




GRESHAM COLLEGE

26TH MARCH 2019

SHOSTAKOVICH'S LADY MACBETH OF MTENSK

PROFESSOR MARINA FROLOVA-WALKER

Soviet Policies on Music and The Young Shostakovich

1917	February and October Revolutions	Shostakovich is 11
1918-1921	Civil War Agitprop art Artistic avant-garde	Shostakovich at Petrograd Conservatoire
1921-1927	The New Economic Policy: stability, contacts with the West	Shostakovich graduates with his First Symphony; Writes Second Symphony for the 10 th Anniversary of the Revolution
1928-32	Stalin comes to power after years of collective government; First Five-Year Plan: industrialization, collectivization, cultural revolution	Shostakovich's opera <i>The Nose</i> and his topical ballets on Soviet themes
1932-1936	Introduction of the doctrine of Socialist Realism	Shostakovich's conservative turn: First Piano Concerto, Cello Sonata, opera <i>Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk</i>

1918-24	Nationalization Preservation of old institutions Idea of Proletarian Culture (The Proletcult) Avant-garde put to use for agitation and propaganda
1924-27	Private initiative wins out due to NEP Government has almost no control over culture beyond basic censorship Popular art forms flourish Exchange with the West Encouraging Soviet topics through competitions and commissions
1928-31	Radical "proletarian" groups win out Ideological dictate and cultural austerity Government only partially lends its support to this
1932	All cultural factions disbanded Government takes control "Creative unions" formed
1934	Doctrine of Socialist Realism promulgated
1936	New ministry formed to oversee culture Government takes full ideological control Stylistic narrowing around a few positive models and against negative models – such as <i>Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk</i>



Leskov

Nikolai Leskov's novella *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1865)

- Ironic title
- Presented as a "feature story" for a newspaper.
- Dispassionate towards the events.
- Sarcastic epigraph: one blushes when singing the first song.
- A strong woman oppressed by her lack of power and by boredom.
- The motivation for Katerina's behaviour is her awakened passion.
- "a lightning born of the dark, making still more vivid the impenetrable darkness of a merchants' life".
- Four murders and a suicide.

"Katerina Lvovna was now prepared to go into the fire, into the water, to prison and onto the cross for Sergei. He made her love him so that there was no limit to her loyalty."

Shostakovich's made several significant changes to the story, all in the direction of presenting Katerina as a more sympathetic character:

- He removed the murder of a child who is an heir to her husband's property.
- He makes her remaining murders unpremeditated, a spontaneous reaction to violence or mockery, or the result of panic.
- He provides her with a "feminist" scene, where she intercedes for a Aksinya, a victim of sexual harassment.
- He heightens the element of social critique in the spirit of "class war".
- He seeks to win our support for her through the vivid representation of her emotional life in the music, while denying the other characters this advantage.
- Shostakovich accordingly transforms Katerina into a near heroine.

The Event and Its Aftermath

26 January: Stalin and other members of the government see a production of *Lady Macbeth*. Shostakovich expects to be received afterwards by Stalin, since another composer had been accorded the same privilege recently in the same circumstances, but the delegation leaves before the end of the performance.

28 January: Heavily critical article in *Pravda*, *Lady Macbeth* is taken off the stage at all venues.

7 February: another critical article, this time on his ballet *The Limpid Stream*

same day: Shostakovich meets the culture minister Platon Kerzhentsev and asks for an audience with Stalin.

Over the following months, there was a spate of meetings of composers and other "culture workers" to discuss what should be done across the arts in light of the *Pravda* article. Shostakovich is no longer at the centre of the campaign and is not required to participate or respond. It becomes clear that campaign had been planned as a wide-ranging offensive to embed Socialist Realism in all the arts and that Shostakovich's opera was ultimately only a pretext. His notoriety lingers, however. His income drops and he is expected to show evidence of remorse and reform by writing another piece of an appropriate nature.

11 December: he withdraws his Fourth Symphony not long before the planned premiere, partly because the musicians were complaining, partly because it is no longer prudent. Shostakovich received official forgiveness after his Fifth Symphony is premiered in November 1937, bringing the more classically-oriented aspects of his recent work to the fore as the basis of his new style.



Lyricism and The Grotesque

The opera combines two types of theatre: Meyerholdian and Stanislavskian, switching between them from scene to scene. The Meyerholdian “theatre of the grotesque” is conveyed through a distortion of familiar idioms and popular genres (waltzes, polkas, galops, parlour songs) and serves to dehumanize the negative characters. This “grotesque style” had already been developed by Shostakovich for satirizing negative characters in his ballets (the Priest, the Bureaucrat, etc.)

Stanislavskian theatre seeks the full immersion of the audience in the spectacle and invites their empathy. Empathy is largely reserved for Katerina. It is achieved by using a more lyrical idiom for her ariosos, which are drawn from the Russian 19th-century “romance” style, but this is employed without the blatant distortions imposed on other styles; there is an updating of harmony and greater complexity, but this underlines the earnestness of her music – it is not an ironic device.

Shostakovich adds his own “commentary” through the symphonic interludes (e.g. the Passacaglia or the outburst before Katerina’s final arioso). *Lady Macbeth* is thus a more conventional opera than *The Nose*, which adopted the Meyerholdian grotesque approach throughout.

The setting (19th-century Russia) brings with it some local colour which is achieved through Katerina’s “romance style” but also through various references to 19th-century Russian opera, e.g. Katerina’s feigned lament uses a theme from *Boris Godunov* (where it also functions as the feigned lament of the people); the final prisoners’ chorus brings a gloomy if cathartic closure akin to the ending of *Boris Godunov*.

This is one of Shostakovich’s more notably “Russian” works; he had generally been influenced far more by the Austro-German Mahler, Hindemith and Krenek than by any of his Russian predecessors or contemporaries.

Sex and feminism

The explicit sex scene did most to earn the opera its notoriety, not only in the Soviet Union, but also in the US, where it prompted one critic to coin the term “pornophony”. “Pornophony” is a more informative label than the critic perhaps realised, because the shock of the scene does not depend on the production (1930s productions were tame by today’s lurid standards) but is already conveyed with great vigour and detail in the music.

The grotesque nature of the music in this scene means that different productions can choose to highlight the violence or the comedy with equal plausibility.

Over recent months, culture workers have discussed what should be done across the arts in light of the #MeToo twitter campaign, which is likely to affect future productions, and has already had an impact on the presentation of the opera in university lectures.

Compared to Leskov’s original story, where Katerina was presented as driven by desire and passion, Shostakovich gives her a more complex range of motives. He intensifies the level of group sexual violence towards Aksinya and makes Katerina respond to it in a brave and intelligent way, shaming the men through her “feminist” arioso. At the same time, his music responds to the “spark” that runs between Katerina and Sergei in the following episode

In the sex scene, Shostakovich also intensifies the level of violence through the music, harking back to the Aksinya episode, but also looking forward to the flogging scene, where it is Sergei’s turn to suffer. Sexual violence is presented as leading to other kinds of violence Sergei is indicted by this music regardless of the fact that Katerina eventually falls for him and becomes a willing participant.

The theme of violence and oppression continues into Act IV, where Katerina is subjected to mockery as the prisoners turn against her; with no escape, she resorts to further violence.



Shostakovich planned *Lady Macbeth* as the first of a series of operas about strong women in different circumstances, and the next instalment would have featured a member of the “People’s Will”, a revolutionary terrorist organization of the late 19th century.

Thus, the opera is about a tragedy of a strong-willed woman who is oppressed by her situation and rebels against it through violence. The ambivalences and moral dilemmas that the opera presents allow it to transcend its original place and time to become a universal drama. It presents a message of empathy towards the oppressed and fallen, which connects this opera strongly to its natural predecessor, Berg’s *Wozzeck*, and to its successor, Britten’s *Peter Grimes*.

We must ask ourselves, however, which opera we want to see. Shostakovich made a new version, *Katerina Izmailova*, in the 1960s, in which all sexual references are toned down. He insisted (and his widow continues to insist) that this was the version he wanted to see on stage henceforth, and that it was not merely a concession to the Soviet authorities.

As a backlash against Soviet attitudes, the 1979 recording of *Lady Macbeth* was not, in fact, a revival of the version staged in the mid-1930s, but a premiere of the even more titillating libretto and score that had already been toned down before it was first staged in 1934.

This first version was written by the 28-year old Shostakovich in the climate of permissiveness that had survived from the 1920s, but rather than accept it without debate as the “authentic” version, we should preserve our right to consider the 30s staged version and the radical revision of the 60s as viable options for future productions, each with their own musical, dramatic and historical points of interest.

“This is Chaos, Not Music” [aka “Muddle instead of Music”] - On the opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (*Pravda*, 28 January 1936)

Transl. by Jonathan Walker and Marina Frolova-Walker

As the general cultural development of our country has progressed, so the need for more good music has grown. At no other time, and in no other place have composers been faced with such a grateful audience. The masses of the people are waiting for good songs – and equally for good instrumental works and good operas.

At various theatres today, this new, culturally educated Soviet public is presented with Shostakovich’s opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. The theatres offer it as a novelty, as some sort of achievement. Servile critics praise the opera to the skies, trying to manufacture a resounding success for the work. Although serious and substantive criticism could have aided the young composer in his future work, instead all he hears are fulsome compliments.

From the opera’s first moments, the astonished listener is assaulted by a stream of sounds that is – by design – inharmonious and chaotic. Snatches of melody and embryonic musical phrases are drowned, surface a final time, then finally disappear back into the general din of screeching and screaming. Such music is hard to follow and quite impossible to memorize.

And so, it goes on almost throughout the opera. Singing is replaced by shouting. If once in a while the composer accidentally stumbles upon a simple, comprehensible melody, then immediately, as if frightened by the prospect, he throws himself into dense thickets of musical chaos, at times the purest cacophony. The expressivity needed by the listener is replaced by rabid rhythms. The expression of passion is left to musical noise.

Yet none of this results from any lack of talent on the part of the composer, nor from any inability to express simple and strong feelings through music. Instead, this is music that has deliberately been constructed in a jumbled manner, so that there is nothing to remind us of classical opera, symphonic sonorities, or simple, accessible musical speech. The music is based on the negation of opera – on the same principle generally used by leftist art to negate simplicity, realism, comprehensibility, or the natural sound of speech in the theatre. This



is the transplantation of “Meyerholdism” into opera and music but multiplied many times over. This is leftist chaos, not natural human music. The ability of good music to grip the masses is sacrificed to petit-bourgeois formalism, which pretends to be original while merely indulging in cheap playacting. This is a game of unintelligibility that can end in tears.

The dangers of this trend in Soviet opera are very clear. These foolish leftist deformities in opera stem from the same source as leftist deformities in painting, poetry, pedagogy and science. Petit-bourgeois “innovation” would cut us off from true art, true science or true literature.

The composer of *Lady Macbeth* had to borrow the neurotic, convulsive, epileptic music of jazz in order to provide some of his characters with “passion”.

At a time when the touchstone of our criticism is socialist realism – and this certainly includes music criticism – Shostakovich’s opera puts the coarsest naturalism on stage. Monotonously, all characters are presented in their most bestial colours – merchants and people alike. The predatory merchant’s wife, whose path to money and power was paved with the corpses of her victims, is here presented as somehow a “victim” of bourgeois society. Leskov’s novel of everyday life is here encumbered with meanings wholly absent from the original.

And how coarse, primitive and vulgar all of this is! The music wheezes, groans, pants and gasps for breath in order to present the love scenes as naturalistically as possible. And “love” is smeared all over the opera in the most vulgar manner. The merchants’ double bed is placed centre stage. And it is on this bed that all the “problems” are solved. Flogging and death by poison are presented in the same coarsely naturalistic style.

The composer probably never set about the task of listening to the demands of the Soviet audiences. It is as if he deliberately encoded his music, jumbling all the sounds so that it would be accessible only to formalist aesthetes devoid of all healthy tastes. He has ignored the demand of Soviet culture – that we remove coarseness and savagery from every corner of Soviet life. This paean to merchants’ lust is dubbed a satire by some critics. But there is no trace of satire here. Using every means of musical and dramatic expression at his disposal, the composer is trying to win over the public’s sympathies to the coarse and vulgar deeds and desires of the merchant’s wife, Katerina Izmailova.

Lady Macbeth has enjoyed considerable success with the bourgeois public abroad. But isn’t this because the opera is chaotic and apolitical? Isn’t it because the opera’s twitching, clamorous, neurotic music titillates the perverted tastes of bourgeois audiences?

Our theatres have put a lot of effort into a conscientious production of Shostakovich’s opera. Actors have revealed significant talent in overcoming the noise, clamour and screeching that emanates from the orchestra. They use their acting powers in an attempt to compensate for the opera’s melodic poverty. Alas, this has only thrown the opera’s coarse naturalism into relief. Talented acting deserves recognition, but their wasted efforts are only to be pitied.

Fragments of Andrey Zhdanov’s Speech at the First Congress of Soviet Writers, 1934

Source: www.marxists.org; emphases added by MFW

Our Soviet writer derives the material for his works of art, his subject matter, images, artistic language and speech, from the life and experience of the men and women of Dneprostroy, of Magnitostroy. Our writer draws his material from the heroic epic of the Chelyuskin expedition, from the experience of our collective farms, from the creative action that is seething in all corners of our country.

...

In our country the main heroes of works of literature are the active builders of a new life -working men and women, men and women collective farmers, Party members, business managers, engineers, members of the Young Communist League, Pioneers. Such are the chief types and the chief heroes of our Soviet literature. Our literature is impregnated with enthusiasm and the spirit of heroic deeds. It is optimistic, but not optimistic in accordance with any “inward,” animal instinct. It is optimistic in essence, because it is the literature of the rising



class of the proletariat, the only progressive and advanced class. Our Soviet literature is strong by virtue of the fact that it is serving a new cause - the cause of socialist construction.

...

Comrade Stalin has called our writers engineers of human souls. What does this mean? What duties does the title confer upon you?

...

In the first place, it means knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as "objective reality," but to depict reality in its revolutionary development.

...

In addition to this, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism. This method in belles lettres and literary criticism is what we call the method of socialist realism.

...

Our Soviet literature is not afraid of the charge of being tendentious. Yes, Soviet literature is tendentious, for in an epoch of class struggle there is not and cannot be a literature which is not class literature, not tendentious, allegedly non-political.

...

To be an engineer of human souls means standing with both feet firmly planted on the basis of real life. And this in its turn denotes a rupture with romanticism of the old type, which depicted a non-existent life and non-existent heroes, leading the reader away from the antagonisms and oppression of real life into a world of the impossible, into a world of utopian dreams. Our literature, which stands with both feet firmly planted on a materialist basis, cannot be hostile to romanticism, but it must be a romanticism of a new type, revolutionary romanticism. We say that socialist realism is the basic method of Soviet belles lettres and literary criticism, and this presupposes that revolutionary romanticism should enter into literary creation as a component part, for the whole life of our Party, the whole life of the working class and its struggle consist in a combination of the most stern and sober practical work with a supreme spirit of heroic deeds and magnificent future prospects. Our Party has always been strong by virtue of the fact that it has united and continues to unite a thoroughly business-like and practical spirit with broad vision, with a constant urge forward, with a struggle for the building of communist society.

Soviet literature should be able to portray our heroes; it should be able to glimpse our tomorrow. This will be no utopian dream, for our tomorrow is already being prepared for today by dint of conscious planned work.

...

One cannot be an engineer of human souls without knowing the technique of literary work, and it must be noted that the technique of the writer's work possesses a large number of specific peculiarities.

...

You have many different types of weapons. Soviet literature has every opportunity of employing these types of weapons (genres, styles, forms and methods of literary creation) in their diversity and fullness, selecting all the best that has been created in this sphere by all previous epochs. From this point of view, the mastery of the technique of writing, the critical assimilation of the literary heritage of all epochs represents a task which you must fulfil without fail, if you wish to become engineers of human souls.

...

Comrades, the proletariat, just as in other provinces of material and spiritual culture, is the sole heir of all that is best in the treasury of world literature. The bourgeoisie has squandered its literary heritage; it is our duty to gather it up carefully, to study it and, having critically assimilated it, to advance further.

...

To be engineers of human souls means to fight actively for the culture of language, for quality of production. Our literature does not as yet come up to the requirements of our era. The weaknesses of our literature are a reflection of the fact that people's consciousness lags behind economic life - a defect from which even our Writers are not, of course, free. That is why untiring work directed towards self-education and towards improving their ideological equipment in the spirit of socialism represents an indispensable condition without which Soviet writers cannot remould the mentality of their readers and thereby become engineers of human souls.

...



We require a high mastery of artistic production; and in this connection it is impossible to overrate the help that Maxim Gorky is rendering the Party and the proletariat in the struggle for quality in literature, for the culture of language.

...

And so our Soviet writers have all the conditions necessary for them to produce works which will be, as we say, consonant with our era, works from which the people of our times can learn and which will be the pride of future generations.

© Professor Marina Frolova-Walker