities distract).

⁴ Shostakovich and his World, Stalin and Shostakovich: Letters to a "Friend", page 48 – Laurel E. Fay

⁵ The opera was first performed in 1934

⁶ Soviet musicologist and professor

⁷ Shostakovich And His World: Responses of Shostakovich to a Questionnaire on Psychology of the Creative Process, page 27 – Laurel E. Fay

This too suggests that Shostakovich's situation and responsibilities played a large part in how and when he composed. Question 26 asks 'What sort of reaction do you experience following a creative high (satisfaction, a neutral state, a let-down)'. Shostakovich's answer was

I have never experienced complete satisfaction: the expectation that I'll be satisfied, which is typically present while I'm working, is far from ever completely realised when the composition is finished (there's no "honeymoon"); there arises a need for more creative work . . .

I don't experience a let-down, however, and much less any aversion to work. This reveals a lot about Shostakovich's attitude towards his work; he constantly seeks perfection and improvement upon his last work, and his situation sometimes determined how he composed. If he was often unsatisfied with his work, perhaps Stalin's criticisms gave him a more specific aim with his music, so that he may become more satisfied if he was making the leader satisfied, rather than thinking of his own satisfaction. It is important to consider that this interview was conducted in 1927-1928. This was when Shostakovich had just come out of the conservatoire and completed his first few symphonies. It was well before Stalin's 'Great Terror'. It would have been interesting to see how his answers may have altered during different stages of his life.

What kind of contact did Shostakovich Have with Stalin?

Letters⁸ have been recorded from Shostakovich to Stalin and Georgii Malenkov⁹, Stalin's second in command. Each one gives a small insight into Shostakovich's activity and his relationship with Stalin. The following letter was sent after Shostakovich had moved into a new apartment.

*Letter to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR com.[rade] Stalin I.V.
Iosif Vissarionovich!*

A few days ago I moved with my family to a new apartment. The apartment turned out to be a very good one and it is very pleasant to live in. With all my heart I thank you for your concern about me. The main thing I very much want now is to justify – if only to a small degree – the attention you have shown me. I will apply all my strength towards that.

*I wish you many years of health and energy for the good of our Motherland, our Great People.
Yours, D. Shostakovich 31st January 1947*

Here there is a hint that Shostakovich may have written his following compositions out of choice because he was grateful to Stalin for providing him with good living conditions whilst the rest of the country was in peril. However, we must consider that Shostakovich was writing this letter to the most powerful man in Russia, and wouldn't have wanted to say anything that could make Stalin 'suspicious', angered or agitated; his vested interest may have been wanting Stalin to see him as a dutiful composer and to 'keep his neck off of the line'.

The following letter is to Gerogii Malenkov about Shostakovich's offer to become secretary of the Union of Soviet Composers.

*Letter to Politburo member Georgii Malenkov, Satlin's second in command:
Greatly respected Georgii Maksimilianovich!*

On 15th August, General Secretary of the Union of Soviet Composers T. N. Khrennikov spoke with me. He invited me to join the Secretariat of the Union of Soviet Composers [SSK].

I am turning to you with the earnest request to take the following into account: I am prepared to perform any public service within the Union of Soviet Composers of which I am capable. However, to undertake the responsibilities of a Secretary of the SSK is beyond my capacity, since I have no aptitude whatsoever for any leadership duties. Moreover, performing the responsibilities of a Secretary of the SSK will require a great deal of my time and energy and thus will tear me away from creative work which – at least for the time being – I consider my main calling.

*With respect to you,
D. D. Shostakovich 16th August 1951*

This was perhaps a 'bold' suggestion from Shostakovich as he was refusing Stalin's offer. It shows how much Shostakovich valued his composing as 'his main calling' and that he was unwilling to perform other duties to please Stalin. This quite strongly suggests that Shostakovich would have wanted to write out of choice because he valued his music so much. If he felt bound to adhere to Stalin's every command, surely he would have obliged in this case?

See all four letters in Index 1

⁸ Shostakovich And His World: Stalin and Shostakovich: Letters to a "Friend", page 44 – Laurel E. Fay

⁹ Soviet Politician and Communist Party Leader

How did Shostakovich respond to the criticism in 'Muddle instead of Music'?

On 28th January 1936 an article entitled 'Muddle instead of Music'¹⁰ was published in Russia's main newspaper Pravda. The article compares Shostakovich's opera Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk to formalism. The article included statements such as:

'From the first minute, the listener is shocked by deliberate dissonance, by a confused stream of sound. Snatches of melody, the beginnings of a musical phrase, are drowned, emerge again, and disappear in a grinding and squealing roar. To follow this "music" is most difficult; to remember it, impossible.'

'Passion is here supposed to be expressed by noise. All this is not due to lack of talent, or lack of ability to depict strong and simple emotions in music. Here is music turned deliberately inside out in order that nothing will be reminiscent of classical opera, or have anything in common with symphonic music or with simple and popular musical language accessible to all.'

'The power of good music to infect the masses has been sacrificed to a petty-bourgeois, "formalist" attempt to create originality through cheap clowning. It is a game of clever ingenuity that may end very badly.'

'He ignored the demand of Soviet culture that all coarseness and savagery be abolished from every corner of Soviet life.'

See full article in Index 2

The article clearly tries to put across that Shostakovich has written music which represents the Soviets poorly, as 'passion is created out of noise' and by using loaded language and straw man fallacies such as 'squealing roar' and 'savagery'. There is also ad hominem where the article criticises Shostakovich for things such as ignoring the demand of Soviet culture.

There are some very contrasting views about what this article meant for Shostakovich and his future music. In a documentary¹¹ one of Shostakovich's friends Flora Litvinova states,

'We knew that the Pravda editorial meant the end of Shostakovich's music, and even that Shostakovich's very life was in danger.'

Was this a slippery slope fallacy or was there some truth? This is contradicted by two sources I have found. The first is Tikhon Khrennikov – Secretary of the Composer's Union. In the same documentary he said:

'You know what? I think all of this has been terribly exaggerated. Shostakovich was such a cheerful man. Well, maybe he had some fears, I don't know. But he was a normal man who reacted normally to everything that was going on, and there was nothing for him to be afraid of, because everyone saw him as the peak of our culture.'

Since both Khrennikov and Litvinova were in close contact with Shostakovich at the time, they have a similar level of reliability. However, Khrennikov may have had slightly more insight as he was the secretary of the composer's union and so was associating with composers from day to day. He saw first-hand what happened to composers in his union. Research has shown that Litvinova was indeed an old friend of Shostakovich's, and she was living at a time when purges, possibly of people she knew, were taking place, but she may have not been aware of how well respected composers were treated. Perhaps they were not in any danger at all because they were iconic figures, celebrities. It is still relevant today that celebrities receive far more press than 'ordinary' people, and so Stalin may have wanted to avoid controversy and use Shostakovich as a way of putting across his Soviet ideas. There is a stark contradiction between the two statements. Although Litvinova may not have been aware of the workings of the Composer's Union, Khrennikov may not have been able to judge Shostakovich's fear as he himself had the power to decide the fate of the composers, being the secretary and actually having the power to denounce the composers in the union. As Vladimir Rubin¹² says in the documentary, "the wolf cannot judge the fear of the fox".

The second contradictory source I have found is an essay¹³ written by Simo Mikkonen¹⁴, a credible expert, which describes the view that the Pravda article was not actually as important as it has been made out to be.

'... The importance attached to this article has been overstated. Events that followed its publication have often been perceived as a kind of witch-hunt for Shostakovich, which mostly certainly was not the case. The target was not even music alone, but rather the artistic front in

¹⁰ <http://www.arnoldschalks.nl/tlte1sub1.html>

¹¹ Shostakovich against Stalin: The War Symphonies, 1997 – Directed by Larry Weinstein

¹² A Russian composer b.1924

¹³ In Shostakovich Studies 2, page 238 - Edited by Pauline Fairclough

¹⁴ Professor of Russian History, University of Jyväskylä

general. It was not the intention of Stalin or of the party to destroy Shostakovich. This is illustrated by the fact that, while many writers and theatre personalities were arrested and even shot, Shostakovich remained untouched. He was allowed to compose and publish, and the fuss about him died down quickly.'

Although it may be true that Shostakovich was not harmed as a result of the article, Mikkonen states that other 'writers and theatre personalities were arrested and even shot'. Because people in similar professions were risking their lives with their creative works, Mikkonen is slightly inconsistent here. It doesn't seem unlikely that Shostakovich would have felt fearful when his work was so heavily criticised, as artists in other professions were being arrested and shot. Mikkonen's argument here is weak.

Elizabeth Wilson¹⁵, a perhaps slightly biased source because of her journalist motives, provides some strong evidence that Shostakovich would have been living in fear and therefore wanted to write to please Stalin. After the Pravda article she states:

'Kezhensev advised Shostakovich that his best tactic would be to 'admit his errors', while Tukhachevsky wrote a letter on Shostakovich's behalf to Stalin...Tukhachevsky may have seemed a powerful patron at the time, but he was arrested only a year later and shot in the summer of 1937 as an enemy of the people. Shortly afterwards, another of Shostakovich's close friends, the musicologist Nikolai Zhilyaev, was arrested because of his association with Tukhachevsky.'

If what Wilson says is true, and we can assume it is because of the nature of her own research for her book, she gives some strength to the argument that Shostakovich must have lived in fear. People Shostakovich had turned to for advice were being shot and arrested. Although Shostakovich was in relatively close contact with Stalin, this evidence suggests that he can't have felt that he could compose freely because many people he knew were being purged. Therefore, he must have been writing, to some degree, as a result of Stalin's control over the Russian people.

A comment which supports this appears in Testimony¹⁶. Shostakovich says:

'What a great honour, it seems that Stalin has approved my 5th symphony... The reaction of the audience and the critics makes no difference at all; there is only one question that matters 'how does the leader like your work?' the answer could mean life or death.'

Although this agrees with the evidence that Stalin's regime limited the way composers composed, the book Testimony isn't actually written by Shostakovich, it is written by Volokov¹⁷. More recent research has revealed that Testimony can't be trusted to be Shostakovich's own word, there are in fact whole books written on why this is the case, so this source seems incredibly unreliable. However, it does agree with the sentiment that Shostakovich's life was in Stalin's hands, whether Shostakovich only cared about what Stalin thought of his music remains a mystery. As David Fanning¹⁸ told me, "no one is a mind reader", and "what people (including Stalin) take out of a work is not necessarily the same as what an artist puts in."

Did Russia 'stamp on his throat and then ask him to sing?'

A recent article in BBC Music Magazine draws on some of the effects that Stalin's regime had on Shostakovich. Firstly, the journalist¹⁹ describes music as a 'tool of the state':

'In Soviet times, the contract between might and music was made explicit. Music was declared a tool of the state, with instructions that its only theme must be the joyful celebration of the proletariat. As head of the Union of Composers from 1948 to 1991 Tikhon Khrennikov enforced Stalin's decree that Soviet music must be cleansed of anti-socialist, bourgeois-Western elements. He denounced Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Miaskovsky and Khachaturian, forcing them into humiliating public recantations for their musical 'crimes'. When I met him in his old age, Khrennikov was unapologetic. 'My word was law!' he told me. 'People knew I was appointed by Stalin and they were afraid of me. I was Stalin's commissar. When I said No! It meant No. But at least, under me no composer or musician was ever executed!'

The journalist doesn't fully explain how music was 'declared a tool the state'. He makes an assumption that composers were 'directed' to write nationalist music when in fact they may have

¹⁵ In Shostakovich: A life remembered¹⁵, 'Terror On the Doorstep', page 145 – Elizabeth Wilson

¹⁶ Testimony, The Memoires of Dmitri Shostakovich – Solomon Volkov

¹⁷ Russian Journalist and Musicologist

¹⁸ Professor of Music at the University of Manchester

¹⁹ Martin Sixsmith, the former BBC correspondent in Moscow

written it out of choice, for pleasure or because they had been intimidated into doing so. With reference to Khrennikov, his comments further prove that people must have been fearful of him as he was appointed by Stalin and had the power to denounce composers. And, despite the fact that no musician or composer was ever executed under him, his statement here implies that he still had the power to do so. Therefore, Shostakovich must have been anxious when his music was being played to Stalin or Khrennikov or any of his critics, because of the power they all possessed.

The article goes on to discuss Shostakovich's appearance in New York and an account by his wife stating that 'fear was his constant companion':

'Pressed to comment on political matters, he appeared uncomfortable and evasive.

Shostakovich had been terrified by the Lady Macbeth scandal in 1936, when Stalin himself publicly attacked his opera, and by Khrennikov's onslaught in 1948. His widow Irina told me that 'Dmitri was like the little bird in the old Russian folk tale – they stamped on his throat and then told him to sing . . . fear was his constant companion.' So Shostakovich knew he must toe the line.'

Irina's metaphor is not backed up by any evidence but it is likely that she would have known Shostakovich more closely than any of the other sources I have found. Since this article was completed in 2013, Irina no longer has the vested interest to appeal to Stalin so she is a reliable source, although this is only her opinion; we do not know if Shostakovich himself felt this way.

An opposing view comes from Mikkonen²⁰ who argues that Shostakovich was not in as much danger as is commonly thought, stating that not a single 'prominent' composer was arrested. Mikkonen supports this statement by providing theoretical reasons:

'A purge in the Composers' Union would have caused critical problems in musical production, which had at the moment started to generate just the kind of Soviet repertoire the authorities desired. This is not, perhaps, sufficient explanation as to why composers largely escaped the terror. But when we take into account the fact that the Committee for Artistic Affairs held practically all the official authority over the musical front, it was perhaps not interested in ruining its achievements in music.'

In his argument here, Mikkonen acknowledges the weaknesses in his own argument by saying that 'this is not sufficient explanation as to why composers largely escaped the terror'. This gives him a strong footing when she goes on to explaining his other reasons:

'If we look at the actual victims, we find that almost all of them were administrative figures, . . . Some professors were displaced, but none were arrested. Most of them even kept their posts. However, some of the displaced professors had relatives arrested, which had made them vulnerable in turn.'

Mikkonen almost brushes past the fact that professors' relatives were arrested, and says that it would have made them 'vulnerable'. This is perhaps a large understatement, for if a family member were to be arrested, it is likely that this would have caused them a great deal of stress and anxiety. They may have been willing to do anything to free their relatives, even if it meant praising the Soviet regime through their music. Mikkonen goes on to say:

'The committee either could not or (more likely) was unwilling to attack composers physically. Rather it attacked those administrators who would affect composers. Thus, the committee was actively nagged in purging, but it left composers untouched. Only the non-composer Chelyapov and the foreign Narkompros official Pshibishevskiy were arrested.'

Mikkonen provides evidence for his argument that composers need not be fearful because 'composers were left untouched'. But this is flawed by his earlier argument where he mentioned that their relatives were arrested. Is this enough for them to change the way they might have wanted to compose?

His conclusion is that:

'Thus Shostakovich was not, in retrospect, in mortal danger. His music was popular - even Stalin was fond of his film scores - and he was building an international reputation at a time when his country needed international prestige.'

His argument that Shostakovich was not 'in mortal danger' is strong as he claimed that no other composers were arrested because it would have caused problems, and the Soviets wanted music to be part of their propaganda campaign to the rest of the world. However, 'not in mortal danger' still implies some level of emotional danger if his work were to be heavily criticised or his relatives

²⁰ In Shostakovich Studies 2, page 238-248 - Edited by Pauline Fairclough

denounced and arrested. Shostakovich may then have wanted to alter his composing strategy to give him the best reputation and avoid such torments.

Command or Choice?

It is my opinion that whether or not Shostakovich's life was in 'mortal danger', it did not stop him from subtly trying to put his point across through his music. For example in his 9th symphony, Russia had just won the war and so it is likely that Stalin would have expected a grand, celebratory symphony. However the melody in the 4th movement resembles a 'street whistler', and the orchestration is extremely understated which could almost be interpreted as Shostakovich laughing bitterly in the face of Stalin. This is the mystery of music and politics: the thoughts, feelings and interpretations within the music are all down to opinion, and so although Stalin had the ability to end Shostakovich's life, he could not prove in writing what Shostakovich was really writing about, and neither can anyone else. From my research I have found that Stalin had a vested interest in wanting composers to reflect Russia's 'glory' and if composers didn't use tools such as Russian folk tunes, or it was too 'noisy' then their music was named 'leftism' and 'against the culture of the people'. Stalin had the power to denounce, arrest and shoot citizens if he became 'suspicious' that they were not supporting his party. There are such contrasting views about the Pravda article it is hard to know what to believe. On one hand, the article is mere criticism which is difficult for most artists to receive. On the other hand, because of Stalin's power, Shostakovich may have considered that his career, and even life, was soon to be over. However, before Stalin's purges in 'The Great Terror', Shostakovich was never satisfied with his work and so may have been fearful of how it was received anyway.

There seems to be a lot of evidence from Wilson, Mikkonen and Khrennikov which suggest that composers were not physically harmed during Stalin's regime. None-the-less this doesn't dispute the fact that relatives and associates were being denounced, arrested and shot, which is implied by the BBC article, Litvinova, Volkov.

Was Stalin's power to kill enough to make Shostakovich alter the way he composed, or did he compose exactly to the intention that he meant? Was he writing out of command or choice? His thoughts cannot be fully represented, as sources are limited to scholarly opinions, letters to Stalin and opinions of friends and relatives. However, I have come to the conclusion that although Shostakovich is likely to have been extremely fearful about how his work was received, this didn't stop him from trying to portray his own bitterness and feelings about Stalin's inhumane purges. He was writing out of command whilst choosing to include his own emotion.

Words: 5000

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Index 1

Letters from Shostakovich to Stalin

Letter to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR com.[rade] Salin I.V.Iosif Vissarionovich!

A few days ago I moved with my family to a new apartment. The apartment turned out to be a very good one and it is very pleasant to live in. With all my heart I thank you for your concern about me. The main thing I very much want now is to justify – if only to a small degree – the attention you have shown me. I will apply all my strength towards that.

I wish you many years of health and energy for the good of our Motherland, our Great People.
Yours, D. Shostakovich 31st January 1947

Letter to Politburo member Georgii Malenkov, Stalin's second in command
Georgii Maksimilianovich!

On 15th August, General Secretary of the Union of Soviet Composers T. N. Khrennikov spoke with me. He invited me to join the Secretariat of the Union of Soviet Composers [SSK].

I am turning to you with the earnest request to take the following into account: I am prepared to perform any public service within the Union of Soviet Composers of which I am capable. However, to undertake the responsibilities of a Secretary of the SSK is beyond my capacity, since I have no aptitude whatsoever for any leadership duties. Moreover, performing the responsibilities of a Secretary of the SSK will require a great deal of my time and energy and thus will tear me away from creative work which – at least for the time being – I consider my main calling.

With respect to you,

D. D. Shostakovich 16th August 1951

17th March 1949

To Comrade I. V. Stalin

Dear Iosif Vissarionovich!

First of all please accept my most heartfelt gratitude for the conversation that took place yesterday. You supported me very much, since the forthcoming trip to America has been worrying me greatly. I cannot be proud of the confidence that has been placed in me. I will fulfil my duty. To speak on behalf of our Soviet people in defence of peace is a great honour for me.

My indisposition cannot serve as an impediment to the fulfilment of such a responsible mission.

Once again, I thank you for the trust and attention.

Yours, D. Shostakovich

Dear Iosif Vissarionovich!

Some burning issues in our musical life that also touch me personally compel me to disturb you. I beg you to receive me and hear me out. I am in pressing need of your help and advice.

Index 2

Pravda: Muddle Instead of Music

28 January 1936, Pravda

Muddle instead of Music

With the general cultural development of our country there grew also the necessity for good music. At no time and in no other place has the composer had a more appreciative audience. The people expect good songs, but also good instrumental works, and good operas.

Certain theatres are presenting to the new culturally mature Soviet public Shostakovich's opera Lady Macbeth as an innovation and achievement. Musical criticism, always ready to serve, has praised the opera to the skies, and given it resounding glory. The young composer, instead of hearing serious criticism, which could have helped him in his future work, hears only enthusiastic compliments.

From the first minute, the listener is shocked by deliberate dissonance, by a confused stream of sound. Snatches of melody, the beginnings of a musical phrase, are drowned, emerge again, and disappear in a grinding and squealing roar. To follow this "music" is most difficult; to remember it, impossible.

Thus it goes, practically throughout the entire opera. The singing on the stage is replaced by shrieks. If the composer chances to come upon the path of a clear and simple melody, he throws himself back into a wilderness of musical chaos - in places becoming

cacaphony. The expression which the listener expects is supplanted by wild rhythm. Passion is here supposed to be expressed by noise. All this is not due to lack of talent, or lack of ability to depict strong and simple emotions in music. Here is music turned deliberately inside out in order that nothing will be reminiscent of classical opera, or have anything in common with symphonic music or with simple and popular musical language accessible to all. This music is built on the basis of rejecting opera - the same basis on which "Leftist" Art rejects in the theatre simplicity, realism, clarity of image, and the unaffected spoken word - which carries into the theatre and into music the most negative features of "Meyerholdism" infinitely multiplied. Here we have "leftist" confusion instead of natural human music. The power of good music to infect the masses has been sacrificed to a petty-bourgeois, "formalist" attempt to create originality through cheap clowning. It is a game of clever ingenuity that may end very badly.

The danger of this trend to Soviet music is clear. Leftist distortion in opera stems from the same source as Leftist distortion in painting, poetry, teaching, and science. Petty-bourgeois "innovations" lead to a break with real art, real science and real literature. The composer of *Lady Macbeth* was forced to borrow from jazz its nervous, convulsive, and spasmodic music in order to lend "passion" to his characters. While our critics, including music critics, swear by the name of socialist realism, the stage serves us, in Shostakovich's creation, the coarsest kind of naturalism. He reveals the merchants and the people monotonously and bestially. The predatory merchant woman who scrambles into the possession of wealth through murder is pictured as some kind of "victim" of bourgeois society. Leskov's story has been given a significance which it does not possess.

And all this is coarse, primitive and vulgar. The music quacks, grunts, and growls, and suffocates itself in order to express the love scenes as naturalistically as possible. And "love" is smeared all over the opera in the most vulgar manner. The merchant's double bed occupies the the central position on the stage. On this bed all "problems" are solved. In the same coarse, naturalistic style is shown the death from poisoning and the flogging - both practically on stage.

The composer apparently never considered the problem of what the Soviet audience looks for and expects in music. As though deliberately, he scribbles down his music, confusing all the sounds in such a way that his music would reach only the effete "formalists" who had lost all their wholesome taste. He ignored the demand of Soviet culture that all coarseness and savagery be abolished from every corner of Soviet life. Some critics call the glorification of the merchants' lust a satire. But there is no question of satire here. The composer has tried, with all the musical and dramatic means at his command, to arouse the sympathy of the spectators for the coarse and vulgar inclinations and behavior of the merchant woman Katerina Ismailova.

Lady Macbeth is having great success with bourgeois audiences abroad. Is it not because the opera is non-political and confusing that they praise it? Is it not explained by the fact that it tickles the perverted taste of the bourgeois with its fidgety, neurotic music? Our theatres have expended a great deal of energy on giving Shostakovich's opera a thorough presentation. The actors have shown exceptional talent in dominating the noise, the screaming, and the roar of the orchestra. With their dramatic action, they have tried to reinforce the weakness of the melodic content. Unfortunately, this has served only to bring out the opera's vulgar features more vividly. The talented acting deserves gratitude, the wasted efforts - regret.