

Dimitri Shostakovich – A Composer Born, not Made.

There has been much debate about to what extent Shostakovich's music was the result of his natural genius or of his personal situation in Stalinist Russia. It is widely acknowledged that his life and times are reflected in his music, and that his music intentionally has something to say about them. But the notion that his experiences 'made' him great, and that his accessible style was forced on him, is completely false.

A satirical march, an ironical waltz, a slightly twisted folk tune, passages that suggest a collision with 'fate', 'fate' making its presence felt in every single movement, lyricism with an edge, the avoidance of an unambiguously upbeat ending - a typical middle-period work? No, these are elements of the 1st Symphony, written in the mid-1920s. The other most ambitious of his earliest works, 'The Nose', written in the late 20s, also avoids any suggestion of 'they all lived happily ever after' at the end. It's satirical and grotesque practically throughout, and there's an intense and disturbing orchestral interlude that's clearly the prototype for later Shostakovichian expression. In other major early works, there's the onslaught of the 1st Piano Sonata, the primordial darkness that opens the 2nd Symphony, and the prototype for S's declamatory instrumental climaxes is to be found in the 3rd Symphony. He was never going to be a 'sunny' composer. And practically all the essential elements of his approach can be found in his pre-30s music.

One thing that's missing is the artistic ambition of his maturity. Unsurprisingly, this kicks in around his mid-20s with 'Lady Macbeth', and is soaring by his late-20s with the 4th Symphony. And this increase in ambition, that remains a constant through his final work, the Viola Sonata, is not a result of political repression. After all, he showed in the 14th of his 24 Preludes that if you choose to, you can express tragedy very effectively in 2 and 1/2 minutes. Ambition is a reflection of personality, not outside circumstances, and if it's there, it's bound to 'happen'.

The other thing that's missing in the pre-30s music is a consistently 'traditional' classical approach. There's a lot of experimentation. Of course this is natural in a young composer just having finished a very traditionally-oriented musical education. It's also worth noting that the experiments of the 1st Sonata, and 2nd and 3rd Symphonies, led Shostakovich nowhere - he produced his best music when working with a clearly - defined, guiding structure, in 'The Nose' and the 1st Symphony. In the 30s there's a return towards classical structure - including the amazing, still-experimental, 4th Symphony. But it's the late works that show conclusively that his natural mature orientation was to a 'traditional' and accessible classical approach. Not one of them represents a return to his experimentation of the 20s. And this at a time when his standing, his knowledge of developments outside Russia, and the fact that an avant-garde of younger Russian composers was by then putting on concerts (if only unofficially), certainly gave him the opportunity for greater experimentation, at least in a low-profile work, if he was at all interested. But to the very end he stuck with a classical approach, and in fact some of his simplest, and most direct and clear music is to be found in his late works. Considering this, the increased simplicity and clarity of his middle-period works, when compared with the 4th Symphony, are a natural evolution. Of course, the condemnation of 'Lady Macbeth' in 1936 had an effect on his style, temporarily reducing his music's degree of obvious originality, but evidently an increase in simplicity and clarity was a separate matter.

As for 'greatness' - was it inborn, or did circumstances force it out of him? Any composer who could write the 1st Symphony while still a teenager, and the modernist-but-crowd-pleasing 'The Nose' in his early 20s, was clearly going to be something special. And we know that he was going to become much more ambitious. Lady Macbeth tells us a lot - granted, Shostakovich had experienced political repression by the time he wrote it, as had many other composers - but he was still only 25, and had yet to live through Stalin's Great Terror, through two rounds of state condemnation, through the 2nd World War, and through the two heart attacks and failing health of his last years. And yet, in Katerina's arias and the Passacaglia, he showed that what would come later was already within him - and that he was already up there with the 'greats'. **L.S.**
