

The Opera And The Dictator

The peculiar martyrdom of Dmitri Shostakovich

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In the days following Dmitri Shostakovich's burial in August 1975, a story went around Moscow of a bearded stranger who elbowed his way through the crowd of mourners at the bier until he stood right between the composer's widow, Irina, and his daughter, Galina. He stayed there for no more than the time it took a woman, who popped up just as mysteriously at the other side of the deceased, to snap a picture, whereupon the two of them disappeared.

The picture may be seen facing page 183 in **Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich as Related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov**, the musical-literary sensation of the early 1980s, which has now been made into a movie by the British director Tony Palmer, with Ben Kingsley in the starring role. Solomon Volkov was the bearded stranger. He was a member of the editorial staff of **Sovetskaya muzyka**, the official organ of the Union of Soviet Composers. He had already begun to make a local reputation as a music journalist with a book on the young composers of Leningrad, his native city. Later that year, together with his wife Marianna, a professional photographer, he joined the great wave of Soviet Jewish emigration that followed in the wake of détente.

The Volkovs arrived in New York in July 1976. Solomon applied for a research fellowship at Columbia University, with a biography of Shostakovich as his stated project. As a member of the university's music department specializing in Russian music, I was asked to interview him and write a letter of recommendation. At the interview in his hotel room, Volkov disclosed to me that he had enjoyed a close, clandestine relationship with Shostakovich, and had elicited extensive memoirs from him during the last years of the composer's life. He was now awaiting their piecemeal arrival from various way stations in Europe, whither they had been smuggled by willing travelers. Their publication, he hinted, would fundamentally revise our image of Shostakovich, and also of a whole era in the history of Russian music, indeed of

Russia itself. He showed me interviews on the subject he had given Italian reporters and, although this was no proof of the memoirs' existence, I was eager to give him the benefit of the doubt. I wrote an enthusiastic letter. He received his sinecure. Thus I became an early accomplice in what was, I later realized, a shameful exploitation.

When Volkov's book was finally published in 1979 by Harper & Row, it certainly lived up to the frenzy of advanced publicity. Its Shostakovich was an embittered ironist, who had never been complicit, to the slightest degree, with the Soviet regime; who had, on the contrary, seen through it, mocked it, protested it all along; whose "Aesopian" manner of expression and outward submission put him in the hallowed tradition of the 19th-century radical writers who knew how to outsmart the tsarist censorship, and beyond them, in the tradition of the *yurodivye* -- the Holy Fools -- who threatened the tsars of Muscovy with God's truth.

Thus the exultant finale of the Fifth Symphony (composed in 1937, a memorable year) was obviously "forced rejoicing, created under threat, as in Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*." The Eleventh Symphony was not a celebration of the 1905 revolution; it was a protest, rather, against the suppression of the Hungarian revolt of 1956. The Seventh Symphony, revered (and just as often jeered) the world over for its portrayal of the Nazi advance on Leningrad, was actually "planned before the war," and the "invasion theme" had nothing to do with fascists: "I was thinking of other enemies of humanity when I composed the theme." The diabolical whirlwind of a scherzo in the Tenth Symphony was a portrait of Stalin. The Twelfth was to have contained a comparable portrait of Lenin.

This was inspiring stuff. Everyone wanted to believe it. Therefore, according to ecstatic reviewers, it was all true. The book was translated into a dozen languages. It won prizes. It became the subject of symposia. The reception of *Testimony* was the greatest critical scandal I have ever witnessed.

For, as any proper scholar could plainly see, the book was a fraud. Yet even those who could did not want to see. Most, including the author of the standard English-language history of Soviet music, confidently endorsed Volkov's "ring of authenticity". (Most original of all was the reasoning of an American conductor long identified with modern Russian music: "Proof of Volkov's veracity... surely lies in the very absence of endorsement by Rostropovich, Kondrashin, and other defectors in a position to confirm or deny episodes described in the book. but who may still fear

reprisals." Kondrashin later came through with an endorsement; Rostropovich has expressed reservations.) Meanwhile, though, the voice of an unassuming scholarly *yurodiviya* was heard by very few.

Her name was Laurel Fay. She meticulously tested the book's claims. Her essay, "Shostakovich versus Volkov: Whose Testimony?" was published in the *Russian Review*, a specialist journal of small circulation, normally devoted to Soviet politics, in vol. XXXIX, 1980, pages 484-93. I give the reference so that the interested may find it; for her disclosures have failed somehow to reach the general reader, and even the musical specialist. The innocent continue to rely on Volkov's book as a source of attractively scurrilous information. Its portrait of Shostakovich has entered the public imagination. But Fay has absolutely demolished its credibility.

I will confine myself here to Fay's most damaging finding, for it is itself conclusive. *Testimony* is not based on an autograph manuscript, or any other original written document. It purports, of course, to be oral history, a product of interviews. Yet not even a tape exists. The only evidence Volkov offered for the authenticity of the work is the claim that Shostakovich signed the first page of each of the eight chapters of edited typescript with the inscription "I have read [this]." Fay shows that in at least seven of eight instances, the signed page did not contain memoir material at all. It contained only an updated (and uncredited) transcript of a text previously published in the U.S.S.R. That is all we know Shostakovich to have read and approved. What is such material doing in a book of orally elicited memoirs? More, the only passages in which Fay was able to identify recycled material were precisely those places Shostakovich was asked to sign. None of the sensational "new" material in the book comes with even this much "testimony" to its authenticity. "The inevitable nagging questions," as Fay framed them, are these: "Is the manuscript which Shostakovich signed identical to the manuscript which has been translated and published as Shostakovich's *Testimony*? Is it possible that Volkov misrepresented the nature and the contents of the book to Shostakovich just as he may be misrepresenting them to the reader?"

That the book contains some genuine interview material is not in doubt. The frontispiece shows a group photograph including Volkov and Shostakovich, inscribed by the composer to his interlocutor "as a souvenir of our conversation about Glazunov, Zoshchenko, Meyerhold." The parts of the book concerning these figures

-- and especially the endearing portrait of Alexander Glazunov, Shostakovich's teacher at the Leningrad Conservatory and practically the book's only hero -- can probably be accepted as authentic. But these are not the parts that set everyone agog. And the matter does not end there. As Fay pointed out, even if the authenticity of **Testimony** could be vindicated, the equally troublesome question of its veracity would remain. A great deal of evidence suggests that in his later years Shostakovich became desperately obsessed with his historical image, and with the theme of self-justification. For he did have a history of collaboration to live down.

Now we have Tony Palmer's appalling film of **Testimony**, which further debases Volkov's exploitation of the composer and his afflicted life. At one point Volkov has his Shostakovich remark, "I despise sentimentality, can't bear it, and I'm not reminiscing so that sensitive ladies can bring their scented hankies to their eyes." You can get out your handkerchiefs now, dear ladies. For maudlin sanctimony, Palmer's film is unsurpassed.

His Shostakovich leads tours of Babi Yar, discusses Stalin's perfidy with Marshal Tukhachevsky, lovingly explains the "real" meaning of the Seventh Symphony to his adorable daughter. There is the obligatory scene in which Stalin's mother berates her son ("You should have been a priest"), and the one in which a bunch of indignant composers are seen walking out on a ranting Comrade Zhdanov. Most odious of all is the composer's deathbed duet with the shade of his old nemesis: "I made a great composer out of you," Stalin gloats. Coached in smart-alecky irony from the movie's start, we take the meaning: were it not for the suffering that Stalin foisted upon him, Shostakovich would never have reached his heights or his depths. It is the old fable of starvation in the garret, of art flourishing in adversity, updated for totalitarianism, and so heartless and patronizing that it is a wonder that even Volkov (who is credited as a consultant to the film) did not protest.

The only antidote to these platitudes and these distortions is to reveal what they conceal. Consider what the book and the film portray as the turning point in Shostakovich's career: his opera **Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District**. It is not often performed, and it is currently unavailable on disc (except in a hard-to-find Soviet import of its revised version on Melodiya records), but it is one of the most famous opera of the 20th century. Everyone knows it as the opera Stalin personally repressed. That, according to Volkov and Palmer, is reason enough to love it.

A careful hearing of the opera, however, leaves things less simple, aesthetically and morally. One cannot come to terms with this work without bewilderment and pain. Confronting **Lady Macbeth** requires a long and hard look at some of the ghastliest aspects of life in our ghastly century; and in the end one is not consoled by what one has learned.

We must begin with some literary background. For a 19th century author, one way to expose social ills was to place a sweet innocent amid injustice and corruption; to condemn the environment by contrast. Though it was usually accomplished by transparent contrivance, this technique fueled the whole movement known as "realism". The classic example of the maneuver in Russian literature was Alexander Ostrovsky's drama, **The Storm**, first performed in 1859 and published the next year in the pages of **Moskvityanin** (The Muscovite), one of those legendary "thick journals" at the crossroads of literature, philosophy, and politics, around which the 19th-century Russian intelligentsia led its busy life of the mind. (Several operas have based on it, including Janacek's **Kat'a Kabanova**.)

Ostrovsky's heroine, Katerina Kabanova, is the wife of a merchant in an unnamed Volga town, a sensitive, poetic nature, stifled by the prison-like atmosphere of her husband's family, which is epitomized by her formidable mother-in-law. She becomes infatuated with another man, succumbs to her passion during her husband's absence on a business trip, is forced by conscience to confess, and is driven by her shame to suicide. Her plight is shown most forcefully in the scene of her husband's departure, when she insists on swearing a hysterical oath of fidelity that the reader knows she will be unable to keep. After this harrowing scene, one can only sympathize with Ostrovsky's adulteress, however one feels about her crime.

And if, like every educated Russian since 1860, one has read Nikolai Dobrolyubov's famous critique of Ostrovsky's play, one cannot think of Katerina without recalling the essay's title: "A Ray of Light in the Dark Kingdom." The precocious Dobrolyubov (1836--61), deified in the Soviet Union as a prototype revolutionary "radical democrat", interpreted the plays of Ostrovsky as a sustained yet futile indictment of patriarchal merchant-class mores. He hailed **The Storm** for embodying, in Katerina's suicide, at least, a gesture of protest against the "dark kingdom's" backward, oppressive structure, and a prophecy of its fall. For him, and

for Soviet readers and writers, Katerina Kabanova was an early martyr of the revolution.

Of a wholly different order from "realistic" plays and novels, which embodied (or were seen to embody) themes of social protest, was another favorite 19th-century genre, the horror story. At the beginning of the century, horror stories generally concerned the supernatural. By century's end, their subject matter had shifted to the opposite extreme: to "naturalism," to lurid yet minutely dispassionate descriptions of aberrant human behavior, of crime and brutality viewed as if under a pathologist's microscope. It was part of the naturalist's technique to appear to take no sides; but in fact the tale of horror tended tacitly to condemn those who upset the established order, natural (*Frankenstein*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*) or social (the novels of Zola). This genre had nothing to do with protest.

An early Russian classic of naturalism was Nikolai Leskov's famous "sketch" of ungovernable passion and mayhem, first published in 1865 in *Epokha*, Dostoyevsky's own thick journal, under the title "The Lady Macbeth of Our District". When it appeared as a book, the district was specified; it was Mtsensk, in south-central Russia", about as close to the middle of nowhere as one could get in a country that had more "nowhere" than any other. The plot shares a number of striking features with Ostrovsky's *Storm*. The title character is also a childless merchant wife named Katerina, whose life is made miserable by a despotic in-law, and who is left behind when her husband takes a business trip. In the grip of boredom and frustration, she, too, takes a lover.

But Katerina Izmailova does not confess. She is, instead, found out by her carping father-in-law. To avoid punishment, she murders him. Her husband returns. To avoid having to give up her lover, she murders again, this time with "an evil joy". She marries her lover, Sergei (a clerk at the Izmailov mill), conceives his child, and inherits the family business. But another heir to the Izmailov fortune unexpectedly surfaces in the person of her late husband's nephew, a saintly little child. To avoid losing her inheritance, she murders for the third time, "as though demons had broken loose from their chains." She and Sergei are apprehended in flagrante by a crowd of villagers returning from church (not the subtlest way of contriving a collision with moral order, but hair-raising in its execution). They are sentenced to hard labor. By now, "light and darkness, good and evil, joy and boredom did not exist" for Katerina. On the way to

Siberia, Sergei takes up with another woman. In a paroxysm of despair at losing him, Katerina murders yet again: she grabs her rival and with her jumps into the icy Volga, thus finally murdering herself.

Leskov's story began, "In our part of the world one sometimes comes across people of such character that one cannot recall them without a shudder even when many years have elapsed since the last encounter." One could hardly claim that Leskov portrayed the monstrous protagonist of his tight-lipped little shocker with "sympathy," or sought to inspire anything of the kind in his reader. Yet that is just what Dmitri Shostakovich tried to do when 65 years and an October Revolution later, he turned Leskov's sketch into his second (and, as things turned out, his last) opera.

In an essay published in the program for **Lady Macbeth**'s first production, which opened at the Leningrad Maly Theater on January 22, 1934, the 27-year-old Shostakovich made three startling assertions, First, that "there is no work of Russian literature that more vividly or expressively characterizes the position of women in the old prerevolutionary time" than Leskov's. But "Leskov, as a brilliant representative of prerevolutionary literature, could not correctly interpret the events that unfold in history." Thus Shostakovich's own task was clear: "... in every way to justify Katerina so that she would impress the audience as a positive character."

All this was in stark contrast to Leskov, who cast his story in dispassionate terms, parodying the manner of what in Russia is known as a "procurator," in impartial court officer whose job it is to prepare summaries of evidence for criminal cases. Shostakovich passionately embraced the role of counsel for the defense. His strategy was to exonerate his heroine by indicting her surroundings, to turn her from sinner to martyr. Here is how he made his case to the public, addressing them exactly as an attorney might address a jury:

'Katerina is an intelligent, talented and interesting woman. Owing to the nightmare circumstances in which life has placed her, owing to the cruel, greedy, petty merchant environment that surrounds her, her life has become sad, dull, gloomy. She does not love her husband, she has no joys, no consolations. And all at once there appears the foremen, Sergei...'

Intelligent, talented, interesting: this is not Leskov's Katerina. But Ostrovsky would have known her; and as we read Shostakovich's essay, and observe the events of her life as he portrayed them, it gradually dawns that he has switched heroines on us. He

has undertaken to turn Leskov's naturalistic horror tale into a high-minded realist tract. "It would be fairest of all, "the composer wrote of his heroine, "to say that her crimes are a protest against the tenor of the life she is forced to live, against the dark and suffocating atmosphere of the merchant class in the last century." This goes beyond Ostrovsky, all the way to Dobrolyubov. And sure enough, Shostakovich does not fail to call his Katerina "a ray of light in the dark kingdom."

In the opera itself, the Ostrovsky/Dobrolyubov subtext is again brought right to the surface, when the husband's departure episode from **The Storm** is transplanted into Leskov's plot at the end of the first scene. As Shostakovich (and his co-librettist Alexander Preis) recast it, this scene is much less subtle than in Ostrovsky. Now it is the evil in-law, not the heroine herself, who insists on the oath. And since it comes before the love intrigue unfolds, it carries no foreboding. Instead of revealing the heroine's fatal ambivalence, it merely intensifies what is already a heavy-handed portrayal of her oppression. Like everything else in the opera, it whitens Katerina by darkening the background. But how white, finally, can she get? How dark must a kingdom be to turn a multiple murderess into a ray of light? How far can moral values be relative?

Add how did Shostakovich hope to bring it off? First, he eliminated whatever could not be "rehabilitated" in Leskov's portrayal of his heroine's behavior. This meant, above all, getting rid of the third of the original Katerina's murders, for as Shostakovich rather exquisitely put it, "The murder of a child, no matter how it may be explained, always makes a bad impression." What remained was freely altered to reserve the moral high ground for the heroine. Instead of being discovered by a group of religious villagers (with an upstanding engineer from St Petersburg at their head), the operatic Katerina's crimes are detected by a "seedy lout" who stumbles upon the corpse of Katerina's husband when he breaks into the Ismailov storeroom to steal some vodka. He eagerly runs off to the local constabulary with the news, singing what Shostakovich, in conversation with the now-exiled Soviet soprano Galina Vishnevskaya, characterized in later (post-Stalinist) years as "a hymn to all informers". In the next scene, the police are portrayed as a venal, degenerate lot who spend their days persecuting "nihilists" instead of protecting the rights of citizens, and who are overjoyed to have a pretext to avenge themselves on Katerina Ismailova for not having invited them to her wedding. In an especially odious invention, Shostakovich

precedes the father-in-law's discovery of Katerina's adultery with a lecherous soliloquy in which the detestable old man declares his intention of seducing her himself. The only other figure of potential moral authority in the opera, the priest who is summoned to minister to the poisoned father-in-law, is portrayed even more cartoonishly than the police.

Merely to recite these unsubtle devices is to expose them. In cold summary, they cannot make the case for Katerina as victim. Shostakovich knew this very well: "It would be fruitless to argue at length the ways I justify all these crimes, since the real justification is to be found in the musical material; for I consider that in an opera it is the music that plays the main, the leading, the decisive role." Of course it does, but only when the composer is equal to the task. Few composers have been as well equipped for it as Shostakovich. In his second opera he proves himself a genius of the genre, fully able to create a world in tone that carries complete conviction. And he used his awesome powers to perpetrate a colossal moral inversion. In one of the most pernicious uses to which music has ever been put, he gave the lie to formalists who would deny music the ethical and expressive powers of which the ancients speak. In the hands of a genius the art of music is still the potent, dangerous thing about which Plato warned.

The composer maintains control over the emotional projection and reception of his opera's gruesome subject matter in two ways. First, there are the overt editorials, in the form of five interludes connecting all scenes not bounded by intermissions. This kind of unmediated authorial intervention was obviously something Shostakovich had learned from the third act of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* (which was performed in Leningrad in 1927, long before its migration westward).

What is overt is easily resisted. More insidious is Shostakovich's other method. Evoking a wealth, of familiar musical genres, in a bewilderingly eclectic range of styles, the composer makes sure that one character, and one character only, is perceived by his audience as a human being. From the very first page of the score, Katerina's music is rhapsodic, soaring, and (most telling) endowed with the lyric intonations of Russian folk song. As the curtain rises to reveal Katerina alone, lamenting her fate, the clarinet plays a cadential phrase that had been characterized as "the soul of Russian music" by Glinka, the first great Russian composer, a century earlier. Katerina's is the only music in the opera that has emotional "life", as it was

traditionally portrayed by composers in the heyday of romantic opera. Like the emotions themselves, it waxes and wanes; it has rhythmic and dynamic flexibility; it reaches climaxes.

Every other member of the cast is portrayed as subhuman. The police, the priest, the "seedy lout", the other minor characters are all presented as repulsive caricatures, their music reeking of operetta, of the music hall, of military bands and circus parades. The orchestral ritornello that precedes each stanza of the police station waltz is the most conspicuous reversion to the brash "wrong-note" vein so familiar from Shostakovich's earlier music, like the notorious polka from the **Age of Gold** ballet, where it had caricatured top-hatted capitalists. The priest, officiating over the last rites for Katerina's first victim, is too dimwitted even for the wrong notes: he lapses into a polka of his own, all the more absurd because all its notes are "right". When Katerina's father-in-law -- usually painted in the darkest orchestral hues and the ugliest, most distorted harmonies -- muses lecherously, right before discovering her adultery, it is to the incongruous strains of a Viennese waltz. The seedy lout's solo scene has to be the most brazen piece of bordello trash ever authored by a "serious" composer.

Most effective of all, though, is Shostakovich's way of accompanying the singing, and above all, the movements of all figures except Katerina with trudging or galloping ostinati -- inflexibly rigorous rhythmic pulsations that characterize them one and all as soulless, insensate automatons, comic-book creatures, incapable of either experiencing or inspiring an emotional response of any kind. This applies even to the chorus, the "people" who are represented in this opera as a cynical, apathetic, and (in the last scene) downright heartless mob. It is sheer dehumanization.

This technique operates at its most insidious, in the scene that portrays the murder of Zinovy Borisovich, Katerina's husband. His murder is "justified" strictly by the "musical material." The scene begins with Katerina and Sergei blissfully in a bed, surrounded by the lushest, most lyrical orchestral music in the entire opera. Three times this mood is broken: first by Sergei himself (whose music gets more and more operetta-like as the opera approaches its denouement); next by an apparition of the first victim; and then by the offstage approach of Zinovy, signaled by the use of a typically "trudging" ostinato. Once he arrives on stage, the trudge gives way, literally, to that maddest of all 19th-century ballroom dances, the "galop," of which

Shostakovich was the pre-eminent 20th-century master. The whole scene of confrontation and murder is played against an unremitting oompah.

Elliott Carter saw **Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk** in Germany in 1960 and found this scene utterly baffling. "The relation of the music to the action is unaccountable," he thought, unable to comprehend the reason why Shostakovich would have "the heroine and her lover strangle her husband on a large stage-sized four-poster bed to a lively dance tune." But the reason is clear enough: the dance tune is there to dehumanize the husband, and to diminish the heroine's crime to a matter of cruelty to animals at worst. What condemns him is nothing more than the fact of his being a part of Katerina's hated environment: he is the beneficiary of the social system that oppressed his wife, and that suffices to just justify his "liquidation." And all of this is conveyed to us by the music alone.

Now we know why Shostakovich's opera was hailed by its earliest critics as such a praiseworthy advance over its literary source. Shostakovich had turned the tale into one of class warfare. Katerina's victims were class enemies, creatures at a lower stage of historical development, and she had every right, according to the law of historical materialism, to eliminate them. Shostakovich, wrote Adrian Piotrovsky, the Maly Theater dramaturge, in the program book to the premier production, "has created the seemingly paradoxical figure of the innocent murderess, a criminal of romantic purity. This he does, not in a spirit of humanitarian forgiveness, but rather by means of a wide-ranging, acute analysis of the social reality that surrounds his Katerina." (Piotrovsky would later collaborate with Shostakovich on the ill-fated ballet **The Limpid Stream**, and shortly afterward perish in one of the early Stalin purges.) It was this kind of "analysis" that was being advanced, even as Shostakovich was writing his opera, in defense of the lawless extermination of the kulaks. This was a time of hideous moral inversion in all walks of Soviet life, when the high tide of Stalinism was coming in and the basest atrocities were being justified in the name of the loftiest humanitarian ideals. In the year that **Lady Macbeth** was completed, little Pavlik Morozov, a well-indoctrinated "pioneer" from a farm near Sverdlovsk, denounced his parents to the secret police as "enemies of the people" and became a Soviet saint (not to be decanonized until the days of Gorbachev). Shostakovich's Katerina was the same sort of heroine. His opera is a faithful reflection of an abominable time.

In one way only was Shostakovich faithful to Leskov: in his shockingly naturalistic portrayal of Katerina's sexual passion. It is lust, pure and simple, that he portrays; ignited by a rape, it turns Katerina into a love-slave, giving the lie to the claim that she is a liberated, aggressive woman in an age of feminine passivity, that her audacity is another justification for her crimes. In fact, the carnal theme is exaggerated in the opera beyond anything in Leskov. The rape music reaches its climax with an unmistakable **ejaculatio praecox**, followed by a leisurely detumescence. The salacious trombone glissandos that portray the behavior of Sergei's member achieved instant world fame when an American magazine dubbed them an exercise in "pornophony."

This aspect of the opera understandably scandalized a certain lapsed seminarian of the Georgian Orthodox Church, who took in a performance of the chief ornament of the Soviet musical stage during the third year of its triumphant run. Stalin's indignation furnished the immediate pretext for the infamous **Pravda** editorial of January 28, 1936, "Muddle Instead of Music," which remains one of the great paradigmatic documents of the buffeting of the arts by totalitarian states.

The article's first target was the opera's obscenity:

"The music croaks and hoots and snorts and pants in order to represent the scenes as naturally as possible. And 'love' in its most vulgar form is daubed all over the opera. The merchant's double bed is the central point on the stage. On it all the 'problems' are solved.... This glorification of merchant-class lasciviousness has been described by some critics as satire. But there can be no question of satire here. The author uses all the means at his disposal and his power of musical and dramatic expression to attract the sympathy of the spectators for the coarse and vulgar aims and actions of the merchant's wife, Katerina Ismailova. **Lady Macbeth** is popular among bourgeois audiences abroad. Is it not because the opera is so confused and so entirely free of political bias [!] that it is praised by bourgeois critics? Is it not perhaps because it titillates the depraved tastes of bourgeois audiences with its witching clamorous, neurasthenic music?"

Criticism next turned to the opera's style, the real "muddle instead of music." Its rhetoric notwithstanding, the editorial was the first conclusive indication that the arts policies of the Soviet state would be governed henceforth by the philistine petit-bourgeois taste of the only critic that mattered. In a phrase that must have scared the

poor composer half out of his wits, the chief official organ of Soviet power accused him of "trifling with difficult matters," and hinted that "it might end very badly."

Thus was Dmitri Shostakovich, perhaps Soviet Russia's most loyal musical son, and certainly her most talented one, made a sacrificial lamb, precisely for his pre-eminence among Soviet artists of his generation. The real purpose of the **Pravda** editorial was to demonstrate how directly the arts were to be subject to Party control in the wake of what the unsuspecting Shostakovich himself had hailed in the program book as "the historic April resolution." This was an action of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, taken on April 21, 1932, in accordance with which all existing Soviet arts associations were dissolved and replaced with "unions" of writers, artists, composers, etc, that were directly answerable to the Party bureaucracy. At first it was greeted by serious artists as a positive move, for it removed from contention the clamorous "proletarian" associations that during the 1920s had been aggressively challenging the high culture. In fact, the resolution removed all barriers that might have protected the arts from the exercise of Stalin's arbitrary rule. Shostakovich, through his opera, was one of the first victims of the new dispensation; and if, as things turned out, he was spared the ultimate Stalinist fate, he had to live for many years under the constant threat of "a bad end." That this unhappy man nevertheless continued to function as an artist and a citizen has lent his career a heroic luster.

It is inevitably in that heroic light, a light made garish by Volkov, Palmer, and others, that we now view **Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk**. We know it as the work through which the Soviet Union's great composer was disgraced; the work whose suppression was an incalculable loss to us, since it spelled the end of what would have been one of the great operatic careers; the work that had to endure a 27-year ban before it was cautiously let back on stage, retitled **Katerina Izmailova**, in a bowdlerized version sans pornophony, with an expanded final scene of convicts en route to exile that is fraught with an excruciating subtext relating to the composer's well-known tribulations.

So ineluctably has the opera come to symbolize pertinacity in the face of despotism that it is almost impossible to see it clearly now as an embodiment of that very despotism. The fate of **Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk** opened Shostakovich's eyes to the nature of the regime under which he was condemned to live. It could be argued that

the work's martyrdom humanized its creator. And yet the opera remains a profoundly inhumane work of art. Its chilling treatment of the victims amounts to a justification of genocide.

In the liberal West, as we have been proudly reminded in recent weeks, we do not believe in banning works of art. If it is because we believe that they cannot threaten life and morals, then we are more vulnerable than we imaged to the dehumanizing message of this great opera. If it's because we believe that ethics has no bearing on aesthetics, then the process of dehumanization has already begun. If, for its inspired music and dramatic power, **Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk** is to hold the stage today, it should be seen and heard with an awareness of history, with open eyes and ears, and with hearts on guard.