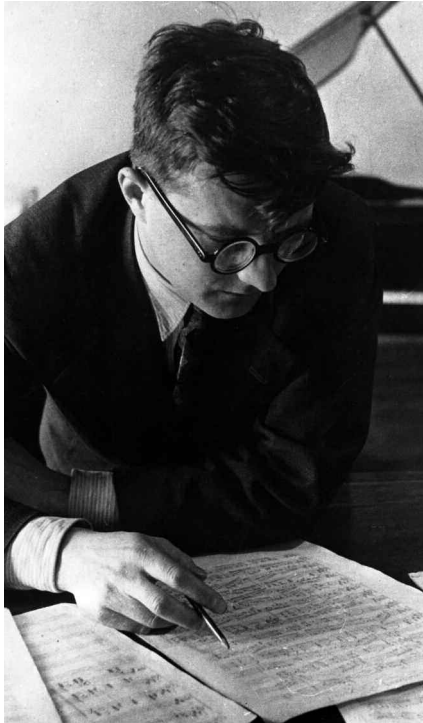


Against the odds

Brian Morton writes about the challenges of Soviet life and the music of *Concerto* composer, Dmitri Shostakovich.



A young Dmitri Shostakovich at work on a score; photo © Underwood & Underwood / CORBIS

The British weather. Capricious. Unreliable. Four seasons in a day. We obsess, and we endure. But now imagine a society in which every spring is a false spring, every lull simply a prelude to fresh and destructive storms, in which the people are told they bathe in the warm sun of a Wise Leader and a Great Idea, but shiver uncontrollably, either in fear or want. And imagine a society whose guiding principle means exactly what the leadership says it means: one thing today, a different thing tomorrow.

Between 1917 and the fall of the Soviet empire at the end of the 1980s, Russia was such a society. Any Russian born in the first decades of the 20th century would have passed the biblical lifespan under a regime that combined cruelty and capriciousness with a Humpty-Dumpty logic that meant even the most cherished concepts – ‘Socialist Realism’, Communism itself – were subject to sudden and absolute about-faces, that meant behaviour that was praised as socially useful one day could be damned as counter-revolutionary and punished by exile or death the next. Reality was nothing more than the whim of the leader.

To some extent, Russians were used to this kind of thing. There is an old, black joke: ‘Meet the new boss; same as the old boss’. Life under Lenin or Stalin, or even Khrushchev, wasn’t so very different from life under the Tsars, except that the Communists had at their disposal the technologies of modern life – fast transport, mass

communications – to enforce their changeable will. For creative artists, there were some perverse benefits to living in a command economy and under permanent political scrutiny. In such a society art is at least deemed important, an expression of society’s needs and triumphs, and not merely a pleasing diversion as in the decadent West. The imposition of rules and boundaries often, ironically, affords the artist a realm of creative challenge. If, in painting, abstraction is proscribed as ‘bourgeois’ or ‘reactionary’ or ‘formalist’, how does the artist manage to satisfy himself as well as his masters with work that is as pleasing in form as it is in content? If, in music, dissonance and minor keys signal defeatism or protest, how does a prominent composer, who will have to pass every fresh work in front of a committee of – largely non-musical – ‘experts’ convince them that it does not conceal slighting references to the leadership?

Dmitri Shostakovich, one of the greatest composers of the 20th century and arguably the last great symphonist in the classical tradition, endured this kind of thing for most of a public life that began with the precocious triumph of his Symphony No.1 in F minor, a student work premiered when the composer was just 20, and lasted until 1975 and the glorious summing-up of his Op.147 Viola Sonata.

Shostakovich was born in St Petersburg in 1906, to a liberal-populist family. A long, tired debate about whether

he was ever a 'loyal Communist' is easily answered. Shostakovich never subscribed to dialectical materialism (the philosophical basis of many strands of Marxism), deplored authoritarianism in any shape or form, but survived by keeping his deepest feelings and his antipathy to the regime carefully buried. An attentive listener quickly learns to pick up the clues: crude two-beat rhythms usually indicate Stalin, threes usually suggest the indomitable Russian people, while the composer himself increasingly appears in the work as D-S-C-H which, like B-A-C-H, reveals in German notation (S = 'Es' or E flat; H = B natural) a little musical monogram.

Shostakovich was required by the authorities to produce work which adhered to the principles of Socialist Realism; his life mirrored the comment of E.J. Sieyès after the French: 'J'ai vécu' – 'I survived'. But only just, in Shostakovich's case. One of his greatest works, and the one in which he perhaps invested most love and pride, was the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. It was finished in the last weeks of 1932 and premiered in Moscow and Leningrad in January 1934. Contrary to the received view, it was not a critical failure but a highly acclaimed success, until Joseph Stalin, who was in any case steering the Soviet Union through yet another ideological wind-shift, decided that the character of the police chief was modelled on himself (he was probably right) and ordered a savage criticism of Shostakovich to be published in the state newspaper, *Pravda* (somewhat ironically translating as 'truth').

This was the first, but not the last time that the composer was declared a non-person. For some time after, Shostakovich became familiar with the 'little

suitcase'; the small bag suspect persons kept packed with essentials against the midnight knock that would see them taken off to Siberia or to a sand-strewn cellar. Not until the success of his D minor Symphony No.5 in 1937, to which Shostakovich allowed a Party hack to append the inscription, 'A Soviet artist's response to just criticism', was he publically acknowledged again.

For a time – and this may well have saved him – Shostakovich was the most famous composer in the world. A wartime performance of his Symphony No.7 (*To the City of Leningrad*) in the besieged city by an orchestra of old, injured and malnourished men, performing during a lull provided by a barrage specifically designed to silence the German guns for a time, has an iconic significance in modern music. The score of the *Leningrad Symphony* was smuggled out of Russia on microfilm and played around the world. Shostakovich had taken a hand as a fireman during the siege, and an image of him, in an absurd brass helmet, appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in the United States. When he eventually visited the former ally in 1949 the same people who had praised his courage and that of his country now turned on him as a Communist stooge.

When Stalin died, things seemed easier for Shostakovich and other artists. There was even talk of a 'Thaw'. And yet the spring of 1957, during which Shostakovich visited a festival in Prague (this a full decade before the famous 'Prague Spring' of Dubček and Svoboda), was merely the prelude to a cold and harsh summer during which Nikita Khrushchev eliminated all vestiges of opposition to his rule and launched a fresh campaign against 'anti-social elements' in the arts.



The cover of *Time* magazine, 2 July 1942, with Shostakovich dressed as a Fire Marshall; image: Time & Life Pictures / Getty Images



Miyako Yoshida and Kevin O'Hare in the pas de deux from MacMillan's *Concerto*; photos: Bill Cooper

Three large-scale works occupied Shostakovich over the course of the year. The last and least known was an operetta celebrating (ironically?) the new Cheryomushki high-rise flats Khrushchev had ordered for the heroic Soviet work force. The most important work of the three was the Symphony No.11 in G minor (*The Year 1905*) which seemed to celebrate an earlier Russian revolution and the sacrifice of demonstrators to Tsarist police, but was actually a sad and angry protest against the crushing of the Hungarian uprising the previous year, an intellectual trauma throughout the Communist world. Never more thoroughly had Shostakovich hidden his true feelings behind a mask of propriety and political correctness. Here he played the 'Holy Fool' to perfection.

The other work of the year was the Piano Concerto No.2 in F major, which comprises the music for Kenneth MacMillan's ballet *Concerto*. In 1966, newly appointed as the Director of Deutsche Oper Ballett in Berlin, he choreographed *Concerto* with the aim of honing the classical technique of his new company. He followed the shape of the music very closely and created one of his trademark *pas de deux* for the central movement, the opening of which was inspired by seeing Lynn Seymour warming up at the barre.

Despite its popularity and infectious tunes, the concerto has never been the most highly regarded of Shostakovich's works. He himself said to a fellow-composer that it had 'no artistic value,' and it has even been dismissed as 'Shostakovich-lite'. It is, indeed, one of his most untroubling scores, almost Tchaikovsky-like in the beautiful 'Andante' second movement, and full of curious references, like the apparent scale exercises in

the final movement, which are explained by the fact that the concerto was written as a gift for the composer's pianist son Maxim, who had just turned 19. It is safe music in the way that the 11th Symphony is dangerous music, both in sound and substance.

Shostakovich's estranged wife had died not long before. The euphoria that had followed Stalin's death had largely faded – 'Meet the new boss, same as the old boss' – and Shostakovich's own reputation and ability to meet his commitments were still uncertain. 'Minor' as it probably is, the Second Piano Concerto celebrates two things that were central to the composer's thinking and beliefs: the moral nature of music-making (Russians, and not just Communist Russians, think of art as having meaning, above all) and the intense physical and mental discipline that goes into creativity. Of all Shostakovich's scores – and there were several early ones specifically for the new ballet – this is one of the most appropriate for dance. It celebrates new steps (a son's burgeoning career), it celebrates the sheer labour of creation (those unexpected exercises) and it affords, in the midst of confusion and horror, a glimpse of a transcendent joy. Shostakovich did not believe in God – he was if anything a militant atheist – and claimed no knowledge of any spiritual realm, but he did passionately believe that within the physical body and its actions there was the capacity to create something that combated the surrounding ugliness and mitigated the world's violence.

BRIAN MORTON is a journalist, writer and broadcaster, and author of *Shostakovich: His Life and His Music*. He also presented BBC Radio 3's jazz programme, *Impressions*, and *In Tune*.