

The University of Maine

DigitalCommons@UMaine

---

Honors College

---

Spring 5-2024

## Shostakovich, Soviet Cultural Policies, and the Fifth and Thirteenth Symphonies: A Contextual Evaluation

Nathanael Batson

University of Maine - Main, nathanael@ntjbatson.me

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors>



Part of the [Composition Commons](#), and the [Musicology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Batson, Nathanael, "Shostakovich, Soviet Cultural Policies, and the Fifth and Thirteenth Symphonies: A Contextual Evaluation" (2024). *Honors College*. 898.

<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors/898>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact [um.library.technical.services@maine.edu](mailto:um.library.technical.services@maine.edu).

SHOSTAKOVICH, SOVIET CULTURAL POLICIES, AND THE FIFTH AND  
THIRTEENTH SYMPHONIES: A CONTEXTUAL EVALUATION

by

Nathanael Tyler-James Batson

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
Music, Political Science

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2024

Advisory Committee:

Dr. Phillip Silver, Professor of Music, Advisor

Dr. Mark Brewer, Professor and Chair, Department of Political Science, Co-  
Advisor

Dr. Margaret Killinger, Professor in Honors

Dr. Beth Wiemann, Professor of Music

© Copyright 2024 Nathanael Batson

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

Dmitri Shostakovich is often regarded as one of the greatest symphonists of the mid-20th century, and with good reason. His music not only illustrates exceptional orchestration techniques and sounds but also contains some of the most emotionally powerful pieces of music in the concert repertoire. As a victim of Soviet persecution, both socially and musically, Shostakovich often spoke through his music. But there lies much debate over the validity of Shostakovich's position in the Soviet Union, for according to some scholars, 'there were no dissidents in Stalin's Russia.' This thesis does not serve to take a stance on the composer's memoirs, *Testimony*, but rather provides the necessary evidence to prove that Shostakovich was an individual who rejected the Party through a contextual evaluation of his Fifth and Thirteenth Symphonies. By describing the factors that impacted cultural policy reforms in Soviet Russia and examining the public responses to these works, this thesis exposes the flaws in selected critics of Shostakovich and proposes evidence for why their beliefs are wrong.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the assistance of my advisor, Dr. Phillip Silver. He greatly assisted me in choosing the main subject matter of the thesis, and with his knowledge and guidance, I was able to dive into the complex writings on Shostakovich. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Mark Brewer, Dr. Beth Wiemann, and Dr. Margaret Killinger, for all their support and guidance throughout my experience at the University of Maine.

I want to extend my gratitude to Martin Anderson, Allan Ho, Dmitry Feofanov, and Michael Mishra for their insight on how we can identify Shostakovich's position as an individual who lived in the horrendous conditions of Soviet Russia. Their assistance and guidance helped me formulate my conclusion on the most effective method to evaluate Dmitri Shostakovich as a composer and as an individual. I would also like to thank Philip Ross Bullock for granting permission for me to use their translation of *From Jewish Folk Poetry* [see Appendix B].

Lastly, I must thank my parents and all those who supported me in writing this thesis. Their encouragement and support helped me greatly, especially when I was under stress and struggled to formulate my thoughts.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: MUSIC FOR THE FEW, OR MUSIC FOR THE PEOPLE?.....	1
I. ABOUT THE COMPOSER, DMITRI DMITRIEVICH SHOSTAKOVICH .....	22
II. THE FIFTH SYMPHONY: RECEPTION.....	30
III. THE FIFTH SYMPHONY: CRITICISM .....	38
IV. THE THIRTEENTH SYMPHONY: RECEPTION .....	50
V. CONCLUSION: WHAT WAS SHOSTAKOVICH’S POSITION IN THE SOVIET UNION? .....	67
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	72
APPENDIX A: SHOSTAKOVICH AND SOVIET JEWRY: REMARKS FROM LAUREL FAY.....	75
APPENDIX B: FROM JEWISH FOLK POETRY OP. 79 NO. 3, 6, 7, AND 9.....	89
AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY .....	91

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Image depicting D.D. Shostakovich.....	22
Figure 2. The Fifth Symphony's original ending.....	40
Figure 3. The Fifth Symphony's ending rewritten.....	40
Figure 4. The repeated tonic in the Fifth's final movement.....	41
Figure 5. The first four notes used for the opening theme in Symphony no. 5. ....	47
Figure 6. The first four notes used in Rebirth.....	47
Figure 7. The Babi Yar Monument. ....	58

## INTRODUCTION: MUSIC FOR THE FEW, OR MUSIC FOR THE PEOPLE?

This introduction explains the enforcement of Soviet expectations for music and why it had a detrimental impact on those expected to follow Party orders. The section opens with a brief description of Andrei Zhdanov, for he had a significant influence on the 1948 reform of music. This is followed by a description of Soviet ideology and how it impacted the formulation of cultural policy expectations in the Soviet Union. It is important to become aware of the 1948 Conference as it paints a terrifying picture of what composers had to endure so that they could write music. It is also essential to understand what expectations composers had to follow, as it can help us better understand the messages behind their work.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. In the years that preceded the 1948 Conference, many of the ‘expectations’ were in response to complaints from Party members, musicians, and other individuals. One of the earliest letters of complaint came from a professional violinist in Odessa, M E. Gol’dshteyn, who complained about ‘incomprehensible music.’ The musician wrote:  
I regard myself as a well enough educated musician to understand the niceties of compositional technique; however, for all the strength of my musical perception, a series of works by our best composers remain incomprehensible to me. They sometimes create the impression that I am listening, not to music, but to a mathematical calculation, the purpose of which is to show how clever the composer is to combine different voices in works with definite themes, disregarding whether or not it sounds false or unpleasant—the author does not trouble over that.  
What must it be like for the listener who is not musically prepared? They indeed have to be forced to listen to such musical stunts, to be deprived of their own senses, their own artistic-musical perceptions. To such listeners they say that such and such a work is written by a master and they are required to simply believe it. . . . Among the creators of these inaccessible works I would like to name composers such as Prokof’yev, Shostakovich, Shebalin and such younger composers as follow these masters. [See Pauline Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses: Shaping Soviet Musical Identity Under Lenin and Stalin* (Yale University Press, 2016), Chapter 5.]

I find it odd that the violinist accuses composers like Shostakovich of making their work too ‘mathematical’ while insisting that their work sound more like the classics, such as



Andrei Zhdanov, born in Ekaterinoslav Governorate on 26 February 1896; died on 31 August 1948 in Moscow, was a Soviet Russian politician and influencing factor in creating the Cominform and so-called ‘Zhdanov Doctrine,’<sup>2</sup> which remained in effect until Stalin’s death in 1953. Throughout his life, Zhdanov held various positions within the Party but is best known for forging a Russian identity through his work on ideological cultural reforms.<sup>3</sup>

As a child, Andrei and his three sisters were schooled by their parents, Ekaterina Pavlovna Gorskaia and Aleksandr Alekseevich Zhdanov, which was in response to the tsarist regime. Ekaterina helped develop her children’s musical abilities during their education at home, whereby Andrei soon learned to play the piano and Russian accordion and began to sing in a choir. Andrei and his sisters received an education at their home until Aleksandr Zhdanov caught pneumonia and died from a heart attack in March 1909. Ekaterina moved the family to Tver and enrolled two of her daughters in the local girl’s gymnasium and enrolled Andrei in the local *realschule*.<sup>4</sup> Andrei quickly excelled academically and continued to do so throughout his four years at the school. Determined to be accepted by the other people at his school, Andrei turned to Marxist social

---

J.S. Bach. This is ironic because J.S. Bach frequently incorporated ‘puzzles’ and ‘math games’ into his work, which is best illustrated in *The Art of the Fugue*, whereby a mathematical analysis of the works reveal that the bar length of a given fugue is determined by the numbers of a Fibonacci series. [See Loïc Sylvestre and Marco Costa, “The Mathematical Architecture of Bach’s ‘The Art of Fugue,’” *Il Saggiatore Musicale* 17, no. 2 (2010): 179–80.]

2. Also known as ‘Zhdanovism’ or ‘*Zhdanovshchina*,’ meaning ‘The Zhdanov Thing.’

3. Kees Boterbloem, *The Life and Times of Andrei Zhdanov, 1896-1948* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 11, 342.

4. The *realschule* was a secondary education that was high-quality, but not as high quality as the gymnasium, which was often attended by children of the tsarist elite.

democracy values. More than eighty years after Andrei began his education at the *realschule*, Andrei's son suggested that the feeling of being second best influenced his father's resentment against elitism and growing hostility towards modernism.<sup>5</sup> Given his reaction toward elitism, it is no surprise that Zhdanov strongly rejected unfamiliar styles or mechanisms. It is my historical opinion that this likely influenced actions during the campaign on cultural reform for the arts, such as those in 1940 and 1946-1948.

In 1934, Andrei briefly supervised literary matters, whereby he helped enforce what history and philosophy would be taught and which textbooks schools could use, but he would be transferred to Leningrad for a new assignment, having little involvement with the arts until 1938. Shortly after Josef Stalin, Vyacheslav Molotov,<sup>6</sup> Anastas Mikoyan,<sup>7</sup> and Andrei Zhdanov attended a 1936 performance of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, an attack on the artistic freedom of Soviet composers began to emerge. The Stalinists were not only offended by the modernity of the opera, but also its possible effect on Soviet audience members. The 1934 Writers' Congress had already ordered that all literature follow a socialist realist form, but Stalin soon became obsessed with all forms of art by the mid-1930s. The emergence of new styles and forms of art was, according to him, a criticism of his rigorously ordered socialist society. Until 1938, Stalin designated Platon Kerzhentsev as his 'watchdog' to find art that criticized the Party.<sup>8</sup> Socialist realism typically had three criteria: 1) Народность [*narodnost*], meaning

---

5. Boterbloem, 11–14.

6. During this time, Molotov was serving as the Prime Minister of the Soviet Union.

7. During this time, Mikoyan was serving as the People's Industry Commissar of the Soviet Union.

8. Boterbloem, 115–16, 135, 211.

‘nationality’ or ‘for or of the people’; 2) идейность [*ideynost*], meaning something that possesses ideological content; and 3) Партийность [*partiynost*], meaning one who shows loyalty or spirit for the Party.<sup>9</sup>

In 1940, the Party turned its attention to the arts, starting the first of two major campaigns. The first campaign would last until the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, and the second campaign began in 1946 and lasted until 1948. The 1940 campaign was part of the long-term effort to create a culture to serve the new Soviet society and to engineer a new Soviet person. This resulted in artists being criticized for their creations rather than receiving comments that could further inspire them. Stalin and other high-ranking officials, such as Zhdanov, criticized the arts coming out of the Soviet Union for how they depicted Soviet reality. Individuals such as Anna Akhmatova, who refused to adjust her poetry to conform to socialist realist norms, are among those who protested these orders. Shortly after a new selection of her work was published in the summer of 1940, lower-level Party bureaucrats denounced her for having an apolitical stance. This opposition to the Party was seen as an attack against Zhdanov, who at the time acted as Stalin’s cultural pointman and Leningrad chief. Zhdanov described Akhmatova’s poetry as “fornication with prayer in honor of God.”<sup>10</sup> Most of the decrees discussed on the arts, literature, and film from 1940-1941 were shelved, but it would only be a rehearsal for the campaign of 1946-1948, for the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union soon took priority over cultural reforms in the country.<sup>11</sup>

---

9. Pauline Fairclough, “Was Soviet Music Middlebrow? Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony, Socialist Realism, and the Mass Listener in the 1930s,” *The Journal of Musicology* 35, no. 3 (2018): 353.

10. Boterbloem, *Life and Times of Andrei Zhdanov*, 211.

11. Boterbloem, 211–12.

During a meeting in August 1946, the Central Committee issued a resolution, “On the journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*,” which stood as the basic statement about the Party’s expectations of ‘good’ Soviet literature for four decades. The standards required writers to concern themselves with current themes, show loyalty to the Party and country, and show optimism in their works. The next decree was issued shortly thereafter, this time attacking the theater repertory. Films such as Sergei Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible, Part II*, were criticized because Tsar Ivan IV was portrayed as a morally dubious character who relied on his nasty secret police.<sup>12</sup> It is my own belief that Stalin suppressed the film because it resembled his mannerisms and behavior too closely.<sup>13</sup>

The Party’s paranoia of Western or alien practices would only increase in the following years. Zhdanov and Stalin soon found ‘proof’ confirming their belief in subversive Western conspiracies following the announcement of the Marshall Plan on 5 June 1947. The Marshall Plan, presented by U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall, pledged American support for European economic recovery with the condition that 1) U.S. monitors of the plan could have great freedom to maneuver in the recipient country and 2) the recipient country give the U.S. full disclosure of how they utilized the aid. This plan was unacceptable to the Soviet regime. In their view, such conditions violated their sovereignty and threatened their national security. Given the conditions of the plan, the Soviet Union declined to participate in the general conference for the Marshall Plan on 12 July.<sup>14</sup>

---

12. Boterbloem, 281.

13. Boterbloem, 282.

14. Boterbloem, 312. The Marshall Plan would be officially signed into law in April 1948.

Stalin and his followers soon began work on a Communist Information Bureau (Cominform), which aimed to develop a coordinating agency of foreign Communist Parties. During this development, Zhdanov was key in reaching out to the other foreign Communist Parties. Since May 1945, the Sovietization of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria had already been established, but until 1947, the different Communist Parties were free to chart their own course towards Communism. But the conclusion of the Cominform conference in 1947 essentially dictated that all the foreign Communist countries who wanted to maintain relations with the Soviet Union had to embrace the Soviet Communist values.<sup>15</sup>

On 22 September 1947, Zhdanov, Vyacheslav Molotov,<sup>16</sup> and their staff traveled to Szklarska Poremba in Poland, the secret location for the first meeting of the Cominform. Zhdanov delivered the keynote address at the first meeting, whereby he signaled a new line that depicted the irreversible division between two camps: the democratic and anti-imperialist camp and the imperialist-capitalist camp. The leading enemy of Communism was the United States, which aimed at ‘enslaving Western Europe and dominating the global market.’<sup>17</sup> The United States’ attempt to dominate the global

---

15. Boterbloem, 308–9.

16. During this time, Molotov was the Soviet Union’s Minister of Foreign Affairs.

17. The distinction between the two camps was never officially enacted as ‘the Zhdanov Doctrine,’ but the framework was often labeled *Zhdanovshchina*. Given its intent to divide the world into two camps, the ‘doctrine’ ruled out neutrality as an option. But with the emergence of NATO and the European Defense Community (EDC), the Soviet Union and other European Communist parties began to promote neutrality as a tool for dissuading states from joining the Western alliance. This concept of neutrality reached its peak following Stalin’s proposal to Germany in March 1952, whereby the dictator offered reunification at the price of neutralization. But as long as Zhdanov’s two-camp concept was in effect, the Soviet Union’s use of neutrality remained propagandistic. Following Stalin’s death, the Soviet Union developed multiple interpretations of neutrality. One such definition was a “means of changing the balance of power rather

market was, according to the Soviet Party, further proved by the enactment of the Truman Doctrine in 1947.<sup>18</sup>

During the first meeting of the Cominform, Zhdanov attacked the French Communists, claiming that their coalitions had outfoxed them because they supported the government's attempts to subvert their bourgeois colleagues. This accusation revealed an essential motive of the Soviet Union: the French Communists had failed to seek advice from the Soviet Communists, and as such, their voices were being suppressed. This essentially hinted that weaker Communist Parties had to defer to the Soviet Communist Party to increase their popularity. Zhdanov then advised other Western Communist Parties, such as the French and Italians, to follow a confrontational strategy to pose as an

---

than preserving it.” [See Wolfgang Mueller, “The USSR and Permanent Neutrality in the Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 4 (2016): 155–56.]

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Communist teachings distinguished between permanent neutrality—founded through international agreement, a national declaration recognized by other states—and ‘positive’ or ‘active’ neutrality—which was usually declared unilaterally and often associated with neutralism and nonalignment. The permanent neutral, therefore, was bound to “maintain neutrality forever, to avoid ever starting a war, and to refrain from conducting a policy that might lead to war.” The Soviet Union’s concept of ‘neutrality’ essentially dictated that unless foreign countries agreed to conform to the Soviet ideology, there was no room for neutrality. [See Mueller, 150–51.]

The Soviet’s concept of neutrality is directly related to the Marxism-Leninism attitude toward neutrality, which they viewed as being shaped by class struggle. This theory claimed that until the final victory of socialism was achieved, no neutrality could exist. Lenin believed that a war between two imperialistic powers could lead to a socialist state of neutrality, but neutrality was unjustifiable if the cause was ‘revolutionary.’ [See Mueller, 150.] We could, therefore, infer that the Soviet Union believed that, following the Second World War, there was no general right to war, and as such, those seeking neutrality should follow Leninism in distinguishing between just and unjust wars. [See Mueller, 150.]

18. Boterbloem, *Life and Times of Andrei Zhdanov*, 312. Although the likelihood is high that the Cominform was created in reaction to the Truman Doctrine, which pledged American support for countries that opposed authoritarian threats, there is no concrete evidence supporting this possibility. [See Boterbloem, 495.]

opposition party. Following this advice, the French and Italian Communist Parties did not gain popularity but received more backlash. These Communist Parties, along with the youth, women's organizations, and recreation clubs, became separate forces that were hostile to the rest of society.<sup>19</sup>

The increasingly authoritative policies enacted by the Soviet Union would soon spread to music in 1948 during the Conference of Musicians of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party. This event was one of the most startling episodes in Soviet art policy, for it established unreasonable standards for the composers to follow. It is worth reemphasizing that the Central Committee had already established the expectations for literature, theater, the cinema, and philosophy, whereby Stalin believed the writer must be the “engineer of human souls.”<sup>20</sup> Essentially, literature in post-war Russia was expected to inspire the readers to acquire and develop a party consciousness and a Soviet consciousness, as well as the virtues seen in characters of modern Soviet fiction. In other words, literature in the Soviet Union taught one to love thy country, to be a good Communist, to love Stalin, to hate the American Warmongers, and to despise anything foreign that is not distinctly pro-Soviet.<sup>21</sup>

The reform of music was much more startling than the reform of literature, the theater, and the cinema, for it knocked down idols whom the Party and government had previously worshiped for years. Some of these individuals included the Big Four (Dmitri Shostakovich, Sergei Prokofiev, Aram Khachaturian, and Nikolai Miaskovsky). Only four

---

19. Boterbloem, 313.

20. Alexander Werth, *Musical Uproar in Moscow* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1949), 12.

21. Werth, 12.

years prior, in 1944, *Bolshevik*,<sup>22</sup> a major newspaper for the Central Committee, had proclaimed Shostakovich's Symphony no. 7 in C Major, op. 60, *Leningrad*, to be the work of a genius of the first magnitude. Later, another major newspaper, *Culture and Life*, expressed disappointment over Shostakovich's Symphony no. 9 in E♭ Major, op. 70, but still referred to him as "the composer of immense talent, of whom our Soviet country is so justly proud."<sup>23</sup>

But in January 1948, Andrei Zhdanov was tasked with announcing that all the praise given to the Big Four had been a "dreadful mistake, a terrible racket, and that the great composers of Soviet symphonic music were little more than a bunch of artistic spivs [slang to describe artists who were perceived as being disconnected from the realities of Soviet society and overly concerned with their own individualistic desires], un-Soviet and even anti-Soviet in their activities, 'anti-people,' formalist, divorced from reality, and, in short, unwanted by the peoples of the Soviet Union."<sup>24</sup> The Central Committee accused composers like Prokofiev and Miaskovsky of atonalism, but they had hardly composed in such a style. They also claimed that their works lacked any melody.<sup>25</sup> This does raise a few questions: was the Party truly sincere in their praise of Shostakovich and other composers before 1948? If so, did Zhdanov's leadership during the 1948 Conference impact the opinion of the Party? If the composers were praised, was this a genuine response, or a duplicitous one? It is difficult to answer these questions. I believe many of

---

22. In this context, *Bolshevik* describes the Soviet newspaper; not the Party.

23. Werth, 17–18. The reason for the Party's disappointment with Shostakovich's Ninth Symphony was likely influenced by its humorous tone.

24. Werth, 19, 27. It is worth noting that Zhdanov was no musical expert. Although he had some musical experience, his popularity and ranks within the Party likely influenced his task to oversee the reform of music in the Soviet Union.

25. Werth, 30.



those living in the West would be quick to deny the possibility that the Party praised certain musical works, but I think the Party truly did praise certain composers—but this ‘praise’ was likely not sincere, but rather a mechanism to exploit the individual’s talent for the benefit of the Party. The Conference led by Zhdanov, therefore, likely significantly impacted the perception and views of the Party.

This all started after the premiere of Vano Muradelyi’s opera *The Great Fellowship*. The opera, according to the Party, presented Russians as foes of the Ossetians and Georgians during the October Revolution. The Party claimed that this was historically false, for the obstacle preventing friendship between the peoples was the Ingushetians and Chechens [who had been deported following the end of the Second World War]. By depicting hostility between different Soviet nations, the opera’s plotline undermined the official myth of the ‘Great Friendship’ between all ethnic groups in the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> Critics also claimed that the music was poor and unexpressive, and without a single melody that one could remember. The critiques attacked the opera’s clashy chords, loud noises, and absence of any Russian dance music. The Central Committee considered the opera formalist and anti-people. Formalist music, according to the Central Committee before the conclusion of the 1948 Conference, was described as:

The rejection of the basic principles of classical music, and the preaching of atonalism dissonance and disharmony, which are alleged to be signs of “progress” and “innovation”; the rejection of so important a thing as melody; and a striving after chaotic and neuropathic discords and accumulations of sounds.<sup>27</sup>

Atonalism is music that does not adhere to a system of key or musical mode. In this context, neuropathic likely implies a sense of pain or discomfort. The Party also accused

---

26. Boterbloem, *Life and Times of Andrei Zhdanov*, 318.

27. Werth, *Musical Uproar in Moscow*, 28–29.

formalist composers of ignoring the artistic tastes of the Soviet people, claiming that such individuals were content to ‘live in a narrow circle of specialists and gourmets’ and ‘cater to the degenerate tastes of a handful of estheticizing individualists.’<sup>28</sup> Today, it is easy to balk at such remarks; must music satisfy multitudes to be acceptable?

Throughout this controversy over which music was ‘right’ and which music was ‘wrong,’ it is evident that Zhdanov did not consider the musical perception of the listener or the musical culture of a work.<sup>29</sup> Zhdanov not only failed to accept the possibility that the Soviet people might enjoy ‘formalist’ works or those works that sound different from the classics but also placed unfair criteria on whether a work met the Party’s expectations. He essentially dictated himself what the people liked and did not like. I believe this harmed and restricted not only the musical creativity of a composer who lived in the Soviet Union but also the musical taste of the citizens. If you are raised in a society where music sounds harmonically and structurally similar, one cannot expand their musical perception or taste. I believe that Shostakovich’s Fourth Symphony, discussed later in the second chapter of this thesis, gives us an idea of who Shostakovich could have become had the Party not enforced such policies for music. Among his works can be found some of the most emotionally powerful pieces of music that reveal the internal emotions inflicted upon him as a victim living under Soviet oppression.<sup>30</sup> It is also worth noting that, for over a century and a half, compositional uniqueness was an entrenched means of

---

28. Werth, 29.

29. Werth, 30–31.

30. One can also hear ‘formalist’ styles in his later works, especially those after Stalin’s death.

artistic expression by European composers. This further proves that the Party did not care about ‘the classics’ but rather what they perceived as being a threat to their country.

When the first meeting of the Conference began in January 1948, Zhdanov opened with an attack against Vano Muradelyi’s opera *The Great Fellowship*, noting that it contained not a single melody that one can remember and a lack of harmony. He then insisted that the Conference assess the reasons for the failure of Muradelyi’s opera. He compared the reception of *The Great Fellowship* to Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, noting that Muradelyi did not lack talent as a composer but produced an opera that the average listener could not tolerate.<sup>31</sup>

Aram Khachaturian, a composer and the Vice-Chair of the Organizational Committee of the Composer’s Union noted that some artists may divert themselves from modern styles of music because their music will be appreciated someday in the future. In response, Zhdanov stated: “I should call it [those who depart from traditional styles] extreme individualism when a composer decides that he is the highest and sole judge of his work.”<sup>32</sup> While the composer is not the sole judge of their work—anyone who listens to the work can be a judge—this does not prevent the composer from writing something not immediately praised by the public.

On the second day of the Conference, Alexander Goldenweiser, a professor at Moscow Conservatory, noted that Western music breaks all the rules of musical law and that clashy notes were problematic to harmony. Goldenweiser even associated the clatter of false chords with the ideology of Fascism.<sup>33</sup> The topic of ‘clashy notes’ was a common

---

31. Werth, 47–49.

32. Werth, 59.

33. Werth, 63.

concern discussed during the conference. While we all have our musical preferences, who dictates what chords are acceptable? Must we use composers such as Beethoven to gain inspiration to write music for the people? According to the Party, yes. But, relying on the model of previous composers can also lead to epigonism,<sup>34</sup> another artistic style that the Party frowned upon. Given that the Soviet Union desired to become a superpower and dominating figure in the world, why did they force composers to sound like the classics rather than establish a completely separate style of music?

The composer Lev Knipper said the following in response to an attack against formalist works:

Music, like literature, has many genres,. . . Each genre has its technical peculiarities; you can't start standardizing everything. Some here like songs, others quartets, others symphonies. Some like gay songs, others like sad songs. Some like the serene music of Rimsky's *Snow Maiden*, others prefer the harmoniously-complex later works like *Kaschei* or *The Golden Cockerel*, One cannot throw the late Scriabin out of Russian music.<sup>35</sup>

This is one of the few comments that clearly appears to attack the Party for dictating what music is acceptable. But the statement raises one important point: once you start standardizing the arts, it prevents one from expressing creativity and new ideas.

Mstislav Keldysh, a professor, critic, and historian, noted the following:

Our art must express the Communist ideology, and must not borrow anything even from what is best in foreign countries. The point is that to-day even the most advanced artists of the capitalist countries are in a state of confusion, and the only way out of this confusion is Communism . . . Soviet music must, first and foremost, base itself on folk-song.<sup>36</sup>

---

34. Describes the artistic or literary imitation of a work from a previous generation that denotes a lack of creativity or originality.

35. Werth, 73.

36. Werth, 77.

What is, then, the Communist ideology? And what is meant by ‘Communism’ and ‘ideology?’ Unlike Communism as we know it, meaning the collective ownership of property and organization of labor for the common advantage of all people, Russian Communism was the latest embodiment of the Russian idea. The Russian idea came from the Russian soul, in which a history of social inequity instilled a desire for radical reform. This, in turn, was thought to allow one to see the properties of ideology in its clearest form.<sup>37</sup> In its simplest terms, ideology refers to different, unique, fully formed ways of thought. Liberalism, conservatism, populism, and socialism are all unique in their empirical ways. One can compare conservatism with socialism because both are fully formed and have established their values.<sup>38</sup> Soviet ideology, however, was a discrete conglomerate of officially sanctioned ideas and pronouncements and described the dense field of practices sustained by institutional provisions.<sup>39</sup> Music, as it applies to the ‘Communist ideology,’ had to embody the victory over inequality endured by the Russian people but also not embody foreign ideas. We can, therefore, understand Keldysh’s remark as follows: all art must express Soviet Russian life in its purest form, and such art must not display signs of alien practices. Essentially, Soviet ideology did not explain the concept of thought, but rather the existence of organized beliefs, attitudes, and opinions, and Soviet Communism did not describe the collective ownership of property but rather the need for the Russian people to seek radical reform.

---

37. Peter Petrov, *What was Soviet Ideology? A Theoretical Inquiry* (Lexington Books: Lanham, 2024), 18–19.

38. Petrov, 36.

39. Petrov, 60–61.

On the third and final day of the conference, Zhdanov made one of his most unsettling statements about the Party's control over musical creativity. Zhdanov stated the following:

There is a struggle going on, though an outwardly hidden struggle, between two schools. One stands for the healthy and progressive things in Soviet music, for the full recognition of the importance of our classical heritage, particularly of the Russian classical school; it stands for a high ideological level, truthfulness and realism, and a deep organic connection with the People and its folk songs—the whole combined with a high degree of craftsmanship. The other school stands for formalism, which is alien to Soviet art, a renunciation of classical traditions. It is anti-People, and prefers to cater for the individualistic experiences of a clique of aesthetes. . . . A work of genius in music is not a work that only a handful of aesthetic gourmets can appreciate. Genius is measured by its depth, and content, by its craftsmanship, by the number of people it can inspire, and by the number of people who accept it. Not all that is accessible is a work of genius, but a real work of genius is one that is accessible, and the more accessible it is to the widest masses of the people, the more clearly is it a work of genius.<sup>40</sup>

The description of these two 'schools' is almost an exact replica of the description of the two camps provided by Zhdanov during the 1947 Cominform Conference. But unlike the Cominform meeting, which addressed the need to merge different foreign Communist Parties, the 1948 Resolution on Music dealt with musical reform. As noted in the passage, the first school [the 'democratic' and 'anti-imperialist'] wrote music accessible to the masses.<sup>41</sup> This translates to music that uses a simple structure and does not use odd

---

40. Werth, *Musical Uproar in Moscow*, 80, 82.

41. Although the Party used 'the masses' to describe what the greatest majority of people wanted, it is my own belief that 'the masses' actually translates to 'what the Party wants.' One only needs to look at the events that took place during the Conference of Musicians of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party in 1948 as proof for why 'the masses' actually means 'what the Party wants.' If 'masses' truly meant 'the people,' the Party would not have a conference to discuss what music was fit for the Soviet citizens. There is a major difference between the musical taste of an individual and the musical taste enforced on an individual. One is the true representation of one's musical preference, while the other is shoved down one's throat as being the one and only acceptable genre of music.

harmonies, sounds, or special effects. The formalist school [the imperialist-capitalist] used odd sounds and harmonies that may be unfamiliar to the listener. A work of genius under the Soviet Union, therefore, was determined by how many people applauded it and whether one understood its form. How could one find genius if the Party controlled and determined its standard? The answer is simple: they could not. In my opinion, true genius comes from new ideas that may not appear elsewhere or through the accumulation of knowledge that is then taught to others. By restricting the flow of ideas, you are quashing new thought advances and, ultimately, the true concept of ‘genius.’

Throughout the three days of the conference, many composers were also called out for their ‘formalistic’ tendencies. Viktor Bely, a composer and member of the Organizational Committee of the Composer’s Union, noted that Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony was ‘uneven’ but acknowledged it played a crucial role during the Great War and represented a symbol of the Soviet Union’s fight against Fascism.<sup>42</sup> Tikhon Khrennikov, a composer and the General Secretary of the Union of Soviet Composers, strongly disliked Prokofiev’s music, claiming it sounded too much like Western music. Khrennikov failed to acknowledge that Prokofiev composed music as early as 1910 that was acceptable to the Party.<sup>43</sup> What is even more problematical to Khrennikov is the fact that the Party expended considerable energy to convince Prokofiev to return to Russia after he had lived abroad for many years.

---

42. Werth, 71. It is ironic that, although the Seventh was written during the siege of Leningrad in 1941, the Symphony was not inspired from the event. The Party, however, associated the Symphony with the Soviet Union’s victory over the Nazi siege of Leningrad in 1941.

43. Werth, 93–94.

What, then, did the Central Committee accomplish in these three days? I believe that one can summarize the Conference with the following points:

- 1) Defining formalism ( a musical style that should be condemned). The official Soviet definition of formalism was described as follows: “‘Formalism’ is, in fact, an insufficiently wholehearted attitude towards Soviet Communism. It is no longer an aesthetic, but a political concept. . . . Formalism is usually considered to denote a lack of ideas, a lack of content, a complete concentration on form . . . with no reference to reality.”<sup>44</sup>
- 2) Noting that, in addition to formalism, styles such as epigonism, individualism,<sup>45</sup> modernism,<sup>46</sup> and naturalism<sup>47</sup> must be avoided.
- 3) Soviet music must 1) incorporate simple melodies that do not utilize ‘clashy’ or ‘odd’ chords; 2) melodies should be inspired by traditional Russian folk songs or the ‘classics’; and 3) the arts must express the Communist ideology.
- 4) Music must not contain Western influences or be anti-Communist and anti-Soviet.
- 5) The people cannot make their own decisions of musical perception; the Party must decide for them.
- 6) A work of genius is easily accessible to the listener. Accessible, in this context, means easily understood.

---

44. Werth, 87.

45. The act of placing one’s desires for art above those of the Party and the Soviet Union.

46. Art that rejects traditional styles and emphasizes new techniques.

47. the role of environmental factors in forming human character.



This is only a short list of the major factors influencing the enforcement of music in the Soviet Union, but I believe it represents a comprehensive summary of the Party's expectations.

How could composers and artists alike live in such a society where their creativity depended on the approval of the Party? Some individuals left Soviet Russia after the 1917 Revolution, but many others remained there for the remainder of their lives. Igor Stravinsky left in 1914 before the Revolution, hoping for better economic and social conditions. Some of those who fled after the 1917 Revolution included Sergey Rachmaninov, who fled in 1917, Sergei Prokofiev, who fled in 1918, and Leonid Sabaneyev, who fled in 1926. Sergei Prokofiev's situation is unique; he was one of the few individuals permitted to return after fleeing the country. Before his return, Sergei Prokofiev was still highly regarded in the country and was therefore asked constantly to come back. He would return to Soviet Russia in 1936, only to be trapped in the Soviet States after his foreign passport was revoked in 1938.<sup>48</sup>

Interestingly, Vladimir Lenin did not favor discarding past culture at the start of the 1917 Revolution, but rather the need to respect such art to improve it. But as the Revolution progressed, the arts became more and more politicized, whereby artists were soon expected to show their patriotism toward Soviet Russia in their creations. The reason that the Soviet Union wanted to uphold artistic styles used by the classics was that it provided evidence that the Revolution was intellectually respectable and was the natural consequence of the most progressive and democratic European values.<sup>49</sup> Although

---

48. Elena Dubinets, *Russian composers abroad: How they left, stayed, returned* (Indiana University Press, 2021), 172–73.

49. Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, Introduction.

their ‘belief’ is more of an excuse for the 1917 Revolution, it helps one understand why the classics were highly regarded. Given that, in the eyes of Lenin, the Revolution respected the intelligence of past European cultures, one can understand why maintaining their styles was so important.

Two questions must be further answered: 1) What could composers do to promote the ‘Russian ideology?’ and 2) Besides having a hatred of anything Western, why did the Soviet Union reject new musical forms? To answer the former, one could denote belonging to their country through symbols that affirm nationality to a given country. This was best done through the use of folk melodies and religious chants. Because the folk melodies and religious chants were often recognizable, they demonstrated the composer’s intention to identify themselves with their country.<sup>50</sup> To further answer the latter question about why the Soviet Union rejected new musical forms, the art historian and sociologist Arnold Hauser wrote the following:

In Soviet Russia [art] is regarded wholly as a means to an end. This utilitarianism is, of course, conditioned above all by the need to place all available means in the service of communist reconstruction and to exterminate the aestheticism of bourgeois culture, which, with its ‘*l’art pour l’art*,’ its contemplative and quietistic attitude to life, implies the greatest possible danger for the social revolution. It is the awareness of this danger that makes it impossible for the architects of communist cultural policy to do justice to the artistic developments of the last hundred years, and it is the denial of this development which makes their views on art so old-fashioned.<sup>51</sup>

Given the above description, it is clear that there are at least three factors that influenced the Soviets’ extremism toward the arts: 1) the need for all art to promote socialist realism; 2) the need for all art to promote the Communist ideology; and 3) the denial of anything

---

50. Dubinets, *Russian composers abroad*, 39.

51. Boterbloem, *Life and Times of Andrei Zhdanov*, 260.

Western, innovative, or foreign, for it will damage the social revolution. These reasons, although extreme, help us better understand the mindset of those who imposed such cultural policies. Along with these factors, the cultural campaigns saw more ‘success’ once the Party played on the fears of other people. From 1946 to 1948, the Second World War was still fresh in people’s minds, and the fear that another war would break out resulted in them turning to Stalin’s ‘wisdom’ to maintain a unified front.<sup>52</sup> This further illustrates the intimidation tactics employed by the Soviet Union and how the Party scared many of its victims into submission.

Why, then, did the Party reject new musical forms? The answer can be inferred from a quote given by Lenin regarding Beethoven’s Piano Sonata no. 23 in F Minor, op. 57, *Appassionata*:

I know of nothing better than the *Appassionata* and could listen to it every day. What astonishing, superhuman music! It always makes me proud, perhaps with a childish naiveté, to think that people can work such miracles! . . . But I can’t listen to music very often, it affects my nerves. I want to say sweet, silly things, and pat the little heads of people who, living in a filthy hell, can create such beauty. These days, one can’t pat anyone on the head nowadays, they might bite your hand off. Hence, you have to beat people’s little heads, beat mercilessly, although ideally we are against doing any violence to people. Hm — what a devilishly difficult job!<sup>53</sup>

This remark reveals at least two important elements about Lenin and the 1917

Revolution:

- 1) He had a strong love for Beethoven and the arts as a whole. This illustrates that even a ‘fierce’ leader like Lenin showed a deep passion for the arts and was able to credit those who produced great work.

---

52. Boterbloem, 283.

53. Maxim Gorky, “Nicolai Lenin the Man,” trans. Martin Fahlgren, Lenin Eulogy, 1924, [https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorky-maxim/1924/lenin-the\\_man.html](https://www.marxists.org/archive/gorky-maxim/1924/lenin-the_man.html).

2) Music made him ‘soft’ and ‘forget’ his mission to lead a revolution. The second part of the quotation noted above illustrates that Lenin wanted to credit those who produced great work in a country that was crumbling, such as Soviet Russia, but acknowledged he could not do such a thing, for the citizens were frustrated with the living conditions, and as such, he needed to focus his attention on paving the path for a better society.

These two elements further reveal another overarching theme in the Soviet Union’s leadership: those in charge had a vision for the country, albeit not the best one, and distanced themselves away from things that might inhibit their ability to lead the Revolution. Lenin expressed a great appreciation for Beethoven’s *Appassionata* Sonata but acknowledged that he could not listen to music too often, for it made him want to say ‘sweet, silly things,’ which would ultimately divert him from focusing on his initial task to lead the Revolution.

I.  
ABOUT THE COMPOSER,  
DMITRI DMITRIEVICH SHOSTAKOVICH



Figure 1. Image depicting D.D. Shostakovich. Mahler Foundation, *Dimitri Shostakovich*, <https://mahlerfoundation.org/mahler/contemporaries/dimitri-shostakovich/>.

Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich (born in St. Petersburg on 25 September 1906; died in Moscow on 9 August 1975) is often regarded as one of the greatest symphonists of the mid-20th century. His various works throughout his lifetime demonstrate his musical gift and tell a story about the world under an oppressive regime. Despite the political intervention and conflicting expectations of the Soviet Union, Shostakovich was able to develop a musical language of emotional power that illustrated how Soviet Russia impacted his own life as well as the lives of others around him.

Unlike the vast majority of musical geniuses that preceded him, Shostakovich displayed little noticeable talent or interest in music during the first eight years of his life. His mother and father, Sofia Vasilyevna and Dmitry Boleslavovich, loved singing and playing music but would not discover the young Shostakovich's gift until 1915.<sup>54</sup> The young Shostakovich enjoyed listening to music, such as the music played by his mother and father and the opera by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, but had to be persuaded by his mother to take piano lessons when he turned nine.<sup>55</sup> But one event changed everything for Shostakovich. He enjoyed hearing his sister and her friends play an arrangement of *Galop*, written by Jean Louis Gobbaerts [who went under the pseudonym 'Streabbog.'] *Galop* has a comical sound, and Shostakovich loved it. Beginning in the summer of 1915, his mother taught him how to play the piece by teaching him the keys in the left and right hand. He would then go on to learn more pieces by Streabbog, and soon, his mother taught him how to read music. Shostakovich quickly improved and discovered that he had perfect pitch and could play simple songs by Mozart and Haydn.<sup>56</sup>

During this time, Shostakovich also began to try composing. He enrolled at Ignatij Gliasser's private music school in 1915, where he received lessons from Ignatij's wife, Olga Fedorovna. In 1916, Shostakovich began to study under the direction of Ignatij,<sup>57</sup> where he would begin to compose short piano pieces, few of which have

---

54. Sofia Moshevich, *Dmitri Shostakovich, Pianist* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 6.

55. Solomon Volkov, *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dimitri Shostakovich*, trans. Antonin W. Bouis (New York: Harper Perennial, 1979), 18.

56. Moshevich, *Dmitri Shostakovich, Pianist*, 6–7.

57. Volkov, *Testimony*, 18.

survived. Under the instruction of Ignatiy Gliasser, Shostakovich learned pieces such as Beethoven's Piano Sonata no. 5 in C Minor, op. 10, Beethoven's Piano Concerto no. 3 in C Minor, op. 37, and in 1917 at the age of 10-11, performed all the preludes and fugues in Bach's *Das wohltemperierte Clavier* [The Well-Tempered Clavier].<sup>58</sup> It was not certain if Shostakovich would become a musician, as his family planned for him to become an engineer. Although Shostakovich excelled in all areas of studies, music began to take up more and more of his time.<sup>59</sup>

Because Ignatiy Gliasser showed little interest in his pupils' compositions, Shostakovich wanted to leave the school. His mother was against his decision, but Shostakovich had already made up his mind, eventually leading to him taking preparatory lessons from his mother's former instructor, Alexandra Rozanova, before starting his studies at the Petrograd Conservatory.<sup>60</sup> His private lessons with Rozanova greatly differed from that of Gliasser. Unlike Ignatiy Gliasser, who showed no interest in his students' original works and would often openly show anger, Rozanova showed extensive interest in Shostakovich's compositions and remained very patient during their lessons. Upon entrance to the Conservatory in 1919 at the young age of 13, Shostakovich studied composition under the direction of Maximilian Steinberg, the son-in-law of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and attended music history classes taught by Alexander Ossovsky. In 1924, Shostakovich studied conducting with Nicolai Malko, violin with Victor Valter, and chamber music with Alexander Glazunov.<sup>61</sup> This, in turn, shows Shostakovich's

---

58. Moshevich, *Dmitri Shostakovich, Pianist*, 8, 10.

59. Volkov, *Testimony*, 18.

60. Volkov, 18–19.

61. Moshevich, *Dmitri Shostakovich, Pianist*, 11–12, 15.

determination to improve his musical gift despite not receiving compliments from his former instructor, Ignatiy Gliasser.

During his second year at the Petrograd Conservatory, Shostakovich received piano lessons from Leonid Nikolayev, where he soon tackled such works as Beethoven's Piano Sonata no. 29 in B $\flat$  Major, op. 106, *Hammerklavier*, which he performed in the spring of 1922. Nikolayev also encouraged Shostakovich to explore the latest works of Hindemith, Bartók, and Krenek. Earlier in 1922, on 24 February, Dmitri's father suddenly died of pneumonia at age forty-six, leaving his wife and three teenage children. His sudden death resulted in Sofia and her eldest daughter, Maria, working as accompanists and private piano teachers to make ends meet.<sup>62</sup>

In the spring of 1923, the result of emotional and physical stress, along with malnutrition, took its toll on Dmitri Shostakovich. The young musician developed Tuberculosis of the bronchial and lymph glands, which soon led to him requiring an operation. While still feeling discomfort and wearing bandages around his swollen neck, he took his spring examination at the Conservatory and decided to take his final piano examinations in June of the same year. The Petrograd Conservatory piano final examinations consisted of two concerts: a solo recital where one played pieces by various composers written in different styles, and the other a concerto piece. Shostakovich's recital featured J.S. Bach's *Prelude and Fugue* in F $\sharp$  Minor, Beethoven's Piano Sonata no. 21 in C Major, op. 53, *Waldstein*, Mozart's Variations in C Major, op. 265, Chopin's Ballade no. 3 in A $\flat$  Major, op. 47, Schumann's Humoresque in B $\flat$  Major, op. 20, and

---

62. Moshevich, 19, 23–24.



Liszt's *Venezia e Napoli* [*Venice and Naples*], op. 159. For his concerto recital, Shostakovich performed Schumann's Piano Concerto in A Minor, op. 54. This made Dmitri Shostakovich a graduate of the Petrograd Conservatory a few months before he turned seventeen.<sup>63</sup>

In 1929, the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM), an organization formed in 1923 to establish a new culture of music that promoted the working class, had significant influence over what music was considered 'acceptable.' This would not last long, as, in 1932, Stalin replaced the RAPM with the Union of Soviet Composers. The Union of Soviet Composers supposedly had a centrist outlook on musical form and was fairly tolerant in its policy, but its additional function as an instrument of party control became apparent with the enforcement of the doctrine of socialist realism following the First Writers' Congress in 1934. (See pages 3-4 for the description of this concept). Unsurprisingly, those who advocated for Soviet principles under the doctrine of socialist realism failed to clarify the implications for music other than specifying that the music should have a heroic or noble tone and resemble the 'classics,' which included composers such as Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and Tchaikovsky.<sup>64</sup>

Following Stalin's unleashing of mass purges (The Great Terror) in 1934, where various writers and musicians were deported and killed for not conforming to the expectations of the Soviet system, Shostakovich, being one of the top Soviet Russian composers at the time, became a target for criticism. Two days after Stalin and the group

---

63. Moshevich, 29.

64. Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, Introduction.

of high-ranking officials attended the 28 January production of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, an unsigned article entitled *Muddle instead of music: On the Opera Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk* was published in the Soviet magazine *Pravda*. Although the entry was unsigned, Stalin likely influenced its publication, given that *Pravda* had published an article the previous day that Stalin signed, whereby he referred to ‘muddle.’<sup>65</sup> *Muddle instead of music: On the Opera Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* criticized Shostakovich for not using natural, human music in his opera and warned him of the consequences if he failed to fix his compositional style. A portion of the article reads:

From the first minute of the opera, the listener is dumbfounded by a deliberately dissident, confused flow of sounds. Fragments of melody, the beginnings of a musical phrase, sink down, breaks loose, and again vanish in the din, grinding, and screeching. To follow this ‘music’ is hard, and to remember it is impossible. [. . .] And all of it is crude, primitive, vulgar . . . The music quacks, moans, pants and chokes in order to render the love scenes as naturally as possible. And ‘love’ is smeared all over the opera in the most vulgar form.<sup>66</sup>

The dangers of the harsh reaction to his opera led to Shostakovich contemplating suicide as ‘a way out.’ During this time, Shostakovich remembered conversations he had with his friend, playwright Mikhail Mikhailov Zoshchenko, where he told him, “When a man is sick, his feelings are the feelings of a child. That’s the lowest level of his psyche, and a child fears danger much more than death. Suicide is a hurried escape from danger. It is the act of a child who has been scared by life.”<sup>67</sup> According to Shostakovich’s memoirs, remembering these comments is one example of what helped him greatly during this

---

65. Volkov, *Testimony*, 57, 161.

66. Allan B. Ho and Dmitry Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered* (London: Toccata Press, 1998), 221–22.

67. Volkov, *Testimony*, 58.

period. Following the remarks responding to the 1936 performance of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, Shostakovich began to develop a formula that could attempt to balance his creative conscience with requirements handed down by the government. His solution consisted of continuing to moderate his style to conform to ‘acceptable’ lyrical and heroic intonations while at the same time devising an interplay of textual and intertextual meanings.

After the death of Stalin in 1953, and until the accession of Leonid Brezhnev in 1964, the term ‘Thaw’ was used to characterize the period of Soviet Russian history under the power of Nikita Khrushchev (7 September 1953-14 October 1964). The term ‘Thaw’ was coined from the 1954 novel by Ilya Ehrenburg, *The Thaw*, which reflects on the period of liberalization after the death of Stalin in 1953.<sup>68</sup> During this period of Russian history, extreme social and cultural oppression seen under Stalin’s reign was gradually reduced, which was made apparent upon events such as the restoration of friendly relations with the West in 1955, Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress in February 1956, the Central Committee’s adoption of the resolution ‘On rectifying errors of 1948 decisions’ on 28 May 1958, the premiere of Shostakovich’s Symphony no. 4 on 30 December 1961, and the reintroduction of Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (which was renamed *Katerina Izmailova*) on 8 January 1963.<sup>69</sup>

---

68. Marina Frolova-Walker and Jonathan Walker, *Music and Soviet Power, 1917-1932* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017), 352.

69. Derek C. Hulme, *Dmitri Shostakovich Catalogue: The First Hundred Years and Beyond*, 4th ed. (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2010), xxv–xxvii. Both his Fourth Symphony and opera were highly praised, particularly the former work.

Shostakovich, however, faced pressure in 1960 to join the Communist Party and promote propaganda, where he was tasked with reading speeches that other people wrote and was forced to agree that his name could be published in articles and letters he did not author.<sup>70</sup> Shostakovich's last major 'clash' with the government occurred in response to the performance of his Symphony no. 13 in B♭ Minor, op. 113, which premiered on 18 December 1962. The first movement of this symphony is discussed more in the respected section, but the Soviet government did not want the piece released because it condemns not only the Nazi massacre at Babi Yar in 1941 but also the Soviet system of government that condoned antisemitism.

---

70. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 181, 398, 408. Shostakovich became a full member of the Party in October 1961.

## II. THE FIFTH SYMPHONY: RECEPTION

The following section discusses the reception of Shostakovich's Symphony no. 5 in D Minor, op. 47, from three different performances: 1) the premiere in Leningrad on 21 November 1937; 2) the American premiere by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) Symphony in New York on 9 April 1938; and 3) the Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO) premiere on 20 January 1939.<sup>71</sup> The section begins with a brief description of the Fourth Symphony, as it significantly impacts the reception and criticism of the Fifth Symphony.

Shostakovich's Symphony no. 4 was completed in 1936 but would not debut until 30 December 1961. There are multiple speculations behind this decision: Shostakovich called it 'a failure' and said it would need further changes before it could be performed.<sup>72</sup> Others speculated that the orchestra musicians and conductor refused to perform a formalist piece of music and that the pressure from the authorities to write music that conformed to socialist realism resulted in the work's suppression.<sup>73</sup> I believe Shostakovich suppressed the Fourth because it did not conform to these guidelines, which would have put his life in danger if premiered. Given the *Lady Macbeth* affair, Shostakovich was walking on thin ice with Stalin and the Soviet system, so pulling the Symphony is not proof that he submitted to Soviet ideals.

---

71. Terry Wait Klefstad, "The Reception in America of Dmitri Shostakovich, 1928-1946," (Doctoral thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2003), 46, 153.

72. Ian MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich*, read by Noah Siegel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), BARD, 16:40:47.

73. Solomon Volkov, *Shostakovich and Stalin: The Extraordinary Relationship and the Brutal Dictator* (New York: Knopf, 2004), Chapter III.

It is worth noting that Shostakovich began work on the Fourth Symphony before the publication of the *Pravda* article attacking his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. When writing his Fourth, Shostakovich gained inspiration from multiple sources, including a leitmotif<sup>74</sup> from his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* and works by composers such as Gustav Mahler and Igor Stravinsky. The third and final movement of the Fourth (which Shostakovich likely wrote after the article condemning his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*) closely resembles Mahler's *Die zwei blauen Augen von meinem Schatz* [The two blue eyes of my love], which is taken from the song cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* [Songs of a Wayfarer].<sup>75</sup> The song's opening line is *Nun hab' ich ewig Leid und Gramen!* [sorrow and grief are now with me forever!] and is likely an expression of his emotions after reading the article attacking his opera. Shostakovich quotes from two pieces by Stravinsky in the final movement of the Fourth, specifically *Oedipus Rex* and *The Firebird*. The quote from *Oedipus Rex* parallels the Soviet Union and the plague-ridden city from Greek mythology. The quote from *The Firebird* is taken from a triumphant scene in the ballet after the death of Kashchei the Immortal, an evil figure depicted in multiple Russian fairy tales and folklore. Shostakovich's music can, therefore, be thought of as a message of rejoicing when Stalin dies.<sup>76</sup> If we accept this musical quotation, it further proves Shostakovich's political position.

---

74. A musical term referring to a short, recurring musical phrase associated with a specific person, place, or idea. In this case, the leitmotif heard in the first movement of Shostakovich's Fourth Symphony was taken from the police march in *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*.

75. A group of individually complete songs that share a common theme, accompanying narrative, or text authored by one writer.

76. Volkov, *Shostakovich and Stalin*, Chapter III.

Given the dangers that Shostakovich would have faced if the Fourth Symphony premiered in 1936, he thought it would be in his best interest to submit for approval a seemingly more conciliatory work, the Fifth Symphony. Before the Fifth Symphony could be performed publicly in Soviet Russia, it first needed to receive approval from the Party currently active in Leningrad. These ‘judges’ consisted of twelve or so individuals who were tasked with telling Shostakovich how to write music. Given that Shostakovich developed a method for disguising his hatred for the Party through secret messages or patterns within his music, the Fifth Symphony successfully presented itself as joyous and optimistic. It satisfied the Party but also expressed the political climate for those under oppression.<sup>77</sup> Given the explanation of the criteria for socialist realism, I suppose one could think of the Party reception of the Fifth as follows: 1) The Fifth Symphony, particularly the final movement, followed a similar structure used by well-known composers, specifically Ludwig van Beethoven. The music was therefore perceived as being ‘for the masses.’ 2) As I will discuss in the following pages, the Fifth Symphony delivers an important message that can take multiple interpretations. For the Party and those supporting the Party, it was Shostakovich’s apology; for those oppressed by the Party, it was Shostakovich’s attack against the Party. 3) Given the last point, the Symphony followed the basic structure of ‘the classics’ and thought to be Shostakovich’s loyalty to the Party. But as I will discuss in the next section, I do not think this represents ‘loyalty’ to the Party.

Upon its premiere in Leningrad on 21 November 1937, the Fifth Symphony received high praise from the Soviet audience. It is recorded that the standing ovation

---

77. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 167.

lasted over an hour upon the final note of the fourth movement.<sup>78</sup> As noted in *Testimony*, “The Fifth Symphony from the very beginning was interpreted by Leningraders as a work about the Great Terror [. . . even if, at the premiere, it] was wrapped by the author and his friends in ‘protective’ words to blunt its impact.”<sup>79</sup> These ‘protective’ words reference not only the subtitle coined by a Russian journalist, “A Soviet Artist’s Creative Reply to a Just Criticism,”<sup>80</sup> but also the hidden messages embedded throughout the symphony. These hidden messages are explained further in the next section. Another Soviet listener noted that the opening to the final movement sounded like ‘the iron tread of a monstrous power trampling man,’ while Alexander Fadeyev, an early Soviet listener of the Fifth, wrote the following in his diary: “The end [of the Fifth] does not sound like an outcome, but like a punishment or revenge of someone.”<sup>81</sup> These receptions share at least three commonalities: 1) all commentators are victims of Soviet oppression or are familiar with the oppression endured by people living in Soviet Russia; 2) all note that the symphony sounded dark and ominous; and 3) all note that the finale is not triumphant or rejoicing. Given the recounts of people impacted by the Soviet system, assuming the Fifth Symphony had a deeper message is not unreasonable.

Unsurprisingly, the ‘triumphant’ interpretation was popular amongst Soviet officials. The ‘triumphant’ conclusion was thought to be a well-designed tool for promoting state-approved Soviet propaganda messages and, therefore, thought to be a sign that Shostakovich ‘changed’ his ways. However, a deeper look into this

---

78. Ho and Feofanov, 165.

79. Ho and Feofanov, 165.

80. Ho and Feofanov, 44.

81. Ho and Feofanov, 165.



interpretation reveals how others perceived this conclusion. Soviet victims of oppression and American musicologists detected a hint of irony and descent in the final bars of the fourth movement, which is thought to imply a sense of forced triumph or tragedy.

The American premiere of the Fifth Symphony marks an interesting turning point in Shostakovich's reception in America. With the American premiere of his First Symphony in November 1928, Shostakovich's reputation as a 'Soviet composer' had not yet been established. The First Symphony was considered a promising student work and evidence of real talent, and critics based their reviews on the work's musical characteristics and Shostakovich's skills as a composer.<sup>82</sup> When the Fifth Symphony premiered, many critics found it weak, blaming Shostakovich's lack of originality and blandness on his submission to socialist realism.<sup>83</sup> While I agree that Shostakovich's Fifth marks a noticeable change in style, I do not think this is evidence of his position. As noted by Terry Klefstad, two factors likely impacted the American reception of the Fifth Symphony. First, the American premiere performance was broadcast over the radio and received less critical attention than an in-person concert. A small studio audience was present, but critics did not review the broadcast as widely as other American premiers of Shostakovich symphonies. Second, program notes that discussed the Lady Macbeth affair and the composer's political situation at length accompanied the BSO premiere on 20 January 1939. Although the program notes did not use the term 'socialist realism,' it was clear that the issue was Shostakovich's obligation to compose for the people rather than for educated members of the musical community.<sup>84</sup>

---

82. Klefstad, "Reception in America of Shostakovich," 309.

83. Klefstad, 151.

84. Klefstad, 153.

The program notes accompanying the BSO premiere on 20 January 1939 make note of three points that likely impacted the American reception of Shostakovich:

- 1) It claims that Shostakovich made it his direct concern to make his music reflect the needs and ideology of Soviet Russia. While Shostakovich's music certainly reflects the climate of Soviet Russia, I do not believe it represents the country's ideology. By ideology, I am referring to the Party. Given the tension between America and the Soviet Union during this period, many people thought it unwise to praise a composer favored among Soviet officials.
- 2) It discusses the *Lady Macbeth* affair, noting the article in *Pravda* that attacked Shostakovich and other composers for being 'formalists.'
- 3) It notes that, despite the Leningrad Philharmonic accepting his Fourth Symphony for performance in December 1936, Shostakovich pulled the work because he was not satisfied that he had met the requirements of the new aesthetic alignment.<sup>85</sup>

These three factors likely significantly impacted the reception of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony in America. First, it makes it clear that, according to Burk, the composer wanted to make it his mission to reflect the needs of the masses, or in other words, the Party. To someone unfamiliar with Shostakovich as a composer, this might imply his submission to socialist realism. But to those familiar with the composer, he did not simply write music for the masses but for those suffering under the regime. Second, Burk makes it clear that there was no official ban on Shostakovich's Fourth Symphony, which implies he pulled it because he wanted to obey the aesthetic outline set by the Party. The

---

85. John N. Burk, "Boston Symphony Orchestra concert program, Subscription Series, Season 58 (1938-1939), Week 13, seq. 9," January 20, 1939, <http://collections.bso.org/digital/collection/PROG/id/147805/rec/1>.

next section further discusses how this remark completely ignores the consequence of ignoring Party orders.

Another major factor that likely impacted the American reception of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony was the fact that both his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, as well as his Fifth and Seventh Symphonies, were attached to Soviet politics through publicity during a period when the Soviet Union was viewed as an enemy rather than an ally during the Cold War years. This, in turn, shows that the reputation of Shostakovich as a composer was heavily influenced by Americans viewing him as a composer for the Party. This made Shostakovich's position problematic for early American music critics, as his submission to governmental control meant submission to an anti-experimental and conformist aesthetic that limited his potential as a composer. With the critical reception of Shostakovich's Fifth, Americans viewed him as a changed composer with an extra-musical political ideology.<sup>86</sup>

Despite its mixed reviews upon its earliest American premiers, critics began to gain a greater appreciation for the Fifth Symphony after subsequent performances. A greater understanding of the Symphony and removing it from a political context helped improve the reception of the work, but Shostakovich's reputation as a Soviet composer who submitted to the orders of his government was already established. Many American music critics still debate whether the Fifth and subsequent works by Shostakovich represent music written for the Party or the people.<sup>87</sup> The symphony would not achieve

---

86. Klefstad, "Reception in America of Shostakovich," 309–13.

87. Klefstad, 314.

global popularity until Stalin died in 1953, but its popularity spiked in Britain upon the publication of Shostakovich's memoirs in 1979.<sup>88</sup>

Why does one critic support one interpretation over the other? According to Walker and Walker, the listener's political ideology is the reason.<sup>89</sup> It makes sense when considering this fact; those who are Soviet sympathizers or unfamiliar with Shostakovich's musical language would see the 'message' as triumphant. For those who are victims of Soviet control or aware of Shostakovich's musical language, the message can either imply tragedy or a forceful triumph.

---

88. Fairclough, "Was Soviet Music Middlebrow?," 336.

89. Marina Frolova-Walker and Jonathan Walker, *Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 77.

### III. THE FIFTH SYMPHONY: CRITICISM

The following section discusses Shostakovich's Symphony no. 5, specifically the final movement, '*Allegro non troppo*,'<sup>90</sup> as it arguably provokes some of the most critiques of any other music in the concert repertoire. These critiques range from judging the symphony's form, style, and structure, to judging the symphony's intended message and the validity of Shostakovich's recounts of the final bars to the fourth movement, as noted in *Testimony*. This section addresses flaws in many of the critiques of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, specifically those raised by Dyneley Hussey, Richard Taruskin, L.A. Sloper, Moses Smith, and Eric Roseberry, and proposes evidence that suggests Shostakovich embedded a hidden message into the final bars of the fourth movement. After all, quoting Gustav Mahler, "Music is not in the notes but beyond them."<sup>91</sup>

In *Testimony*, Shostakovich reflects on an interpretation of the Fifth Symphony by the conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky, who believed that Shostakovich wanted to write an 'exultant' finale for his Fifth but could not manage it. Shostakovich responded to this reflection by saying:

. . . I never thought about any exultant finales, for what exultation could there be? I think that it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat, as in *Boris Godunov*. 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.' What kind of apotheosis is that? You have to be a complete oaf not to hear that.<sup>92</sup>

---

90. A musical tempo indicating that a piece or passage is to be played fast, but not too much.

91. MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich*.

92. Volkov, *Testimony*, 82, 235.

This forced rejoicing can be further seen in the final bars of the fourth movement. The last bars of the piece are played in a triumphant-sounding D Major rather than D Minor. In other words, it sounds ‘happy’ or ‘hopeful’ rather than ‘dark’ and ‘ominous.’ But Shostakovich supposedly claimed that the final bars are not rejoicingful. We can see that Shostakovich added at least four noteworthy elements to the music: 1) he makes the subdominant of the chord minor rather than major; 2) he decides to use a dominant seventh chord on the tonic, D, rather than a major seventh chord; 3) the piece concludes with repeated major chords on the tonic; and 4) the upper woodwinds and strings play a series of 252 high As in a row, which spans over 31 measures. The three figures below show the following: 1) the ‘forced rejoicing/triumph’ theme written in its original form (with a minor subdominant and dominant seventh); 2) the ‘forced rejoicing/triumph’ theme rewritten with a major subdominant chord and major seventh chord; and 3) the repeated tonic chords heard at the very end of the Fifth Symphony.<sup>93</sup>

---

93. To hear a comparison showing the difference between the final movement played with a minor subdominant and dominant seventh chord, and a rewritten version played with a major subdominant and major seventh chord, see San Francisco Symphony, “Keeping Score | Dmitri Shostakovich: Symphony No. 5 (Full Documentary and Concert),” YouTube, March 19, 2020, 48:28-50:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3RbWSfhlp4>.

The image shows the original ending of the Fifth Symphony, consisting of three systems of musical notation. Each system includes a vocal line (top), a piano accompaniment (middle), and a bass line (bottom). The piano accompaniment features chords labeled Gm and D7. The bass line has a steady rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

Figure 2. The Fifth Symphony's original ending. Take note of the minor subdominant (Gm) and dominant seventh (D7).

The image shows the rewritten ending of the Fifth Symphony, consisting of three systems of musical notation. Each system includes a vocal line (top), a piano accompaniment (middle), and a bass line (bottom). The piano accompaniment features chords labeled G and Dmaj7. The bass line has a steady rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

Figure 3. The Fifth Symphony's ending rewritten. The new version features a major subdominant chord (G) and major seventh chord (Dmaj7).

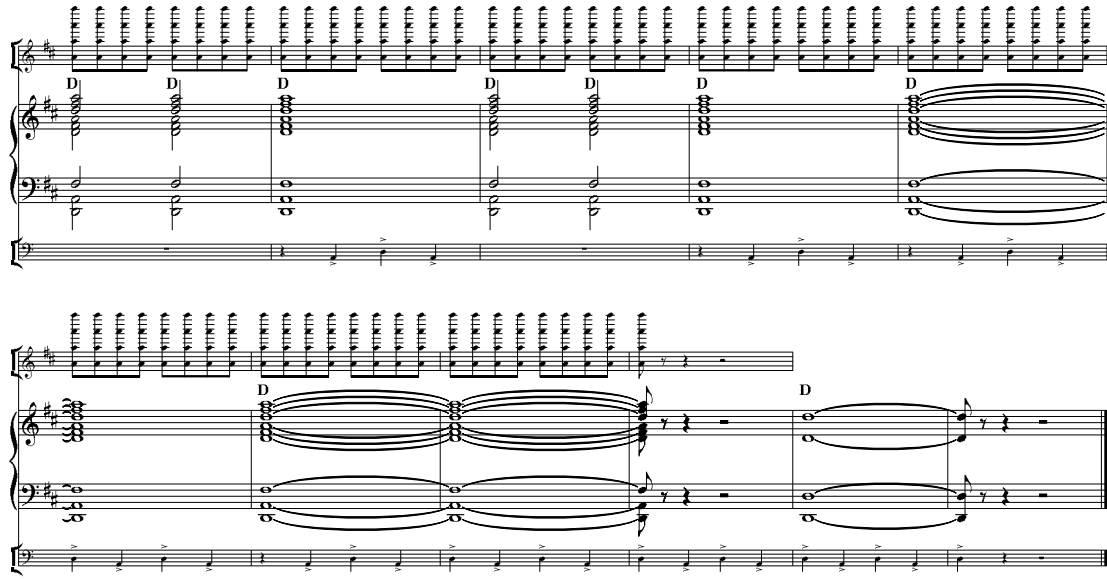


Figure 4. The repeated tonic in the Fifth's final movement.

Considering these factors, is it unreasonable to infer that the sudden minor chords imply irony or tension and that the repeated tonic chords and high As imply suffering?

The first critique is featured in “The ‘Old’ Shostakovich’: Reception in the British Press.” According to Pauline Fairclough, the British critic Dyneley Hussey said the following about the Fifth:

In his fifth Symphony . . . I see no signs that the lessons have been learned. . . The result is a dull and pretentious work. And I would respectfully ask the young men who cannot bear the reiterated tonic and dominant with which Beethoven approaches his cadences, how they can patiently endure the ending of the symphony with its reiterated scream of the tonic for what seemed at least five minutes.<sup>94</sup>

This critique fails to acknowledge the time in which Shostakovich lived and the possibility that Shostakovich purposefully wrote in code, whereby he added ‘reiterated screams of the tonic’ because he was implying a sense of unease. Multiple sources, including *Testimony*,<sup>95</sup>

---

94. Pauline Fairclough, “The ‘Old Shostakovich’: Reception in the British Press,” *Music & Letters* 88, no. 2 (2007): 272.

95. See Volkov, *Testimony*, 82.



*The New Shostakovich*,<sup>96</sup> and *Shostakovich Reconsidered*,<sup>97</sup> support the idea that Shostakovich used secret messages or codes within his music. If understood, one could better appreciate the repeated tonic that, according to Hussey, ‘seems to go on for at least five minutes.’

Other critiques regarding the Fifth Symphony do not question the composer’s ability to write music but rather the fact that this symphony marks a significant change in style compared to past works, which, according to some, proves Shostakovich’s submission to socialist realism. One such critique comes from L.A. Sloper, who writes:

What a pity that a composer of Shostakovich’s talent could not have been brought up in a country where freedom is granted to artists. Both his talent and the effect of governmental restriction on it are evident in his Fifth Symphony. . . . In this score pages of great beauty stand side by side with pages of rubbish. It is as if Shostakovich had written for a time under the guidance of his own imagination, then suddenly had remembered that if he was going to write at all, or at least if his music was to be heard at all, he must celebrate the virtues of communism; whereupon he put in a cheap military march, or a bombastic coda in the manner of Liszt. And he had his reward in the form of official approbation.<sup>98</sup>

This reflection makes at least two observations: 1) the fact that Shostakovich lived in a period when music censorship was evident, and 2) that the Fifth marks a noticeable change in style compared to previous symphonies written by Shostakovich. The first point is certainly valid; Shostakovich lived during a period where speech, including music, was heavily censored to promote the ideals of the Soviet government. But does this make his work ‘rubbish’? I think not. Yes, the composer’s compositional style changed significantly compared to his earlier symphonies, but I do not believe this is proof of Shostakovich’s submission to socialist realism. Given the climate of the Soviet Union under Josef Stalin,

---

96. See MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich*.

97. See Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 173.

98. Klefstad, “Reception in America of Shostakovich,” 166.

it is my historical interpretation that Shostakovich was given two options: 1) Fix any compositional styles to conform to socialist realism, and 2) Do not change and suffer the consequences. Considering these facts, one cannot claim that Shostakovich was a Soviet Party henchman or supporter. Additionally, can music not be both ‘for the masses’ or ‘for the Party’ and music that speaks to those under the oppression of the regime? Given that many sources support the idea that Shostakovich embedded secret messages into his music, yes it can.

Another music critic, Moses Smith, although refusing to connect the final movement with politics, believes it represents predictable and false music.<sup>99</sup> The author refers to the repetitive themes throughout the symphony and its ‘triumphant’ sounding conclusion. To dispute the belief that the final movement sounds ‘predictable,’ it is worth remembering when Shostakovich wrote this symphony. The years 1936-1937 were extremely difficult for Shostakovich. After he was called out in *Pravda* as ‘an enemy of the people,’ his life was unquestionably in grave danger. Therefore, It is not unreasonable to infer that the ‘predictability’ and ‘blandness’ of the symphony could represent his life and or the Soviet system.

Eric Roseberry, in 1993, questioned the ‘forced rejoicing’ theme in the final bars to the Fifth, whereby he writes: “After all, Shostakovich’s original renouncements on this symphony at the time of its premier made no mention of such a hidden agenda.”<sup>100</sup> This critique, as with many critiques addressing Shostakovich’s works, contains two major flaws: 1) the failure to acknowledge, comprehend, and remember the socioeconomic and

---

99. Klefstad, 166–67.

100. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 166.

political climate in which Shostakovich lived. During this period of history, especially before the Thaw, noncompliance to Soviet orders would be paid with one's life; and 2) the possibility that Shostakovich embedded hidden messages that implied a sense of torture, tragedy, or sadness.<sup>101</sup>

Richard Taruskin, a vocal critic of Shostakovich, believes that musical instruments cannot sensibly impersonate or represent emotions or historical events. In one response to another critic who believed that certain instruments featured in Shostakovich symphonies represented specific things (e.g., the Soviet civil servants are represented by the oboe and clarinet, the Red Army men by the brass), Taruskin writes, "I don't imagine he would have felt any differently were the civil servants represented by the flute and the horn."<sup>102</sup> In writing about the Fifth, Mr. Taruskin makes the following remarks:

If we claim to find defiant ridicule in the Fifth Symphony, we necessarily adjudge its composer, at this point in his career, to have been a 'dissident'. That characterization has got to be rejected as a self-gratifying anachronism. There were no dissidents in Stalin's Russia. There were old opponents, to be sure, but by late 1937 they were all dead or behind bars. . . . Public descent or even principal criticism were simply unknown. Dissidence began under Khrushchev.<sup>103</sup>

Mr. Taruskin's rejection that Shostakovich could not be a dissident before Khrushchev is preposterous. A Dissident, in this context, describes one who rejected the values or policy of the Party. Taruskin's claims contain multiple flaws: 1) what proof can Mr. Taruskin provide that proves what Shostakovich was thinking in his mind? Under the oppressive regime of the Soviet system, many people did not openly reveal their views but rather hid

---

101. Ho and Feofanov, 167.

102. Ho and Feofanov, 678.

103. Ho and Feofanov, 656.

their emotions through other mediums like music or poetry. 2) Taruskin, being a strict critic of Shostakovich's memoir, *Testimony*, fiercely opposes all interpretations of Shostakovich with any reference to the composer's memoirs.<sup>104</sup> This claim alone cannot prove that Shostakovich did not embed secret messages into his Fifth Symphony. Multiple other sources, such as recounts from family and friends, support the idea that Shostakovich was not a supporter of the Party. 3) The claim that dissidence began under Khrushchev is utterly false. *The Black Book*, a project beginning in 1942 to document the experience of Soviet Jews through thousands of pages of letters, diaries, and witness testimony submitted from across the country, was dissident in the eyes of the Soviet government.<sup>105</sup> Although many of those Soviet citizens who participated in the project faced horrible fates, this is one such example that 'dissidence' indeed existed under Stalin.

The above critiques of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony share at least two commonalities: 1) all critics judge the form and structure of the symphony, and 2) all critics question the ability of Shostakovich to imbed such a message of 'forced triumph' or 'forced rejoicing. This, in turn, tells us that many of Shostakovich's critics base their judgments on the following:

1. A bystander's impression of international politics:

In this view, critics such as Hussey, Roseberry, and Taruskin attempt to dismiss any possibility that Shostakovich could have embedded a hidden message into his music, either because he did not explicitly tell the listener his intentions or because,

---

104. Ho and Feofanov, 650.

105. Jeremy Eichler, *Time's Echo: The Second World War, the Holocaust, and the Music of Remembrance* (New York: Knopf, 2023), 240.

according to Taruskin, ‘there were no dissidents in Stalin’s Russia.’ These critics fail to recall the consequences for those who openly expressed their views or intentions. All three critics fail to consider the possibility that Shostakovich purposefully added repeated chords to emphasize a point or message.

2. Using Shostakovich’s artistic choices as proof of his submission to socialist realism  
This judgment raised by L.A. Sloper and Moses Smith, as with those raised by Hussey, Roseberry, and Taruskin, fails to look at the bigger picture: life in Soviet Russia was nowhere near life in the United States. First of all, while Shostakovich did withhold his Fourth Symphony for twenty-five years due to it not meeting the expectations of socialist realism, Shostakovich had his reasons. Given the *Lady Macbeth* affair, the composer was already on thin ice, and another demonstration that he was unwilling to accept the Soviet system’s ideals would be his death sentence. But Shostakovich was not the only person in danger if the Fourth Symphony premiered in 1936; the article published in *Pravda* insinuated that all performers would live to regret the day if another piece that went against the Party’s expectations was performed.<sup>106</sup> Second, and more importantly, Shostakovich delivered a symphony that not only spoke to the Soviet system but also to the people being oppressed by the system. With these points in mind, one can see that many of the critiques of the Fifth Symphony are politically based and do not consider other contextual factors.

To further show the power of the Fifth Symphony, it is worth mentioning *Four Romances on Poems by Pushkin*, op. 46 no. 1, which remained unperformed until

---

106. Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 122.

1940.<sup>107</sup> Although the Fifth Symphony premiered before the *Four Romances on Poems by Pushkin*, it is important to see the similarities between the two works because it can further prove that the Fifth Symphony contains a hidden message. The first of the four poems, which is entitled “Rebirth,” reads:

A barbarian artist, with [a] sleepy brush  
Blackens over a picture of genius[.]  
And his lawless drawing  
Scribbles meaninglessly upon it.

But with the years, the alien paints  
Flake off like old scales;  
The creation of genius appears before us  
In its former beauty.

Thus do delusions fall away  
From my worn-out soul,  
And there spring up within it  
Visions of original, pure days.<sup>108</sup>

The first four notes heard in the poem are the same ones heard in the Fifth Symphony’s opening theme.



Figure 5. The first four notes used for the opening theme in Symphony no. 5.

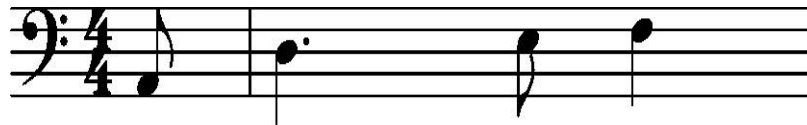


Figure 6. The first four notes used in “Rebirth.”

---

107. Wilson, 127.

108. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 669.

Given that the first four notes to the Fifth Symphony's final movement are also the poem's first four notes, it is not unreasonable to relate them with the words 'A barbarian artist.' In this case, the 'barbarian artist' is represented by Stalin, who impacted the publication attacking Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. Pushkin's poem also offers multiple interpretations of what Shostakovich might have thought when he wrote the finale to the Fifth Symphony: The 'lawless drawing' of Stalin may correspond to the indifference of the Stalinist justice system to the legal process; 'original, pure days' could imply a sense of yearning allusion to pre-communist era; and 'thus do delusions fall away' might predict both the misinterpretations that the finale of the Fifth will evoke and its eventual correctness once the Pushkin text is grasped. It is also worth mentioning that the Russian word for 'pure,' чистый [*chisti*] can be thought of as being cleaned and restored to its original form. This is directly related to the Russian word for 'purge,' чистка [*chistka*], which is now infamous in the term 'ethnic cleansing.' This understanding allows Shostakovich to leave the hidden messages as a clue to his true intentions. If ever questioned by the authorities, he could claim that the poem referred to himself as having a reborn personality embracing communist anti-individualism.<sup>109</sup>

If we accept the outline noted above, three points can be drawn: 1) Shostakovich embedded hidden messages into his Fifth Symphony; 2) these messages address both the people being oppressed by the Party and those from the Party seeking satisfaction; and 3) it is not unreasonable to assume that Shostakovich embedded more hidden messages into later works that he wrote. In addition to this information, it is clear that Shostakovich was not a sympathizer of the Party; he was someone protesting its values while meeting their

---

109. Ho and Feofanov, 669–70.

expectations at the same time. This, in turn, further illustrates the complex formula that Shostakovich developed that allowed him to compose what he wanted, to an extent, while simultaneously speaking to those crying out for help.



#### IV. THE THIRTEENTH SYMPHONY: RECEPTION

Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony no. 13 is a political piece of music. Not only did it explicitly go against the ideology of the Soviet system, but it also condemned anti-Semitism, a belief supported by the Soviet government. The following section provides information on the following: 1) the 1941 Babi Yar massacre, including the events leading up to the horrific event and how the Soviet government responded; 2) information on how the public and Soviet officials responded to Shostakovich's Thirteenth Symphony, specifically the first movement; and 3) evidence supporting the fact that the first movement of the Thirteenth Symphony was dissident.

In the early morning hours of 22 June 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Unwilling to break the news, Stalin ordered the Minister of Foreign Affairs Vyacheslav Molotov, who had negotiated the original nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany, to announce the invasion over the wireless to the Soviet people. But by the time the announcement came, the German army had launched attacks simultaneously on three fronts. Within less than one week, the night sky of Minsk was glowing with flames. As German forces conquered more territory, they were trailed by specialized SS-killing squads known as the *Einsatzgruppen*. On 19 September of the same year, the German army took the city of Kyiv with force. Mass beatings of Jewish people living in the city took place in broad daylight. A professor at the Kyiv Conservatory named S. U. Satanovsky was shot at home with his family. An elderly woman named Sarra Maksimovna Evenson, who was a well-known writer, editor, and translator, was thrown from a third-story window. By 23 September, corpses and bundles of religious items

began floating down the Dnieper River. On the following day, 24 September, a series of explosions ripped through the city as mines left by retreating Soviet forces began to detonate.<sup>110</sup>

Over the course of two days, 27-28 September, Ukrainian police distributed two thousand copies of an unsigned order in Russian, Ukrainian, and German that stated:

All Jews in the city of Kyiv and its surroundings will present themselves on Monday, September 29, 1941, at 8:00 A.M. at the corner of Melnik and Doktorivskaya Streets (beside the cemetery). Documents, money, and valuables, as well as warm clothing, underwear, and so on, are to be brought. Any Jew not carrying out this order and found elsewhere will be shot. Any citizen entering premises vacated by Jews and appropriating property for themselves will be shot.<sup>111</sup>

Many of the Jewish citizens thought they were about to be evacuated, given that they were ordered to gather their belongings and that the gathering point was near a train station. Nazi command anticipated that five thousand to six thousand Jewish people would show up at the gathering point, but more than thirty thousand people showed up. They gathered at the intersection of today's Melnykova and Dorohozhytska Streets and, rather than going to the train station, were directed on a ten-minute walk toward Babi Yar, a steep ravine on the wooded outskirts of the city. Members of the Nazi *Sonderkommando* [special command unit] 4a, under the direction of Commander Paul Blobel, formed two parallel lines with the Jewish citizens, forced them to 'register' themselves, hand over their documents and valuables, and ordered to strip naked. The victims were sent between the two parallel lines of people, beaten with clubs, and set upon by dogs. They were then brought to the edge of the ravine and mowed down by machine gunners. Battalions of German police assisted with the operation, and members of the Ukrainian Auxiliary police force were directed by

---

110. Eichler, *Time's Echo*, 232.

111. Eichler, 233.

members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. In total, 33,771 Jews were murdered at Babi Yar over the course of two days, 29-30 September, making it the worst massacre of Jews on Soviet soil.<sup>112</sup>

In late 1942, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC), chaired by the famous Yiddish actor Solomon Mikhoels, received a telegram from the American Committee of Jewish Writers, Artists, and Scientists, led by Albert Einstein, proposing the preparation of a collection of documents bearing witness to the Nazi crimes being committed. Ilya Ehrenburg would soon oversee the creation of what would be called *The Black Book*, an effort to document the experience of Soviet Jews through thousands of pages of letters, diaries, and witness testimony submitted from across the country. *The Black Book* was considered extremely dangerous by the regime and would not be published in its original form until 1993. The book had a fatal flaw in the censor's eyes: it documented the cooperation between the German units and local Soviet populations. It is estimated that in Ukraine alone, thirty to forty thousand ethnic Ukrainians participated in the massacre. In the words of one oversight committee, such reports would diminish "the force of the accusation against the Germans, which should be the primary and decisive purpose of the book."<sup>113</sup> The text would be reworked to emphasize some real episodes of heroism in local populations saving their Jewish neighbors, and later, in the summer of 1947, the Russian language version of *The Black Book* was sent to the printers.<sup>114</sup>

Despite *The Black Book* being sent to the printers, an order to stop publication arrived from authorities on 20 August, where only thirty-three sheets had been printed.

---

112. Eichler, 234–36.

113. Eichler, 242.

114. Eichler, 240–43.

Mikhoels pleaded with the Politburo official, Andrei Zhdanov, arguing that it could act as a crucial “counter-propaganda document in the struggle against reactionary forces.”<sup>115</sup> The final verdict of *The Black Book* came in October 1947: it had serious political errors, including separating Jewish suffering from the larger Soviet tragedy. It was believed that *The Black Book*’s recounts of violence against the Jews could lead a reader to mistakenly conclude that anti-Semitism itself was key to the rise of fascism. The argument essentially claimed that Jews were murdered in the Second World War only because the Soviets were murdered. The thirty-three sheets of *The Black Book* would be burned in 1948, along with galleys and printing plates.<sup>116</sup>

In the early postwar era, Stalin launched a new anti-Semitic campaign and turned against the leaders of the JAC. The members were accused of nationalist activity, and less than one year after the suppression of *The Black Book*’s publication, Stalin dispatched operatives to Minsk, where they tracked down Mikhoels and murdered him at a remote location. Shortly afterward, at approximately midnight on 13 January 1948, his corpse was brought to a silent street and run over by a truck, later to be found in the snow as if he had died in a traffic accident. As noted in *Times Echo* by Jeremy Eichler, “At Babyn Yar, the silence was complete. First the Nazis had destroyed the evidence; then the Soviets had destroyed the memory. Together they formed a perfect seal.”<sup>117</sup>

The Soviet government attempted to suppress any memory of the horrific massacre at Babi Yar. In the late 1950s, a dam was constructed that flooded Babi Yar with silt and muddy water from local brick factories. Once the silt settled, it was hoped that the terrain

---

115. Eichler, 242.

116. Eichler, 242–43.

117. Eichler, 243.

could serve as the foundation for a new park and soccer stadium, but on 13 March 1961, the dam collapsed, unleashing a giant wall of liquid mud into the Kurenivka district of Kyiv. A few months later, in the summer of 1961, the poet Yevgeni Yevtushenko learned of the incident and traveled to see the site. The poet was deeply moved by what he saw and began writing his poem, “Babi Yar,” the same night.<sup>118</sup>

The following day, Yevtushenko read his poem over the phone to another poet in Moscow and shared it with friends at a local Kyiv restaurant. He was scheduled to give a public reading in Kyiv’s October Palace of Culture that same week but learned that the event was being canceled due to a ‘flu epidemic.’ Clearly, the KGB had caught wind of his poem, but Yevtushenko somehow managed to get organizers to reinstate the reading. The hall was not only sold out, but one thousand people were waiting outside with hopes that the reading would be amplified so they could hear it. After the poem concluded, there was utmost silence in the audience, but soon, thunderous applause broke out. Yevtushenko brought his poem to the offices of *Literaturnaya Gazeta* to have it published in the newspaper, and after consulting with his wife, the editor for the newspaper decided to publish “Babi Yar,” later being fired for his actions. But “Babi Yar” was now public record, appearing in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* on 19 September 1961.<sup>119</sup> The poem appears below:

---

118. Eichler, 253–54.

119. Eichler, 255.

No monument stands over Babi Yar.  
A drop sheer as a crude gravestone.  
I am afraid.  
Today I am as old in years  
as all the Jewish people.

Now I seem to be  
a Jew.  
Here I plod through ancient Egypt.  
Here I perish crucified on the cross,  
and to this day I bear the scars of nails.

[I stand here, as if by a well,  
giving faith in our brotherhood.  
Here Russians lie and Ukrainians lie  
with Jews in the same earth.]<sup>120</sup>

I seem to be  
Dreyfus.  
The Philistine  
is both informer and judge.

I am behind bars.  
Beset on every side.  
Hounded,  
spat on,  
slandered.  
Squealing, dainty ladies in flounced brussels lace  
stick their parasols into my face.

I seem to be then  
a young boy in Byelostok.  
Blood runs, spilling over the floors.  
The barroom rabble-rousers  
give off a stench of vodka and onion.

A boot kicks me aside, helpless.  
In vain I plead with these pogrom bullies.  
While they jeer and shout,  
“Beat the Yids. Save Russia!”  
Some grain-marketeer beats up my mother.

---

120. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 131. The lines enclosed in brackets were used to replace the preceding lines because the Party insisted that the text of the Thirteenth Symphony specify that Russians and Ukrainians were victims of the massacre. This is further described below.

O my Russian people!  
I know  
you  
are international to the core.  
But those with unclean hands  
have often made a jingle of your purest name.

I know the goodness of my land.  
How vile these anti-Semites—  
without a qualm  
they pompously called themselves  
the Union of the Russian People!

I seem to be  
Anne Frank  
transparent  
as a branch in April.  
And I love.  
And have no need of phrases.  
My need  
is that we gaze into each other.

How little we can see  
or smell!  
We are denied the leaves,  
we are denied the sky.  
Yet we can do so much—  
tenderly  
embrace each other in a darkened room.

They're coming here?  
Be not afraid. Those are the booming  
sounds of spring:  
spring is coming here.

Come then to me.  
Quick, give me your lips.  
Are they smashing down the door?  
No, it's the ice breaking . . .

The wild grasses rustle over Babi Yar.  
The trees look ominous,  
like judges.  
Here all things scream silently,  
and, baring my head,  
slowly I feel myself  
turning grey.

And I myself  
am one massive, soundless scream  
above the thousand thousand buried here.  
I am  
each old man  
here shot dead.  
I am  
every child  
here shot dead.

[I think of Russia's heroic feats  
In blocking fascism's path.  
To the tiniest dewdrop,  
Her whole essence and fate is dear to me.]<sup>121</sup>

Nothing in me  
shall ever forget!  
The "Internationale," let it  
thunder  
when the last anti-Semite on earth  
is buried for ever.

In my blood there is no Jewish blood.  
In their callous rage, all antisemites  
must hate me now as a Jew.  
For that reason  
I am a true Russian!<sup>122</sup>

---

121. Michael Mishra, *A Shostakovich Companion* (Westport: Praeger, 2008), 243. The lines enclosed in brackets were used to replace the preceding lines because the Party insisted that the poem describe the Soviet government's triumph over fascism. This is further described below.

122. Yevgeni Yevtushenko, "Babi Yar," in *The Collected Poems, 1952-1990*, trans. George Reavey (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1991), 102–104.





Figure 7. The Babi Yar Monument. K, Babi Yar: Which Monument(s) ?, <https://k-larevue.com/en/babi-yar-which-monuments/>.

Eventually, in 1976, the regime installed a monument with a plaque that described the massacre without any reference to the one group singled out for complete annihilation: “Here in 1941-1943, the German fascist invaders executed more than 100,000 citizens of Kiev and prisoners of war.”<sup>123</sup>

---

123. Eichler, *Time's Echo*, 264.

Shortly after the “Babi Yar” poem was published, Isaak Glikman, a close friend of Shostakovich and Russian literary critic, gave the composer a copy of the 19 September *Literaturnaya Gazeta* that featured the “Babi Yar” poem. Glikman and Shostakovich found the poem deeply moving and powerful, and about six months later, Shostakovich called Yevtushenko to request that he use the text for his Thirteenth Symphony. Once Yevtushenko gave his permission, Shostakovich disclosed that he had already written the work. Shostakovich then decided to supplement “Babi Yar” with other Yevtushenko texts to create a Thirteenth Symphony. He chose “Humor,” “In the Store,” and “A Career” for the second, third, and fifth movements, and for the fourth movement, Shostakovich commissioned from Yevtushenko a new poem, “Fears.”<sup>124</sup>

Shostakovich was not a Jew, but he sympathized with the Jewish people, which is evident in the many Jewish themes found in his music.<sup>125</sup> As noted in *Testimony*:

Jews were tormented for so long that they learned to hide their despair. They expressed despair in dance music... But even before then, the attitude toward Jews had changed drastically. It turned out that we had far to go to achieve brotherhood. The Jews became the most persecuted and defenseless people of Europe. It was a return to the Middle Ages. Jews became a symbol for me. All of man’s defenselessness was concentrated in them. After the war, I tried to convey that feeling in my music.<sup>126</sup>

Shostakovich faced persecution and backlash because of his compositional style. He was forced to hide his true creative talent through encrypted musical messages, which is evident in various works he wrote. This, in turn, shows how he sympathized with the Jewish

---

124. Mishra, *A Shostakovich Companion*, 241. When he was composing the other four movements, Shostakovich was undergoing treatment for a chronic ailment afflicting his right hand. [See Eichler, *Time’s Echo*, 256, 258.]

125. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 266.

126. Volkov, *Testimony*, 72–73.

community and how many of his works, although sounding triumphant, are the complete opposite; they are sadness and torture hidden in joyous sounds.

The Thirteenth's premiere, however, would not come without hardship. There is much conflicting information on how Yevgeny Mravinsky, who previously conducted multiple other Shostakovich works [such as his Fifth Symphony] responded to Shostakovich's request for him to conduct the Thirteenth Symphony in December 1962. According to some, Mravinsky declined to conduct the Symphony because he forgot to take the score with him on vacation, and that he never conducted choral works as the Thirteenth calls for a bass soloist and male choir. Kirill Kondrashin, who conducted the premiere of the Thirteenth Symphony on 18 December 1962, noted, "Mravinsky had been advised from above not to perform the symphony, and he withdrew like a coward."<sup>127</sup> Mravinsky's assistant with the Leningrad Philharmonic, Kurt Sanderling, believed that the conductor feared the consequences for the choir and soloist if they performed the piece.<sup>128</sup> Alexandra Vavilina, a flautist in the Leningrad Philharmonic who would later become Mravinsky's third wife, reported that Mravinsky did not refuse to conduct the work but had problems with scheduling the premiere as soon as December.<sup>129</sup> I will not extensively criticize Mravinsky, whatever his true reasons might have been, for the conductor and the musicians were certainly in grave danger due to the subject matter of the Symphony.

Multiple soloists also withdrew from the premiere, including 1) Boris Gmyrya, the original bass soloist, withdrew from the premiere in fear for his life, claiming that pressure from the local Party Committee prevented him from singing the text; 2) Aleksandr

---

127. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 106.

128. Ho and Feofanov, 107.

129. Mishra, *A Shostakovich Companion*, 242.

Vedernikov also declined for similar reasons stated by Gmyrya; and 3) Victor Nechipaylo withdrew at the last moment. The bass soloist who sang the premiere was Vitaly Gromadsky, but the orchestra originally thought he would not perform. He showed up to the dress rehearsal ‘as a listener’ but was pressed into singing as the soloist. But officials were still determined to destroy the performance. Throughout the day, Kondrashin was again pressured to cancel the premiere but held his ground, and Shostakovich was soon summoned to a private meeting with members of the Central Committee. In an interview over half a century later, the widow of Dmitri Shostakovich, Irina Shostakovich, recounted a conversation with her husband immediately before the meeting with the Central Committee, noting that he broke down in tears. But Shostakovich withstood the assault from Soviet officials, refusing to cancel the Thirteenth’s premiere.<sup>130</sup> During another meeting on the eve of the Thirteenth’s premiere, Yevtushenko and Shostakovich, along with a group of other writers and artists, were warned against ‘contamination’ by Western influences, whereby Khrushchev claimed in conversation that Shostakovich’s music gave him ‘bellyache.’<sup>131</sup>

Given that both the conductor and composer refused to obey orders, Party officials changed tactics. A special contingent of soldiers and policemen patrolled the streets around the concert hall the day of the premiere, and someone told the television crews to go home. The printed program for the concert also did not include any of the Yevtushenko texts, which is a departure from tradition. But the performance went on as scheduled, and after the ending of the first movement to the Symphony, spontaneous applause sounded

---

130. Eichler, *Time’s Echo*, 261–63.

131. David Conway, “A New Year’s Message from Dmitri Shostakovich,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 80, no. 2 (2002): 293.

throughout the concert hall, so much so that Kondrashin had to silence the audience and move onto the second movement in fear that the cheers would be perceived as a political demonstration. After the Symphony concluded, the applause lasted for what seemed like an eternity. The pianist Maria Yudina, who had previously criticized Shostakovich's compromises, wrote that with the Thirteenth, the composer had become 'one of us again.' Mstislav Rostropovich, a revered cellist, hailed the Symphony, noting that it expressed the immense amplitude of people's lives, from disappointments and tragedy to enlightenment and proud hopes.<sup>132</sup> The reactions from Soviet citizens further show how Shostakovich could write music that spoke to those being oppressed.

After one performance of the Thirteenth Symphony, the district Party secretary noted, "This is outrageous, we let Shostakovich join the Party, and then he goes and presents us with a symphony about Jews."<sup>133</sup> This response is expected, but it is worth noting how the Party member emphasized that they let Shostakovich join the Party, and he responded by giving them his Thirteenth Symphony. I believe this illustrates that Shostakovich unwillingly joined the Communist Party and did not share the ideologies of the Soviet system. If Shostakovich were truly loyal to the Party, the Thirteenth would either never exist or be suppressed by Shostakovich. Given the reality, it is clear where Shostakovich stood.

After its debut in 1962, only a brief mention of the Thirteenth appeared in the newspapers, but this would change when, one week later, an unsigned editorial in *Sovetskaya Kultura* summed up the Thirteenth as a pernicious fiction masquerading as

---

132. Eichler, *Time's Echo*, 262–63.

133. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 265.

social critique. The Thirteenth's powerful message still traveled quickly, appearing with the headline "Shostakovich's Thirteenth is Silenced in Moscow for Ideological Taint" on the New York Times's front page on 12 January 1963.<sup>134</sup> But Yevtushenko, possibly fearing that the silencing of the text would remain forever, changed eight lines of his "Babi Yar" poem [see the lines enclosed with brackets above]. Displeased by this change, Shostakovich neither changed the text in his Thirteenth nor wrote it into the manuscript score. The Thirteenth was given three performances in Minsk the following month and again received praise from the Soviet people. But the Thirteenth received an extensive critical review in the Belorussian press and soon resulted in the work's unofficial ban.<sup>135</sup>

Although the Thirteenth went largely unperformed in the Soviet Union, it appeared in the West in 1970 thanks to the cellist Rostropovich, who smuggled out a copy of the score by tearing off the title page and passing it to Eugene Ormandy, conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra. The Thirteenth was published in the Soviet Union with Yevtushenko's modified text, both in 1971 and 1983, but the Thirteenth, as it was written, would not be published in Russia until 2006, fifteen years after the Soviet Union collapsed.<sup>136</sup>

What follows is a note from Richard Taruskin regarding the Thirteenth. Although not reacting negatively to the Thirteenth, Taruskin does not believe the work was 'risky' or 'dangerous.' Taruskin writes:

It is important to quash the fantasy image of Shostakovich as a dissident, no matter how much it feeds his popularity, because it dishonors actual dissidents like Mr. Solzhenitsyn or Andrei Sakharov, who took risks and suffered reprisals. Shostakovich did not take such risks. Four of the five poems by Yevgeny that

---

134. Eichler, *Time's Echo*, 262–63.

135. Eichler, 263.

136. Eichler, 265.

Shostakovich incorporated into his “dissident” Thirteenth Symphony (including “Babi Yar,” the famous protest against anti-Semitism) had already appeared in the official Soviet press by the time Shostakovich set them.<sup>137</sup>

Here, Mr. Taruskin yet again fails to consider other contextual factors about the Thirteenth or even the poem written by Yevtushenko. Yes, four of the five poems used for the Thirteenth were published in newspapers before its premiere, but Yevtushenko faced much backlash after the “Babi Yar” poem was published. It is also worth noting that under the hall where Yevtushenko read his poem, unknown to him at the time, there was a special cellar belonging to the KGB, where they would torture many people. Given the fact that Soviet authorities attempted to suppress him from reading his poem and the fact that he recited it right above the KGB torture cellar, I believe that Yevtushenko certainly faced danger, whether it be from the authorities attempting to suppress his work or the fact that he could have been taken into the torture cellar at any point.

Party officials also tried attacking Yevtushenko by using names against him, some of which include Ilya Ehrenburg, but Ehrenburg confirmed that he did not send the critique to Yevtushenko.<sup>138</sup> Mr. Taruskin’s claims, as illustrated above, are completely false. Taruskin does not mention the repercussions Yevtushenko faced or the punishment given to the person who published the article. He also makes no mention of the backlash that Shostakovich faced.

During a symposium on 25 January 1992 in the Bush Pavilion at Russell Sage College in Troy, New York, Maxim Shostakovich, Solomon Volkov, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, and conductor Kenneth Kierster were gathered to discuss the music of Dmitri Shostakovich.

---

137. Richard Taruskin, “Casting a Great Composer as a Fictional Hero,” in *On Russian Music*, 1st ed. (Berkeley: California University Press, 2009), 326.

138. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 381–82.

During the panel, Yevtushenko stated the following about the Thirteenth: “[The Thirteenth] was not just a symphony, but really a social, political (although that word somehow is humiliating to what really happened) and historic event... I heard the first performance of the Thirteenth Symphony as performed by [Shostakovich], with him singing the solo part and the chorus, and playing the orchestra part on the piano. It was beautiful.<sup>139</sup> When Yevtushenko first heard the ending to the fifth movement of the Thirteenth, he noted that the ending sounded too soft, as if the harmonies were slushing around the dead bodies of the victims. But Yevtushenko soon realized the subtleness of the ending provided a small taste of eternity separate from the Stalinist justice system. In other words, it was music written to speak to the people.<sup>140</sup>

It is my musical interpretation that Shostakovich constantly used subtle sounds, phrases, and harmonies in his works. These subtle gestures often represent things one can only fully explain in a lengthy dissertation. With his Fifth Symphony, Shostakovich was able to deliver a message about all the torture and oppression experienced by the Soviet citizens while simultaneously delivering a work that satisfied the Party. As noted in the sections on the Fifth, Shostakovich was able to deliver this powerful message by using minor chords rather than major ones and through repetition (in this case, the high As that repeat 252 times and the constant repeating of the tonic towards the Symphony’s conclusion). In the Thirteenth, Shostakovich delivered a subtle message of a life free of fascism through soft harmonies.

---

139. Ho and Feofanov, 379, 384.

140. Ho and Feofanov, 384–85.



I believe that the reactions noted above can be summarized with the following points:

- 1) Reaction based on ideology: Those reactions from the Party attack Shostakovich for writing music that goes against Party values (in other words, exposing anti-Semitism), while the reactions from those oppressed by the Party praise it for its powerful message and exposure of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union
- 2) Reaction based on Shostakovich as a composer: Some individuals do not necessarily dislike the music, but claim Shostakovich did not take any risks in composing the piece.
- 3) Reactions based on fear or courage: The original conductor, Yevgeny Mravinsky, and numerous other bass soloists gave various excuses as to why they could not perform the piece, while those who did do so knew their lives were in grave danger.

Given these categories, the reactions were heavily influenced by one's politics, perception of Shostakovich as a composer, and courage of the conductor or musician.

V.  
CONCLUSION:  
WHAT WAS SHOSTAKOVICH'S POSITION IN THE SOVIET UNION?

My interest in writing this thesis was to provide evidence supporting the fact that Dmitri Shostakovich was an individual who rejected the Party. Through the evaluation of his Fifth and Thirteenth Symphonies, as well as his actions as a victim living under Soviet persecution, I believe that the evidence is indisputable: Shostakovich was not a Party supporter but rather someone who rejected their values. Scholars such as Richard Taruskin and Laurel Fay have made a career out of attacking Shostakovich's memoirs, *Testimony*, which is subsequently an attack on his music. These scholars have largely remained silent or dismissed new evidence that further reveals Shostakovich's anti-Stalinist position in Soviet Russia. Surely, these individuals should be obligated to discover and report all the evidence, even those at odds with their beliefs and positions, but it is apparent they do no such thing. While some may disagree or dismiss my beliefs in writing this thesis, I have attempted to evaluate the life and music of Shostakovich as completely as possible in their proper context.

There does, however, lie a problem with classifying Shostakovich as a 'dissident.' This problem, which I have noted in chapter three of this thesis, concerns the legal fact that those who rejected the Party or orders handed down by the authorities [specifically under Stalin's control] would be killed. While I think that Taruskin's interpretation of dissident is one-sided, it further begs the question: is any one term or label sufficient? In an email message from Dmitry Feofanov, they noted that how one defines 'dissident' can result in different interpretations of the term in relation to Shostakovich. If one defines it narrowly by relating it to the protest movements of the 1970s, then Shostakovich was not a dissident,

but if one defines it broadly by relating it to the composer's opposition to the Communist regime, then Shostakovich was most certainly a dissident. But what it comes down to, as noted by Feofanov, is not the terms that define the issue but rather the substance.

In their response to my email, Dr. Allan B. Ho proposed the term 'internal dissident' to distinguish Shostakovich's position from that of a typical dissident but acknowledged it was not perfect. I agree that this is a good way to label the composer, but I believe scholars such as Richard Taruskin would likely have rejected such labels, even though the dissidence is more internal rather than external. To those dissenters who reject such a label, however, we can propose an alternative characterization. In response to my email message, Dr. Michael Mishra proposed *inakomyslyashchii* as a way to characterize Shostakovich's position in Soviet Russia. Dr. Mishra noted that the musicologist David Fanning described the term as meaning 'the otherwise-thinker,' which implies something stronger than the Western 'non-conformist' but not so strong as 'dissident' in the narrow sense. In choosing the characterization *inakomyslyashchii*, we acknowledge that Shostakovich did not necessarily fight against the prevailing cultural politics as placed himself spiritually outside them, which ultimately preserved his own musical independence and integrity. I believe this to be a strong term to describe Shostakovich's circumstance, for it portrays an individual whose first concern was to write music that he felt needed to be written and that if a given piece did not satisfy the cultural expectations active at the time, he wrote it regardless. While this may be the most satisfying label to describe Shostakovich's position, even this has its flaws. As noted by Dr. Mishra in their email to me, the term potentially portrays Shostakovich as "a bit aloof," a bit "ivory tower," and potentially underplays that essential characteristic of empathy that he demonstrated throughout his life.

We must, however, find a way to reveal Shostakovich's empathetic actions, for ignoring such information inhibits the character of the composer. As noted by

Yevtushenko:

When we remember or point out that [Shostakovich] signed these denunciatory letters, we forget another thing – we forget how many other letters he wrote trying to save people all through his life. For example, he wrote a letter defending the poet Joseph Brodsky. He helped an enormous number of people. And when I was in difficult circumstances, believe me, he helped me and I was only one of many that he helped. [. . .] When people focus too much on the political aspects of some of [Shostakovich's] activity, they forget [. . .] his humane behavior.<sup>141</sup>

This quote illustrates that critics who focus on the political circumstances or actions of Shostakovich neglect to acknowledge all the good deeds he performed and that he was in an extremely difficult situation. To solve such an issue, I believe that we must not criticize such figures without first considering their past and position in the society in which they live.

What this conclusion has proven thus far is that finding a term or label to describe Shostakovich's position in Soviet Russia is both difficult and undesirable. As noted by Dr. Mishra in his email to me, such a task is impossible and undesirable because it ultimately reduces a figure as complex as Shostakovich to a simple term or label. Dr. Mishra noted, "Ultimately, though, whatever we make of the semantics, our evaluation of Shostakovich and his actions (or lack of actions) is meaningful only if carried out with as complete an understanding as possible of what his options were, at least as he perceived them, at any given time."<sup>142</sup> Dr. Mishra's advice to me, as is my advice to the reader, is to focus on the facts concerning the composer rather than a single term or label that describes his position.

---

141. Ho and Feofanov, 106.

142. Quote from Mishra's book, *A Shostakovich Companion*, 16.

I think this is best done through a contextual evaluation and understanding of his work. As noted by Ho and Feofanov in *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, a contextual approach to Shostakovich's music allows one to 1) gain a clear understanding of the composer's intentions to write in certain ways, which leads to 2) a greater understanding of the composer's 'tone,' which further leads to 3) a more appropriate mode of interpretation in criticism.<sup>143</sup> By evaluating Shostakovich's music and actions contextually rather than through a single term, I believe that we can expose the true intentions of the composer.

One such example of a circumstance that requires a contextual evaluation of Shostakovich includes his membership in the Communist Party. As noted by Yevtushenko during the discussion at the 1992 symposium:

Shostakovich did sign a lot of public letters, denunciations of a kind, and he was ashamed of that and, at the same time, didn't attach much significance to this. And we argued about that. And he would say, 'Yes, I have signed letters that I didn't believe, but I've never written a single note of music that I didn't believe.' And now, when critics like to attack figures like Shostakovich and others of his generation for doing that sort of thing, they themselves commit a moral crime, because how do they know how they would behave if they had ended up in such horrible circumstances.<sup>144</sup>

Yevtushenko's quote tells us two things: 1) Shostakovich acknowledged that he signed things as a Party member, which he did not believe, and 2) Shostakovich never wrote a note of music that he did not believe. If we put his second point into context, one can infer that he wrote *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, for example, with the intent to associate himself with Soviet Jewry [this is discussed more in Appendix A]. Yevtushenko also raises another critical point: how would those critics who attack Shostakovich's music and actions react if they were put in the same position as the composer? As noted by Henry Orlov in *A*

---

143. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 561–64.

144. Ho and Feofanov, 387.

*Shostakovich Casebook*, “Those born and brought up in a free society can hardly comprehend what it takes to remain honest in a police state or imagine themselves in the place of someone whose very thought of liberty puts freedom or life at stake.”<sup>145</sup> This is one such piece of evidence that refutes the critics, for how can someone born in a free society attack someone living under an oppressive regime? Another piece of evidence that rejects those who claim that Shostakovich was a Party supporter is the premiere of his Thirteenth Symphony. If Shostakovich were truly a follower, he would most certainly not have premiered the work one year after joining the Communist Party.

There will likely never be an end to the debate over how to classify Shostakovich’s position as an individual who lived in Soviet Russia. To solve such dilemmas over what term to use, perhaps the best option is to provide no label but rather focus on the composer’s life and work to gain a contextual understanding of his music and actions as a victim of Soviet persecution. I believe there is no easy way to separate the politics from the music, for when you do, we ignore all the heroic and empathetic actions he showed throughout his life. What we must do, however, is ensure we do not criticize his music without first understanding the contextual factors surrounding his life. This, in turn, will help us comprehend and see his music in its true light.

---

145. Allan B. Ho and Dmitry Feofanov, *The Shostakovich Wars* (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University, 2014), 220, <https://www.siu.edu/~aho/ShostakovichWars/SW.pdf>.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boterbloem, Kees. *The Life and Times of Andrei Zhdanov, 1896-1948*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014.
- Brown, Malcolm Hamrick. *A Shostakovich Casebook*. Indiana University Press, 2004.
- Burk, John N. "Boston Symphony Orchestra concert program, Subscription Series, Season 58 (1938-1939), Week 13, seq. 9." January 20, 1939.  
<http://collections.bso.org/digital/collection/PROG/id/147805/rec/1>.
- Conway, David. "A New Year's Message from Dmitri Shostakovich." *The Slavonic and East European Review* 80, no. 2 (2002): 288–95.
- Dubinets, Elena. *Russian composers abroad: How they left, stayed, returned*. Indiana University Press, 2021.
- Edmunds, Neil. *Soviet Music and Society Under Lenin and Stalin: The Baton and Sickle*. New York: Routledge, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203496268>.
- Eichler, Jeremy. *Time's Echo: The Second World War, the Holocaust, and the Music of Remembrance*. New York: Knopf, 2023.
- Fairclough, Pauline. "The 'Old Shostakovich': Reception in the British Press." *Music & Letters* 88, no. 2 (2007): 266–96.
- Fairclough, Pauline. *Classics for the Masses: Shaping Soviet Musical Identity Under Lenin and Stalin*. Yale University Press, 2016.
- Fairclough, Pauline. "Was Soviet Music Middlebrow? Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, Socialist Realism, and the Mass Listener in the 1930s." *The Journal of Musicology* 35, no. 3 (2018): 336–67.
- Fay, Laurel E. "Classical Music;The Composer Was Courageous, but Not as Much as in Myth." *The New York Times*. April 14, 1996.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/04/14/arts/classical-music-the-composer-was-courageous-but-not-as-much-as-in-myth.html>.
- Fay, Laurel E. *Shostakovich: A Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Frolova-Walker, Marina, and Jonathan Walker. *Music and Soviet Power, 1917-1932*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017.
- Frolova-Walker, Marina, and Jonathan Walker. *Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023.

- Ho, Allan B., and Dmitry Feofanov. *Shostakovich Reconsidered*. London: Toccata Press, 1998.
- Ho, Allan B., and Dmitry Feofanov. *The Shostakovich Wars*. Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University, 2014. <https://www.siu.edu/~aho/ShostakovichWars/SW.pdf>.
- Hulme, Derek C. *Dmitri Shostakovich Catalogue: The First Hundred Years and Beyond*, 4th ed. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2010.
- Klefstad, Terry Wait. "The Reception in America of Dmitri Shostakovich, 1928-1946." Doctoral thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2003.
- MacDonald, Ian. *The New Shostakovich*. Read by Noah Siegel. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. BARD, 16:40:47.
- MacDonald, Ian. "Laurel Fay's Biography." Review of *Shostakovich: A Life*, by Laurel Fay. Music Under Soviet Rule. Accessed February 5, 2024. <https://www.siu.edu/~aho/musov/fay/fay.html>.
- Mishra, Michael. *A Shostakovich Companion*. Westport: Praeger, 2008.
- Moshevich, Sofia. *Dmitri Shostakovich, Pianist*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004.
- Mueller, Wolfgang. "The USSR and Permanent Neutrality in the Cold War." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 4 (2016): 148–79.
- Petrov, Peter. *What was Soviet Ideology? A Theoretical Inquiry*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2024.
- San Francisco Symphony. "Keeping Score | Dmitri Shostakovich: Symphony No. 5 (Full Documentary and Concert)." YouTube, March 19, 2020, 1:48:27. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3RbWSfhlp4>.
- Sylvestre, Loïc, and Marco Costa. "The Mathematical Architecture of Bach's 'The Art of Fugue.'" *Il Saggiatore Musicale* 17, no. 2 (2010): 175–95.
- Taruskin, Richard. "Casting a Great Composer as a Fictional Hero." In *On Russian Music*, 1st ed., 322–28. University of California Press, 2009.
- Volkov, Solomon. *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dimitri Shostakovich*. Translated by Antonin W. Bouis. New York: Harper Perennial, 1979.
- Volkov, Solomon. *Shostakovich and Stalin: The Extraordinary Relationship and the Brutal Dictator*. New York: Knopf, 2004.



Werth, Alexander. *Musical Uproar in Moscow*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1949.

Wilson, Elizabeth. *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

Yevtushenko, Yevgeni. "Babi Yar." In *The Collected Poems, 1952-1990*. Translated by George Reavey, 102–104. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1991.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: SHOSTAKOVICH AND SOVIET JEWRY: REMARKS FROM LAUREL FAY

The following appendix discusses remarks from Laurel Fay about Shostakovich's usage of Jewish themes in *From Jewish Folk Poetry* and Symphony no. 13 ("Babi Yar,") specifically the first movement, 'Adagio.' Unlike the critiques noted in the Fifth Symphony, whereby individuals like Richard Taruskin mainly attacked the structure and intended message, scholars like Laurel Fay are uncertain about whether Shostakovich used music to connect with others. In this case, she questioned the idea that Shostakovich composed *From Jewish Folk Poetry* and Symphony no. 13 as a method to speak about his suffering and the suffering of Soviet Jewry. The appendix opens with a discussion about Fay's remarks on Symphony no. 13, which I criticize due to her failure to acknowledge historical events and differences between musical styles. This is followed by a discussion on Fay's uncertainty about the persecution of Soviet Jewry before *From Jewish Folk Poetry* was written. I also criticize her reliance on Soviet publications to support her research. I then discuss how Fay failed to acknowledge that many other people, including Richard Taruskin, rejected her claim that Shostakovich could not have indicated Stalin's plan for the eradication of Soviet Jewry. Following this, I critique her statement that 1948 was the most difficult year for Shostakovich. The appendix concludes with a proposal for why Fay makes such remarks and offers evidence to refute her methodology.

As noted in *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, Laurel Fay questioned the danger and consequence of performing the Thirteenth Symphony in the Soviet Union. She argued that many singers did not balk at performing *From Jewish Folk Poetry* as some did when

the Thirteenth premiered, concluding that Shostakovich chose the text for *From Jewish Folk Poetry* out of ‘sheer stupidity’ rather than out of courage and solidarity. Fay writes: “It was his rotten luck that of all the available nationalities, great and small, he just happened to pick the wrong ‘folk’ as his inspiration.”<sup>146</sup> This statement references Shostakovich’s attempt to redeem himself at the Composer’s Congress in April 1948, whereby the composer pledged to place melody at the heart of his work.<sup>147</sup> I would like to briefly comment on Fay’s outrageous remarks on ‘the right folk.’ What is the ‘right’ folk? Is it the random person on the street? Is it a relative or a loved one? Is it those who represent the Party? This critique, as with many critiques noted in the chapters about the Fifth Symphony, for reasons unknown to me, completely fails to accept the possibility that Shostakovich could have embedded hidden messages into his works or sympathized with those being oppressed.

Fay fails to acknowledge a few key points. First, she fails to acknowledge the differences between performing a song cycle, such as *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, and the premiere of a symphony. People typically performed music in a song cycle in a smaller, more intimate venue, such as with friends and family, whereas a symphony premiere occurred in a much more public setting. Second, Fay fails to acknowledge that a performance of *From Jewish Folk Poetry* at the Composer’s Union on 20 December 1948 was canceled. Third, she attempts to defend her belief that composing a work with Jewish elements in 1948 was neither risky nor unusual by noting the gratifying response to

---

146. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 227–28, 710. Shostakovich composed *From Jewish Folk Poetry* from 1 August to 21 October 1948. It consists of eleven separate songs that expose the horrifying treatment of Soviet Jewry. [See Appendix B to read an English translation of four songs from the song cycle.]

147. Ho and Feofanov, 227.

Mieczyslaw Weinberg's new Sinfonietta that was 'saturated' with Jewish themes. What Fay fails to acknowledge is that 1) Weinberg was a Jew; Shostakovich was not, so associating himself with a group of people despised by the Party was a courageous act; and 2) the fact that few people in the Soviet Union published works with Jewish elements.<sup>148</sup>

Fay does acknowledge that Weinberg's Sinfonietta no. 1 was dedicated to "the friendship of the peoples of the USSR,"<sup>149</sup> but does not acknowledge that *From Jewish Folk Poetry* further exposed Shostakovich's open protest against the hounding of Jews.<sup>150</sup> This difference in subject matter is worth discussing. It is no surprise that the Party praised a work that was dedicated to the 'friendship of the peoples of the USSR,' for its subtitle likely made the Party overlook the fact that Weinberg was Jewish and that he was the son-in-law of Solomon Mikhoels. It is also worth noting that Weinberg's piece was purely instrumental, meaning it contained no vocals, unlike *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, which did use vocals. Given that Weinberg's Sinfonietta no. 1 had no direct dialogue that attacked the Party, it is no surprise that Shostakovich's song cycle received backlash from the Party. We can, therefore, see that *From Jewish Folk Poetry* was an open protest against the Party, for its text exposed the horrible treatment of Soviet Jewry.

Fay also makes multiple other outrageous remarks about the validity of Jewish suffering under the Soviet Union. She insisted that *From Jewish Folk Poetry* has no relation to the Jewish persecution in 1948 and that Shostakovich's openness about

---

148. Ho and Feofanov, 226–28.

149. Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 170.

150. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 223.

composing the song cycle must be evidence that he did not intend to protest the persecution of Soviet Jewry. Fay's arguments relied on her historically illiterate belief that Shostakovich could not have indicated Stalin's monstrous plan to eradicate Soviet Jewry. One need only turn to the information provided in the fourth chapter as proof of why Fay's comments are wrong: the murder of Solomon Mikhoels and suppression of *The Black Book* are evidence that Shostakovich could have indicated Stalin's monstrous plan. Nevertheless, she wrote the following in her book *Shostakovich: A Life*:

Despite increasingly menacing incidents of anti-Semitism that had occurred in the country since the end of the war, by the summer of 1948 Shostakovich, like the majority of his countrymen, could not yet have known about Stalin's monstrous plan for the eventual containment or eradication of Soviet Jewry. . . . By late January 1949, however, shortly after Shostakovich sent his letter to Karayev, Stalin's Campaign against "rootless cosmopolitans" escalated rapidly into a virulent campaign against Jewish culture and Zionism in the press.<sup>151</sup>

Fay's uncertainty of the extent to which Jews were being persecuted in 1948 mainly relies on the following historical points: 1) in May 1948, Stalin had 'publicly' upstaged Truman by making the Soviet Union the first country to grant *de jure* recognition to the nascent state of Israel; 2) *Pravda* touted equality and mutual respect for the ethnic cultures of all of the Soviet Union's constituent nationalities; and 3) that over fifty thousand Jews greeted Golda Meir upon her arrival in Moscow to become Israel's first ambassador to the Soviet Union.<sup>152</sup> Here, Fay accepts the statements in *Pravda* as being fact and disregards Stalin's public denunciation of anti-Semitism, misconstruing his acknowledgment of Israel as his 'love' for the Jewish people rather than a cold plan to

---

151. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 170. This quote also appears to imply that Shostakovich's song cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry* was the reason for Stalin's campaign against Jews. This statement is not only insulting but also ignores multiple historical vents that likely led to Stalin's new campaign.

152. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 224.

gain a Soviet foothold in the Middle East. Fay also dismisses testimonies of Jews and non-Jews who lived through the horrifying '40s and '50s, stating that “memory is fickle.”<sup>153</sup> I should not have to explain why this remark is insulting, but given her caution against using memoirs as a primary source, it is unsurprising why she would reject such material.

Fay further failed to acknowledge that Natalya Mikhoels, the daughter of Solomon Mikhoels, rejected her historically illiterate claim that anti-Semitism was little known in the Soviet Union before 1948. Natalya Mikhoels also disputed the ‘wrong folk’ argument, noting that Shostakovich’s choice to use Jewish themes in his music was no accident because the topic concerned him much.<sup>154</sup> Fay also failed to acknowledge that Manashir Yakubov, the curator of the Shostakovich Family Archive, and Richard Taruskin rejected her conclusions about Shostakovich’s association with the Jewish community. Taruskin writes:

*From Jewish Folk Poetry* was written during the black year 1948. That was the year of the Zhdanov crackdown, and of the Communist Party’s infamous ‘Resolution on Music,’ a document that subjected Shostakovich to his second bout of official persecution. It was also the year in which for the first time anti-Semitism, under the guise of a campaign against ‘cosmopolitanism’ became official government policy in the Soviet Union. The actor Solomon Mikhoels was murdered in Minsk. The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was liquidated and its leadership arrested. Over the next five years, practically every Jewish cultural activist in the country would be executed. Shostakovich’s song cycle was the most demonstrative of his several appropriations of Jewish thematic material and subject matter, *and when you connect the various events of 1948 – even when Stalin’s cynical recognition of the infant state of Israel that year and the triumphant arrival of Golda Meir (then Golda Myerson), the Israeli ambassador – just in time for the High Holidays are weighed in the balance – it seems more convincing than ever to associate the appropriation of Jewish folklore with the composer’s wish covertly to affirm solidarity with the persecuted. Indeed, it was a*

---

153. Ho and Feofanov, 225.

154. Ho and Feofanov, 708.

*way of identifying himself and his colleagues, creative artists in Stalin's Russia, with another oppressed minority.*<sup>155</sup>

Taruskin provides an excellent rebuttal against Fay's claims. First, Taruskin uses the Resolution on Music as evidence of the dangers of performing a musical work that went against Party guidelines. Second, Taruskin shows that, despite the anti-Semitic climate of the Soviet Union, Shostakovich was not afraid of associating himself with the Jewish people. Third, Taruskin provides evidence that Jewish people were murdered and arrested, which rebuts Fay's question about the extent to which Jewish people suffered in the Soviet Union. This, in turn, raises one question: to what extent is Fay arguing her point? Is Fay dismissing those events that occurred in 1948—the murder of Solomon Mikhoels, the Resolution on Music, and the enactment of official government policy supporting anti-Semitism—as evidence for why *From Jewish Folk Poetry* is much more than an ordinary song cycle? Or is she unaware of such information? As I will discuss later in this appendix, I believe we can further understand how Fay draws her conclusions by turning to the methodologies she used to write *Shostakovich: A Life*.

In 1996—four years before she published *Shostakovich: A Life*—Laurel Fay published an article in the *New York Times* with the opening statement: “Nineteen forty-eight was the worst year of Dmitri Shostakovich's life.”<sup>156</sup> This opening statement is a bold claim, for how does Fay know that 1948 was the worst year of Shostakovich's life?

---

155. Ho and Feofanov, *The Shostakovich Wars*, 173.

156. Laurel E. Fay, “Classical Music; The Composer Was Courageous, but Not as Much as in Myth,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/04/14/arts/classical-music-the-composer-was-courageous-but-not-as-much-as-in-myth.html>. Fay's opening statement noted above contradicts a remark noted in her book *Shostakovich: A Life*. In her book, Fay describes 1948 as ‘one of the most’ difficult years of Shostakovich's life; not the most. [See Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 171.]

And in what context is she arguing her point? Certainly, the 1948 resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party was harsh, but was it any less harsh than those events and attacks that occurred in 1936? Without a detailed account of Shostakovich's inner feelings about such events, how can one truly know what the composer was thinking? One cannot simply measure an individual's inner feelings based on events in the external world. How can we presume that 1948 was harsher for Shostakovich than the loss of his wife, Nina, in 1954, or of his mother in 1955?<sup>157</sup> The answer is simple: we cannot. It is also worth noting that, following the January 1948 conference, Shostakovich was in a suicidal state. His own words in *Testimony* read: "At the time, it seemed as though my end had come."<sup>158</sup> Without sufficient evidence to prove Shostakovich's inner thoughts and feelings, we are left to accept that Shostakovich committed himself to courageous acts on behalf of others, fully knowing he had no reliable method to estimate the risks he took.

Fay's comments further illustrate how she appears to be grasping at every possible excuse for attacking Shostakovich's character and association with Soviet Jewry. This opinion is further described in *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, whereby the authors write: "Fay's historically illiterate interpretation of *From Jewish Folk Poetry* depends, in the end, on an estimate of Shostakovich's intelligence which is frankly insulting."<sup>159</sup> It is

---

157. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 709. By context, I am inquiring whether Fay is referring to political or private events. For example, the 1948 Conference of Musicians of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party and the 1936 *Pravda* article that attacked Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* are examples of what I consider to be political events, whereas the death of Shostakovich's wife and mother, or his operation in 1923 are examples of what I consider to be private and more intimate events.

158. Volkov, *Testimony*, 111, 146.

159. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 720.



evident that Fay is not judging the music of Shostakovich, as many critics of the composer do, but rather the composer himself. I can respectfully agree to disagree with those who attack Shostakovich's music for, according to their own belief, an absence of any feeling or message. But those who attack Shostakovich for his character are insulting. How can one objectively study or talk about someone when making biased remarks?

Fay also makes it a habit to cherry-pick quotations that best support her stance while leaving out sections that rebut it. In one such example, Fay reflects on the time in which Shostakovich visited Solomon Mikhoels' family after his murder, where the composer remarked, 'I envy him,' but she leaves out another quote that he noted on a separate occasion: "'This'" had started with the Jews, and would end with the entire intelligentsia.'<sup>160</sup> This makes Shostakovich appear cold and crude, which is utterly false.

Ian MacDonald points out Fay's unfair habit in his review of *Shostakovich: A Life*, whereby he writes:

While Fay indulges in no further local aberrations on the scale of her interpretation of *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, she sees to it that her underlying concept of Shostakovich as a Faithful Servant of the Soviet state, only fit fully sustained in the earlier part of her narrative, becomes more overt after 1948 - gradually building towards a general summary of his position in Soviet culture so calamitously misrepresentative that it surpasses every other warped judgment in her book. She works this trick by manipulating two factors: (1) the relative profusion of public statements "by" Shostakovich during his last 27 years; (2) the fact that he joined the Communist Party in 1960, thereafter appearing regularly to function as its musical mouthpiece.<sup>161</sup>

The first point noted by MacDonald, whereby Fay selected quotations about Shostakovich that bring into question his character, is noted above. To illustrate Fay's

---

160. Ho and Feofanov, *The Shostakovich Wars*, 171.

161. Ian MacDonald, "Part 4: 1948-1960," in *Laurel Fay's Biography*, review of *Shostakovich: A Life*, by Laurel Fay, *Music Under Soviet Rule*, accessed February 5, 2024, <https://www.siue.edu/~aho/musov/fay/fayrev4.html>.

second manipulation tactic noted by MacDonald, we can turn to Shostakovich's actions as a member of the Communist Party. Fay's reliance on those events after 1948 to generalize Shostakovich's position in Soviet culture is misleading. Given all the information presented in this thesis, it is clear that Shostakovich embedded hidden messages into his work that revealed his true position. But we can also look at other key factors that tell us Shostakovich was not a Party supporter. He signed articles for Soviet publications without reading them and read out speeches that others authored with extreme emphases, significant pauses, and moments of slurred speech.<sup>162</sup> Can these not be signs of 'hesitation' or 'over-exaggeration?' If Shostakovich embedded secret messages into his music, could his body language and speech also tell us his true thoughts? The possibility that Shostakovich's body language and speech patterns contained a deeper message is also restated in *Shostakovich Reconsidered*. In describing how Shostakovich read speeches for the Communist Party as if they were his own, the Russian musicologist, Daniel Zhitomirsky, writes:

Indeed, why did he have to read inept texts and present them as if they were his own? Probably, his entire being bristled at this coercion, and he did everything in his power to divorce himself from what he was reading, simultaneously hinting at his being not privy to this newspaper banality. He succeeded in doing this in an extremely expressive manner!<sup>163</sup>

If we accept this statement as fact, there was no Soviet Party henchman in Shostakovich, but rather someone who developed a method for maintaining his survival while simultaneously acting as a voice for the oppressed.

---

162. MacDonald.

163. Ho and Feofanov, *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, 433.

I believe that we can summarize Fay's arguments as follows: 'Shostakovich had no knowledge of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union before 1948, for why would he compose such a piece of music given the political climate? It is also not apparent that Shostakovich truly associated himself with the Jewish people because such pieces of music served no other purpose than to fulfill a quota.' Fay's belief is simply insulting and degrading, not only to Shostakovich but also to all the Jewish people who were victims of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. Shostakovich proved time and time again that he committed himself to courageous acts on behalf of others with the full knowledge that he could not estimate the risks involved. For instance, he hid a condemned Jew named Moisei Beregovsky, a musicologist specializing in the same Jewish folk music that Shostakovich turned to for his song cycle, in the basement of his home. Given the policies at the time, Shostakovich violated the legal code by harboring an enemy of the People.<sup>164</sup> But he did so, fully knowing what might happen to him. But we can also turn to Shostakovich's String Quartet no. 8 in C Minor, op. 110, written in 1960 shortly after he was pressured into joining the Communist Party, as evidence of his association with Soviet Jewry. Although it is often given the subtitle 'To the victims of fascism and war,' documentary evidence and the composer's friends and family have confirmed the true meaning of the Eighth String Quartet to be a dedication to the composer himself as a victim of fascism. The chromatic-sounding Jewish *motifs* featured throughout the composition might have been Shostakovich's way of evoking the Holocaust and the annihilation of the Jews by the Nazis, which also paradigms the mass murder and criminality that occurred in the Soviet Union. His incorporation of previous works such

---

164. Ho and Feofanov, 717–18.

as the First and Fifth Symphonies, as well as his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, further supports the fact that the Eighth String Quartet was an autobiographical reflection.<sup>165</sup>

But there remains another pressing question: on what basis is Fay rejecting Shostakovich's association with the Jewish community? One can only assume this is her own scholarly opinion, which can be further seen in her methodology for writing *Shostakovich: A Life*. I noticed two key methodology points noted by Fay that might help us understand how she draws her seemingly bogus conclusions:

1) Fay's rejection of the validity of *Testimony*.

According to Fay, memoirs are a 'treacherous resource' for a historian because one's reminiscences can be unreliable and distorted due to faulty memory, selective amnesia, wishful thinking, and exaggeration. She also claims that there are no reliable resources for the basic facts about Shostakovich's life and work.<sup>166</sup> If Fay believes such things, why does she depend on primary sources as evidence for Shostakovich's position? Surely, those primary sources, too, would be unreliable, but Fay chooses to pick which sources she thinks are trustworthy. Malcolm Hamrick Brown, another vocal critic of Shostakovich and someone who supports much of those views expressed by Laurel Fay and Richard Taruskin, notes that Fay believed the memoirs of Shostakovich to be a forgery. But in her book, *Shostakovich: A Life*, Fay only indirectly and briefly challenges her critics.<sup>167</sup> Given this new information, how can we truly accept Fay's remarks, given that she did not fully engage with those who

---

165. Ho and Feofanov, 161, 619, 628, 632.

166. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 2–3.

167. Malcolm Hamrick Brown, *A Shostakovich Casebook* (Indiana University Press, 2004), 347.

criticized her when writing her book? As I have noted earlier, this thesis does not serve to evaluate the validity of *Testimony*, but Laurel Fay's rejection of its contents appears to have resulted from indirect communication with those scholars whom she rejects.

- 2) Relying on newspapers and other documents from the Soviet Union to provide a chronology of Shostakovich's life and work rather than incorporating information from a secondary source.<sup>168</sup>

Fay's methodology of relying on primary sources from the Soviet era, in many ways, contradicts her hesitation to rely on an individual's memoirs. Fay claims that one cannot trust memoirs because they often contain distorted or inaccurate information, but shows no hesitation to trust the information published in Soviet newspapers, which often contain some degree of distortion. One need only turn to the above example, where *Pravda* touted universal respect for all ethnic groups in the Soviet Union, to affirm my statement. Given the high prevalence of propaganda in the Soviet Union, how can Fay both accept the documents and information published before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and reject the accounts from Shostakovich in his memoirs? One might claim that my statements are wrong, for I utilize information from secondary sources and the memoirs of Shostakovich. But these resources, unlike many of those raised by Fay, are supported by interviews or documents published after 1991. Given that Fay claimed that 'memory is fickle,' it is unsurprising that she relies on older information rather than those that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

---

168. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life*, 4.

It is also odd that on the second page of her book *Shostakovich: A Life*, Fay states, “What do we know of his life? Shostakovich made a point of speaking through his music, not about it.<sup>169</sup> Why does Laurel Fay make this remark at the outset of her book but reject the possibility that Shostakovich used Jewish themes to expose his own persecution and the persecution of Soviet Jewry? If Fay believes that Shostakovich spoke through his music, why does she claim that *From Jewish Folk Poetry* was nothing more than an ordinary song cycle? If he spoke through music, could *From Jewish Folk Poetry* have been his way of speaking about the persecution of Soviet Jewry? I think the answer is clear: yes, *From Jewish Folk Poetry* most certainly spoke about the Party’s attack on Shostakovich’s identity and the identity of Soviet Jewry.

Shostakovich’s desire to speak through his music is echoed in *Testimony*:

I am horrified by people who think the commentaries to a symphony are more important than the symphony. What counts with them is a large number of brave words—and the music itself can be pathetic and woebegone. This is real perversion. I don’t need brave words on music and I don’t think anyone does. We need brave music. Music in which the composer expresses his thoughts truthfully, and does it in such a way that the greatest possible number of decent citizens in his country and other countries will recognize and accept that music, thereby understanding his country and people. That is the meaning of composing music, as I see it. . . . They say that music is comprehensible without translation. I want to believe in that, but for now I see that music needs many accompanying words to make it understood in another country.<sup>170</sup>

I share Shostakovich’s concern about those who place the commentary above the music itself. One need not receive a lecture about a musical work to enjoy it, for it can damage

---

169. Fay, 2.

170. Volkov, *Testimony*, 86–87. ‘Commentaries’ refer to any notes or accompanying narrative that might proceed the performance of a musical work. Essentially, commentaries can describe the background or story about the musical work through spoken or written dialogue. Shostakovich was therefore horrified by those who placed such material above the music itself.

the song's impact on the listener. Unfortunately, as noted by Shostakovich, those from another country may not fully grasp a piece's message and, therefore, might require additional information to understand it in its intended context. So why does Laurel Fay reject such claims? If we return to the methodologies I noted above, Fay might believe that one will 'forget' or 'pick and choose' sections of a musical work to accept, or that one will 'exaggerate' their reaction to a work's performance.

Fay's remarks do not appear to be supported by strong evidence. Her methodology is to reject *Testimony*—in which Shostakovich discusses his association with Soviet Jewry—and heavily rely on primary sources from the Soviet Union. While primary sources often contain useful information, one should approach them cautiously, especially those sources from a country that has already promoted propaganda. It is also odd that Fay believes *From Jewish Folk Poetry* served as another ordinary song cycle to appease the Party. This makes Shostakovich appear to be clueless of any suffering of Soviet Jewry, which is false. If Shostakovich wanted to 'appease' the Party, he would most certainly not use a song cycle that contained Jewish themes. We can, therefore, refute Fay's claims that *From Jewish Folk Poetry* was nothing more than an ordinary song cycle and confirm that its text exposes the persecution of Shostakovich's identity and the identity of Soviet Jewry.

3. Lullaby

Bonnier than any is my little boy – a light in the darkness.  
Your father is in chains in Siberia,  
Kept in prison by the tsar.  
Sleep, lullay, lullay.  
As she rocks your cradle, your mother sheds her tears.  
When you grow up, you will understand what sears her  
Your father is in far-off Siberia,  
Whilst I endure poverty here.  
But you should sleep without a care,  
Lullay, lullay.  
My grief is blacker than the night itself,  
Sleep, my dear, whilst no sleep comes to me.  
Sleep, my fine one, sleep, my lovely little son,  
Spi, lullay, lullay.

6. An abandoned father

The old peddler, Ele, put on his coat.  
They say his daughter's gone off with a policeman.  
'Tsirile, my daughter!  
Come back to your father  
And I'll give you fancy dresses for your wedding.  
Tsirile, my daughter!  
I'll buy you earrings and rings for your fingers.  
Tsirile, my daughter!  
And I'll find a handsome young man  
For you to marry into the bargain.  
Tsirile, my daughter!'  
'I don't need your fancy wares,  
I don't need your rings either.  
All I want is to marry this fine policeman!..  
Officer, hurry please,  
Would you be so kind  
As to send this old Jew packing.'  
'Tsirile, my daughter!  
Come back to me! Come back to me!...'



7. Song of want

Above the attic sleeps the roof,  
Sound asleep beneath the straw.  
In the cradle there sleeps a child,  
Naked and unswaddled.

Hop, hop, ever higher!  
The goat is eating the straw off the roof.  
Hop, hop, ever higher!  
The goat is eating the straw off the roof, oy!

The cradle is in the attic,  
A spider weaves its woe in it.  
It devours all my joy,  
Leaving me nothing but want.

Hop, hop, ever higher!

The cockerel is in the attic,  
With its bright-red cockscomb.  
Oy, wife, can't you at least borrow  
A crust of stale bread for the children.

Hop, hop, ever higher!

9. The good life

Dear friends, in gloomy bygone years,  
I never sang songs about the fields so wide.  
Not for me did the fields bear their crops,  
Not for me did the dewdrops fall.  
In a cramped cellar, in the dank gloom,  
I used to live, worn out by need,  
And a sad song rose from the basement,  
A song of grief and of my unparalleled suffering.

Flow merrily, little river, on the collective farm,  
Rush to give my greetings to my friends,  
Tell them that the collective farm is now my home,  
And that a blossoming tree stands by my window.  
For me the fields now bear their crops,  
I am fed with milk and honey.  
I am happy, so tell my brothers:  
I will compose songs to the fields of the collective farm!

\*\*Used with translator's permission. (C) Philip Ross Bullock

## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Nathanael Batson graduated from the University of Maine in 2024 with dual degrees in music and political science and minors in disability studies, legal studies, and leadership studies. In addition to earning the distinction of summa cum laude, Nathanael also earned highest honors for his thesis, "Shostakovich, Soviet Cultural Policies, and the Fifth and Thirteenth Symphonies: A Contextual Evaluation."

Born in Fairfield, Maine, Nathanael has received various honors and awards. He was inducted into Alpha Lambda Delta, Pi Sigma Alpha, and Pi Kappa Lambda, and was the recipient of the John M. Nickerson Scholarship at the University of Maine in 2022 and 2023. Nathanael is also active in various organizations and activities. In 2022, he was nominated to serve as secretary for the American Council of the Blind of Maine, and in 2023 was appointed by the Maine Governor to serve as a member of the Maine State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

Nathanael has written various musical pieces throughout his college career, including the theme for the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center Podcast, "Maine Policy Matters." Nathanael played the trumpet in various ensembles at the University of Maine, including the pep band, jazz band, jazz combo, concert band, marching band, trumpet ensemble, and commencement ensemble. Nathanael hopes to further his education in a music-related field.