

active delivery system for state and party propaganda. The most chilling single instance of that enforcement was among the first: an editorial in *Pravda*, the official organ of the Soviet Communist Party, on 28 January 1936, denouncing an opera, *The Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, by Dmitry Dmitrievich Shostakovich (1906–75). At the age of twenty-nine, Shostakovich was already a world-famous composer and the outstanding Soviet creative artist of his generation. His opera portrays—and justifies!—the murderous revenge of an oppressed wife against her husband and father-in-law, and, later, against a rival for the love of her paramour. Its exceedingly violent music and its frank portrayal of carnal lust had made it a sensation the world over in the two years since its first performance, and its sudden suppression made headlines everywhere. In the official Soviet press, the editorial, titled “Muddle Instead of Music,” was always referred to afterwards as “the historic document,” and historic it certainly was: the earliest instance of a mortal threat (“this ... could end very badly”) directed against an individual creative artist by an omnipotent state. No one has ever been able to define exactly what it was about the opera that so offended the regime, other than the fact that Iosif Stalin (1879–1953), the Soviet dictator, had found the music disagreeable. (He had attended a performance; the composer had been alerted to expect a summons to Stalin’s box for congratulations, but Stalin left before the last intermission.) Most likely, an example was being made of the most eminent musician so as to demonstrate that no one’s reputation would offer protection against the exercise of totalitarian power. But from now on, Soviet music would be defined by a safe and tame stylistic conservatism (“classicism”) that stood in peculiar contrast to the revolutionary image of the regime. The authorship of the editorial remains a mystery. It was probably written by a cultural official at Stalin’s behest; the widespread assumption that the dictator wrote it himself is typical of the “conspiracy-theorizing” that official secrecy begets.

With the general growth of culture in our country there has also been a growth in the demand for good music. Nowhere else and never before have composers faced such grateful audiences. The masses await good songs, but also good instrumental works and good operas.

Several theaters have offered Shostakovich’s opera *The Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* to this new and culturally advanced Soviet public as both a novelty and a mark of achievement. Obliging music critics have praised the opera to the skies and created a resounding reputation for it. The young composer has heard only enthusiastic compliments, not the sort of practical and serious criticism that might have helped him in his future work.

From its very first minute listeners are deafened by the opera’s purposely graceless and jumbled stream of sounds. Little shreds of melody, little stabs at a musical phrase, sink, resurface and disappear once more in the rumbling, grating, screeching din. It is hard enough to follow this “music”; to remember it is impossible.

Thus it continues practically throughout the opera. On the stage singing is replaced by shouting. If the composer should happen by chance upon a simple and comprehensible melody, he immediately, as if alarmed at such a calamity, plunges right back into his musical uproar, which at times turns into a complete cacophony. The expressivity that a music lover demands is replaced by a wild rhythm. This musical racket is supposed to express passion.

СУМБУР ВМЕСТО МУЗЫКИ

Об опере «Ледяной Макбет Мценского уезда»

Вместе с общим культурным ростом в нашей стране выросла и потребность в хорошей музыке. Никогда и нигде композиторы не имели перед собой такой благодатной аудитории. Народные массы живут хороших песен, но также и хороших инструментальных произведений, хороших опер.

Некоторые театры как новинку, как достижение представляют новую, выросшую культурно советской публике оперу Шостаковича «Ледяной Макбет Мценского уезда». Услужливая музыкальная критика превозносит до небес оперу, создает ей громкую славу. Молодой композитор вместо деловой и серьезной критики, которая могла бы помочь ему в дальнейшей работе, выслушивает только восторженные комплименты.

Слушателя с первой же минуты ошарашивает в опере нарочито нестройный, сумбурный поток звуков. Обрывки мелодии, запятые музыкальной фразы то тут, то там вырываются, слова исчезают в грохоте, скрежете и визге. Следить за этой «музыкальной» трудно, запомнить ее невозможно.

Так в течение почти всей оперы. На сцене певие заменено криком. Если композитору случается попасть на дорожку простой и поющей мелодии, то он немедленно, словно испугавшись такой беды, бросится в дебри музыкального сумбура, места преобладающего в какафонии. Выразительность, которой требует слушатель, заменяется бешеным ритмом. Музыкальный шук должен выразить страсть.

Это все не от бедности композитора, не от его неумения в музыке выразить простые и сильные чувства. Это музыка, умышленно сделанная «широкоугольной» — так, чтобы ничего не было слышно. Это музыка оперную музыку, ничего не было общего с симфоническими звучаниями, с простой, общедоступной музыкальной речью. Это музыка, которая построена по

тому же принципу отрицания оперы, по какому левачское искусство вообще отрицает в театре простоту, реализм, понятность образа, естественное звучание слова. Это — перенесение в оперу, в музыку наиболее отрицательных черт «мейерхольдовщины» в умноженном виде. Это левачский сумбур вместо естественной, человеческой музыки. Способность хорошей музыки захватывать массы приносится в жертву мелкобуржуазным формалистическим потугам, претензиям создать оригинальность приемами дешевого оригинальничанья. Это игра в шумные вещи, которая может кончиться очень плохо.

Опасность такого направления в советской музыке ясна. Левачское уродство в опере растет на то же основание, что и левачское уродство в живописи, в поэзии, в педагогике, в науке. Мелкобуржуазное «новаторство» ведет к отрыву от подлинного искусства, от подлинной науки, от подлинной литературы.

Актору «Ледяной Макбет Мценского уезда» пришлось заклинать у лжла его невозможную, судорожную, припадочную музыку, чтобы придать «страсть» своим героям.

В то время как наша критика — в том числе и музыкальная — является явным социалистическим реализмом, сцена преисполнена нам в творении Шостаковича грубейший натурализм. Озвонотом, в звуковой обличии представлены все — и купцы и народ. Хищники-купцы, лорвавшаяся путем убийства к богатству и власти, представлена в виде злой-то «жертвы» буржуазного общества. Бытовой повести Дельцова даван смысл, дакого в ней нет.

И все это грубо, примитивно, вульгарно. Музыка крикает, улет, пылит, зады-

вается, чтобы как можно натуральнее изобразить любовные сцены И «любви» размалана во всей опере в самой вульгарной форме. Купеческая двуплательная кровать занимает центральное место в оформлении. В ней разрешаются все «проблемы». В таком же грубо-натуралистическом стиле показана смерть от отравления, сечение почти на сценой сцене.

Композитор, видимо, не поставил перед собой задачи прислушаться к тому, чего ждет, чего ищет в музыке советская аудитория. Он словно нарочно зашифровал свою музыку, перепутал все звучания в ней так, чтобы юшла его музыка только до последних вздохом вкус астетов-формалистов. Он прошел мимо требований советской культуры выгнать грубость и идиотизм из всех углов советского быта. Это воспевание купеческой похотливости некоторые критики называют сатирой. Ни о какой сатире здесь и речи не может быть. Всеми средствами и музыкальной и драматической выразительности автор старается привлечь симпатии публики к грубым и вульгарным стремлениям и поступкам купчихи Катерины Памайловой.

«Ледяной Макбет» имеет успех у буржуазной публики за границей. Не потому ли похваляется ее буржуазная публика, что опера эта сумбурна и абсолютно аморальна? Не потому ли, что она текочет впечатлительные вкусы буржуазной аудитории своей зергающей, крикливой, неврастенической музыкой?

Наши театры приложили немало труда, чтобы тщательно поставить оперу Шостаковича. Актеры обшарили значительный талант в преодолении шума, крика и скрежета оркестра. Драматической игрой они старались возместить междинное убожество оперы. К сожалению, от этого еще ярче выступили ее грубо-натуралистические черты. Талантливая игра заслуживает признательности, затраченные усилия — сожаления.

Pravda, 28 January 1936: the famous unsigned editorial, "Muddle Instead of Music," which nipped the operatic career of Dmitry Shostakovich in the bud by virtual decree of the Soviet Communist Party.

None of this is the result of any lack of talent in the composer, or of his inability to express simple and powerful feelings in music. This is music deliberately made topsyturvy so as never to recall classical operatic music, so as never to have anything in common with symphonic sonorities or with the plain language of music that can be understood by all. This is music constructed according to the same principle of rejecting opera as that by which "leftist" art rejects all simplicity, realism and intelligible symbols in the theater, all natural sound of words. This is a leftist muddle instead of natural human music. The ability of good music to seize the imagination of the masses is sacrificed to petty-bourgeois formalistic effects, the pretensions to originality by means of cheap eccentricity. This trifling with serious matters could end very badly.

The danger of such a tendency in Soviet music is clear. Left deformation in opera grows out of the same source as left deviation in painting, poetry, education or science.

Petty bourgeois “innovation” leads to a disengagement from real art, real science, or real literature.

The author of *The Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* has had to borrow from jazz its nervous, convulsive, hysterical idiom in order to lend “passion” to his characters.

At a time when our critics—musical ones included—are declaring their allegiance to Socialist Realism, our stage is offering us, in this creation by Shostakovich, the crudest naturalism. Everyone, merchants and the people alike, is presented in the same monotonously beastly guise. A rapacious merchant wife, who has by means of murder clawed her way to power and riches, is presented as some kind of “victim” of bourgeois society.

It is all so crude, primitive, vulgar. The music croaks and hoots and snorts and pants in order to represent love scenes as naturally as possible. And “love” in its most vulgar form is smeared all over the opera. A merchant double bed occupies center stage. On it all “problems” are solved. Death by poisoning and a flogging are portrayed in the same crudely naturalistic style.

The composer, it seems, has not set himself the task to inquire what our Soviet audience wants and seeks in music. It is as if he has deliberately coded his music, distorted it in such a way that it can appeal only to aesthetes and formalists who have lost all healthy taste. He has ignored the demands of Soviet culture to drive out crudity and disarray from all corners of Soviet life. Some critics have called this paean to merchant-class lasciviousness a satire. But there can be no talk of satire here. With all the means of musical and dramatic expression at his command the author tries to attract the public’s sympathy to Katerina Izmailova’s crude and vulgar desires and deeds.

The Lady Macbeth is popular with bourgeois audiences abroad. Is it not because the opera is muddled and absolutely apolitical that the bourgeois public praises it? Is it not because it titillates the depraved tastes of the bourgeois audience with its witching, clamorous, neurasthenic music?

Our theaters have spared no pains to give Shostakovich’s opera a worthy production. The actors have displayed considerable talent in overcoming the noise, screech and ruckus of the orchestra. They have endeavored to make up for the melodic poverty of the opera with dramatic intensity. Unfortunately, this has only made the crudely naturalistic features of the opera stand out with even greater clarity. Talented acting deserves recognition, but wasted efforts deserve commiseration.

“Sumbur vmesto muziki,” *Pravda*, 28 January 1936, trans. R. T., partially on the basis of the translation in Kurt London, *The Seven Soviet Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938), 72–74.

Shostakovich rehabilitated himself the next year—the darkest year of Soviet state terror, full of mass arrests and purges—with his Fifth Symphony (1937), advertised in the Soviet press as “a Soviet artist’s creative response to just criticism.” Until Stalin’s death enabled a measured liberalization of Soviet artistic policy (called “the Thaw”), Shostakovich was a kind of ambassador for Soviet music, sent on official visits abroad (most notably to the Communist-dominated Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace, held at New York’s Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in 1949). The high point of his world prestige came with his colossal, programmatic Seventh Symphony, composed in 1941–42 during the siege of Leningrad, his native city, and dedicated to its population. It quickly went around the world, just as *The Lady Macbeth* had done a decade earlier, but this time it was the object of feverish morale-building publicity as

part of the Allied war effort against the Fascist axis of Germany, Italy, and Japan. Its autograph score was microfilmed and flown, via Teheran and Cairo, to London, thence to New York, where it was given its American première by the NBC Symphony Orchestra under Arturo Toscanini (1867–1957), himself a principled exile from Mussolini's Italy, on 19 July 1942, in a performance that was broadcast live nationwide, and in "transcription," virtually worldwide. It was the very success of the work as a political expression that antagonized many music critics, who were zealous to defend the status of art, and modern art particularly, as "autonomous." That zeal is vividly illustrated by Virgil Thomson's exceedingly hostile review, which could easily compete in harshness with the *Pravda* review of *The Lady Macbeth*, albeit from a diametrically opposite perspective. The main issue in both reviews—on the surface, at least—is, ironically enough, the same: namely, "accessibility." But the surface, in both cases, was obviously just a façade.

Whether one is able to listen without mind-wandering to the Seventh Symphony of Dmitri Shostakovich probably depends on the rapidity of one's musical perceptions. It seems to have been written for the slow-witted, the not very musical and the distracted. In this respect it differs from nearly all those other symphonies in which abnormal length is part and parcel of the composer's concept. Beethoven's Ninth, Mahler's Ninth and Eighth, Bruckner's Seventh, and the great Berlioz "machines" are long because they could not have been made any shorter without eliminating something the author wanted in. Their matter is complex and cannot be expounded briefly.

The Shostakovich piece, on the other hand, is merely a stretching out of material that is in no way deep or difficult to understand. The stretching itself is not even a matter of real, though possibly unnecessary, development. It is for the most part straight repetition. The piece seems to be the length it is not because the substance of it would brook no briefer expression but because, for some reason not inherent in the material, the composer wished it that way. Of what that reason could possibly be I have only the vaguest notion. That the reason was clear to its author I have not the slightest doubt, however, because the piece all through bears the marks of complete assurance. It is no pent-up pouring out of personal feelings and still less an encyclopedic display of musical skill. It is as interminably straightforward and withal as limited in spiritual scope as a film like *The Great Ziegfeld* or *Gone with the Wind*. It could have said what it says in fifteen minutes, or it could have gone on for two hours more. The proportions of the work seem to this auditor, in short, wholly arbitrary.

They do not seem, nevertheless, accidental. Nothing seems accidental in the piece. The themes are clearly thought out and their doings are simplified with a master's hand. The harmonies, the contrapuntal web, the orchestration show no evidence of floundering or of experiment. If the music has no mystery and consequently no real freedom of thought, neither does it contain any obscurity or any evidence of personal frustration. It is as objective as an editorial, as self-assured as the news report of a public ceremony.

The Seventh Symphony has the same formal structure as the rest of its author's work. It is a series of production numbers, interspersed with neutral matter written chiefly in two-part counterpoint. There is a mechanized military march and the usual patriotic ending, neither of them quite as interesting or imaginative as it might be. And the rest of the episodes are even tamer. The pastorale and the Protestant chorale are competent routine stuff, no more; and the continuity counterpoint, though less static than usual, just sort of runs on as if some cinematic narrative were in progress that