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Skylar Schaffer

Ouachita Baptist University

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Russian Nationalism: Dmitri Shostakovich

Skylar Schaffer, Junior BME



Abstract

Born in the year 1906 in St. Petersburg, Russia, was Dmitri Shostakovich. The son of a piano teacher and an engineer, Shostakovich began playing the piano early in childhood, during which he learned his love for learning music and his love for composition. Less than twenty years after his birth, Soviet control began, and by 1924 Joseph Stalin gained control over the Soviet Union. As Shostakovich rose as a composer, so did Stalinistic Russia. Soon World War II would begin, allowing Stalin and Adolf Hitler to rise higher in the midst of chaos and destruction. It was Shostakovich who stuck to his own beliefs and composed against the ideologies and requests given by Stalin.

Over the course of World War II, Shostakovich composed five major symphonies that are widely known as *The War Symphonies*. These included symphonies four through nine. When writing his seventh symphony, Shostakovich was living in Leningrad, where a siege was about to begin. Now, it is known as the Leningrad Symphony, giving hope to those suffering and avenging the destruction done by Stalin and his army to not only his hometown, but to the world. During the composition of Shostakovich's other symphonies, Stalin publicly persecuted and denounced Shostakovich as a composer. At one point during World War II, Shostakovich was brought in and questioned by the KGB for plotting against Stalin. Thus began his paranoia and timidity. Knowing the risks though, Shostakovich continued fighting for justice against Stalin's dictatorship the best way he could: through music.

Biography

Dmitri Shostakovich was born on September 25, 1906 in St. Petersburg, Russia. He was the son of an engineer and a piano teacher. In 1919, he entered the Petrograd Conservatory where he studied piano with Leonid Nikolayev and composition with Aleksandr Glazunov. In 1928, when Joseph Stalin put his First Five-Year Plan into action, more and more restraints were put on artists and composers as popular music was demanded. Shostakovich was first publicly denounced by Stalin when he attended his opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* in 1936. From then on, Shostakovich lived in fear of arrest and persecution. Over the next few years, he wrote many symphonies and chamber works, including *Symphony No. 5* and in 1941, found himself stranded in Leningrad when the German forces began a 900-day siege in the city, he dedicated his *Symphony No. 7* to those living in Leningrad as well as those facing the destruction of World War II. Over the course of his career, Shostakovich produced 15 symphonies, multiple concerti, as well as many chamber works. Shostakovich died August 9, 1975 due in part to heart disease as well as a fight with ALS. Though he has passed, his music and legacy lives on and his fights against Stalin have not been forgotten.

Methodology

Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District: premiering in 1934, this opera has a deeper meaning than lust, murder, and love. It serves as a cry for help, for personal freedom, and for individual rights to be respected.

Symphony no. 5: premiering in 1937, this symphony was written about an artist who would be judged just as much by politics as he would by his talents.

Symphony no. 7: premiering in 1941, this symphony was a depiction of the Siege of Leningrad as well as the struggles with fascism but not just the Nazi form.

Symphony no. 10: premiering summer of 1953, just after Stalin's death, this symphony is a depiction of the years under Stalin.

Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District

Written about a wife who fell in love with her husband's worker, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* is an opera based on the novel by Nikolai Leskov. Telling the story of love, lust, and murder, the opera's deeper meaning of a plea for individual rights did not go unnoticed by Joseph Stalin, who went to a showing after two successful years of running. Before the beginning of Act 3, Stalin up and left and two days later, Shostakovich was publicly denounced for the first time. From then on, the opera was banned, and Shostakovich lived in fear of arrest and murder.

Symphony no. 5

Not only is this symphony Shostakovich's most famous symphony, but it is also the work that put him back on track. It tells the story of a Soviet artist's reply to just criticism. It features colorful brass, strings, doom-laden fanfares, lamentful sections, and a powerful and beautiful end to the piece by the brass and timpani. Shostakovich was put back on track, when after the premiere, had a 45-minute long standing ovation.

Symphony no. 7

A personal favorite of mine, this symphony was written at a time of darkness when German forces began a 900-day siege over Leningrad, the city where Shostakovich and his family were living. During this time, Shostakovich served as a roof-top firefighter. He started the symphony before the siege, but soon, he changed the trajectory to better give hope to those in Leningrad as well as to put the struggles of fascism into light. The symphony begins very light and peaceful, but soon changes when a snare drum solo enters, depicting the upcoming military siege. The once sweet melody becomes twisted and eerie. Over the next three movements, Shostakovich depicts times of sadness and of questioning reality. The ending is questioning but overall triumph as the siege ends. Shostakovich was worried that the siege would prevent a premiere from happening, so he micro-filmed this symphony and sent it to ABC, where the ABC Symphony filmed and broadcasted the symphony for all to hear.

Symphony no. 10

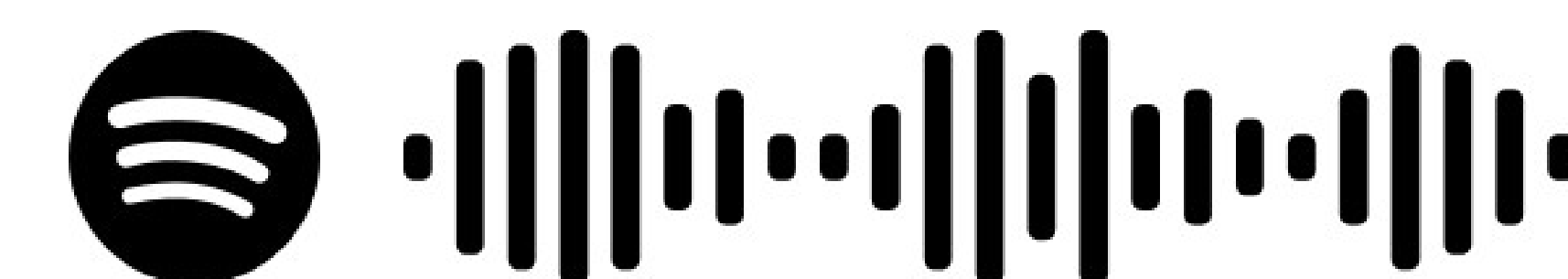
Written the summer after Stalin died, this symphony depicts the Soviet years under Stalin. It is a doom-filled symphony that is full of terror as it gives justice to the two million plus who died at the direct and indirect hand of Stalin. The last two minutes feature triumph as it depicts the ending of the reign of terror. Through this symphony, Stalin finally got what he wanted: a symphony written about him.

Shostakovich Against Stalin

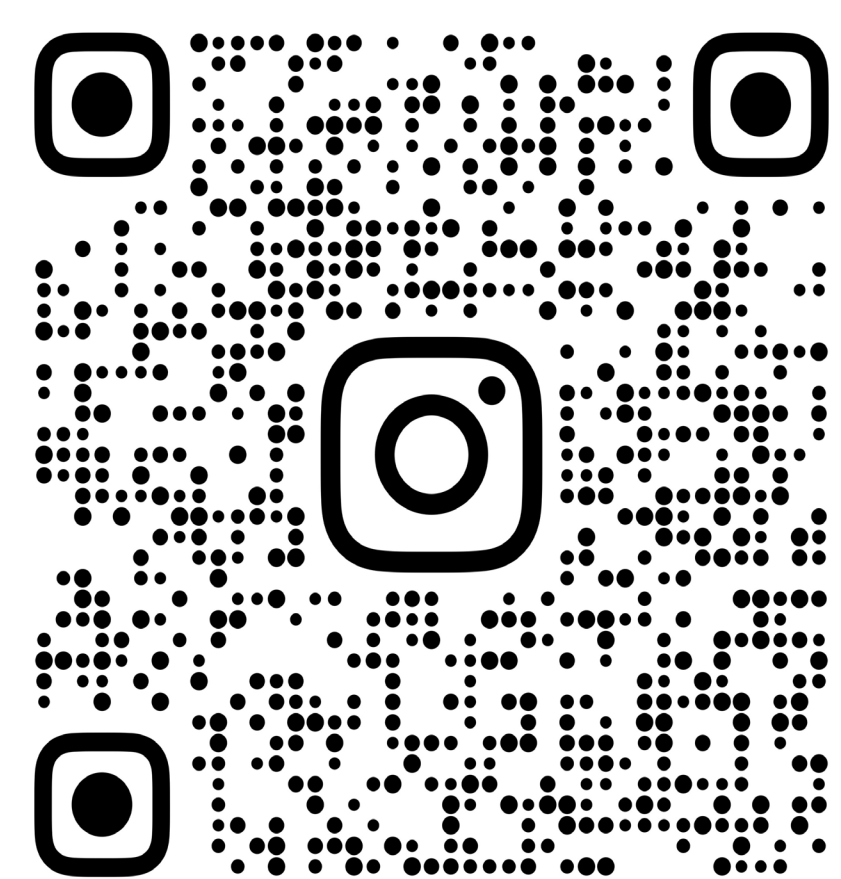
As stated before, Stalin and Shostakovich had an overall shaky relationship. History tells us that Stalin would stop anyone who got in his way and Shostakovich lived in fear of arrest or persecution. Stalin denounced Shostakovich on three different occasions, one of which belittling him to "less than human." Many of Shostakovich's works depict topics against the Stalinistic reign, including topics regarding political freedom, individual rights and freedoms, and the terrifying truth to the way Stalin reigned.

Impacts on International Nationalism

In comparison to today's time, people all over the world are disappearing randomly. All over, there are stories of random common people, artists, political leaders, etcetera. For example, 30,000 people went missing in Argentina during the 1970's. These children were kidnapped by Argentina's brutal military dictatorship. This is just one example of many years of random disappearances and random deaths all over the world. Shostakovich constantly went against the leadership of Stalin because he knew his people deserved better and more freedom. Rebellion against political leaders is everywhere, take Hong Kong a few years ago as another example. Nationalism is everywhere, but it is important to realize the negatives of putting all trust in political leaders because you never know how they may actually be.



For a fun remake of *Symphony no. 5*, scan this QR code!



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