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## THE JUBILEE OF DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH

Celebrations of jubilees have their own tradition and special meaning in historiography. The centenary of a composer's birth is typically the moment when the first clearer historical perspective on an author's work and activity is formed. An opportunity to examine the century which saw the **appearance** of a new creative poetics, to trace an author's **course of development**, the **reception** of and **response** to his works and the **influence** he had on his contemporaries and immediate successors – these are the elements which ensure the forming of the first more objective judgments and consequently the clarification of views on the importance and meaning of an author's personality and work. They are tested once again at the moment of marking the fiftieth anniversary of the author's death, a time when it is safe to say that the personal, human connections with the author, which can, both positively and negatively, cloud the objectivity of judgment, cease to have influence.

The centenary of the birth of Dmitry Shostakovich, an author who has been judged in very contradictory ways, is being celebrated in 2006, which will consequently provide an opportunity for many reexaminations. In this paper we will pose the question of the reception of Shostakovich's work in music writings in our country. It is, understandably, intrinsically linked with the presentations of Shostakovich's works, since the writings appeared mainly in connection with performances. Without intending to comment on the bibliography of writings on Shostakovich, we will point out only certain key moments of this long history, which seem important for the mentioned "jubilean" reexaminations.

Shostakovich's works were premiered in Belgrade in the 1930's, when the *First Symphony* was performed at a concert of the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra (1934) and *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was staged at the National Theatre (1937). In the Soviet Union this was a time of great controversy over Shostakovich's production in the context of socialist realism, a time of bans and persecutions, but only their faint echo reached Belgrade prior to 1939 and there was a lack of true

understanding of both the context and the real meaning of these debates.<sup>1</sup> This is clearly indicated by Vojislav Vučković's writings commenting on the premieres of Shostakovich's works. He demonstrated great interest in the music of the Soviet Union, but he “viewed it through Western eyes”, measuring its importance against current creative tendencies in Europe and evaluating Shostakovich himself according to his success in the West. On the eve of the premiere of Shostakovich's symphony he presented him in the following manner:

“The new dynamics, which emanates from this master's work in spite of its classical form, inspired Shostakovich's *Revolution Symphony*, which he wrote at the age of seventeen. His symphonic poem *October*, extolling the historic days of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, continued in the same direction; while in the opera *The Nose* (based on a short story by Gogol) Shostakovich found his autonomous expression, completely free from conventional mannerisms of Western-European music. *Symphony in F Minor*, which will be performed in Belgrade, belongs to the period of the creation of Shostakovich's piano miniatures (which, alongside other compositions, he performed as a pianist on his tour across Russia), therefore, to a time when this great composer was interested in the compositional texture of absolute music. Consequently, when examining it one should never look for any special programme content or expect an analysis of social problems – without which Shostakovich is otherwise impossible to imagine. It is a work in which this young composer (he is only twenty-eight years old) demonstrated, perhaps more than anything else, his youth, freshness, insight, humour, temperament and exuberance, owing to which, given his truly brilliant talent, this composition conquered the repertoires of great world conductors from Malko to Toscanini. Shostakovich is a great name not only in Europe but in America as well, a name that is in no way inferior to Schönberg and Hindemith and that has greatly eclipsed the fame of Igor Stravinsky.”<sup>2</sup>

When presenting Paul Weiss's article on contemporary Russian music from the Prague magazine *Doba* to the readers of the magazine NIN, Vučković added his own

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<sup>1</sup> On the reception of ideas of new and socialist realism cf. Sonja Marinković, Vojislav Vučković i novi realizam, *Novi Zvuk*, Beograd, 1993, 2, 23-33.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Vojislav Vučković, Kako treba slušati Šostakoviča i Mosolova in: *Studije, eseji, kritike*, Beograd, Nolit, 1968, 312-313.

“commentary-supplement”, referring specifically to Shostakovich, to the long quotation about the development of vocal music:

“However, in addition to choral music and song, contemporary Russian music also nurtures older music forms, which it provides with new textual or music content. This Russian neoclassicism includes the works of Dmitry Shostakovich, which are already quite famous in Europe. (Arturo Toscanini, the greatest living conductor in the world, conducted Shostakovich’s *Symphony No. 1* at his concerts with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.) In the field of opera music, he wrote the brilliant comic opera *The Nose* to the text of Gogol (which has appeared on many European stages in the form of a suite) and *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* to the text of Leskov – “a tragic satire” of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia (which features the problem of a woman declining in an uncultured environment).”<sup>3</sup>

Writing about the Belgrade premiere of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, Vučković demonstrated that he was familiar with the debate going on in Russia concerning this opera and representing it as a controversy “between the naturalists and the formalists on one side and the new realists on the other”<sup>4</sup>, he perceived this conflict as a confrontation between those who believed that “form is the only content of art” and the champions of “the artistic expression of immediate reality seen as a function of the driving forces of social progress”, but he was still far from the harsh censure and ideological lessons characteristic of socialist realism.

The shift in Vučković’s views took place in 1939 under the influence of Nejedlý’s writings on the history of Soviet art, when Vučković began to employ terms typical of socialist realism:

“...they (Soviet composers, note S.M.) are keeping up with the tempo of the building of socialism: naturally, not without mistakes, occasional deviations and dilemmas, but with dogged determination to enrich their country with new cultural values to the greatest possible degree.

The final resolving of all dilemmas has been principally aided by the discussion about the remnants of formalism and naturalism in the works of

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Vojislav Vučković, Paul Vajs o savremenoj ruskoj muzici in: *ibid*, 343.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Vojislav Vučković, Dmitrij Šokstakovič i njegova »Ledi Magbet« (povodom premijere u Beogradskom pozorištu od 12.11.1937.), in: *ibid*, 375.

Dmitry Shostakovich. The review of his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* and ballet *The Bright Stream*<sup>5</sup>, published in the Moscow newspaper *Pravda*, clarified to all the Soviet composers and Shostakovich himself the causes of and reasons behind the last remains of misconceptions and removed them from the path of their proper improvement.”<sup>6</sup>

Vučković's attitude towards Shostakovich is largely paradigmatic of our musicology. Many ambivalent and very few original views were expressed about Shostakovich in the period following the Second World War.<sup>7</sup> His work was received with appreciation and attention, but at the same time Soviet ideological-political qualifications were adopted uncritically. This acceptance is undoubtedly witnessed by the comments during Shostakovich's visit to Yugoslavia in 1963 on the occasion of the premiere of *Katerina Ismailova* at the Zagreb Opera,<sup>8</sup> as well as a series of other occasional writings.<sup>9</sup> For instance, Andreis's approach to Shostakovich, both in his history of music and the encyclopedic contribution dedicated to Shostakovich, bears a strong ideological stamp. These writings underline the issues of party approval and disapproval of certain compositions, as well as the criticism and awards with which he was showered with equal passion, while the analysis of works and style mostly receives insufficient attention. The varied genre range of Shostakovich's production is illuminated very selectively, without appropriately establishing the relationship

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<sup>5</sup> The ballet in question is *The Limpid Stream*, the title of which has often been translated incorrectly.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Vojislav Vučković, *Savremena sovjetska muzika* in: *ibid*, 464.

<sup>7</sup> Unlike in the case of Stravinsky and Prokofiev, no original contributions were made to the understanding and interpreting of Shostakovich's works, except for two seminar papers of musicology students (Vesna Kabiljo's paper on Shostakovich's symphonies entitled: *Neoklasicizam-ekspresionizam, neoklasicizam-socijalizam, saglasja i sukobi u simfonijskom stvaralaštvu Dmitrija Šostakoviča*, *Zvuk*, Sarajevo, 1982, 3, 68-78, was published, while Tijana Popović's paper on Shostakovich's quartets was not).

Although published under the title *Šostakovič – ideologija i djelo (Shostakovich – Ideology and Work)*, Vesna Vučinić's doctoral dissertation (defended at the University of Art in Belgrade) focuses its research and contribution on the analysis of the notion of ideology, the relationship between ideology and art, the elucidating of the relationship between ideas of the avant-garde and the cult of the proletariat in the Soviet post-revolutionary culture, as well as the course of development of ideas of proletarian art, rather than on autonomous research into Shostakovich's life and work and its original interpretation. The part of the study dedicated to these issues sums up the results of the research of Soviet musicology and they are provided here as an example, that is, an illustration and explanation of the presented theoretical positions.

Cf. Vesna Vučinić, *Šostakovič – ideologija i djelo*, Beograd, Foto futura, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Ivanka Bešević, *Šostakovič u Jugoslaviji (razgovor sa velikim umetnikom)*, *Zvuk*, Beograd, 1963, 61, 38-41; Krešimir Kovačević, *Hronika muzičkog života – Zagreb*, *ibid*, 77-80.

<sup>9</sup> Mihajlo Vukdragović, *Treći svesavezni kongres kompozitora SSSR*, *Zvuk*, Beograd, 1962, 54, 428-431; *Muzika u SSSR u jubilarnoj godini (Oktobarska revolucija i muzika; O sovjetskoj simfonijskoj muzici; Sedamdeset godina Jurija Šaporina; Opera »Mati« Tihona Hrenjikova; Balet »Spartak« Arama Hačaturjana)*, *Zvuk*, Beograd, 1958, 15-16, 255-263.

between his symphonic, concertante, chamber, piano, vocal-instrumental, incidental, film and theatre music. There are no criteria of periodization which would be based on the analysis of his work instead of the social-political circumstances in which he created. The characteristics of his style are represented in a very general manner and often terminologically confusing within the categories of 20<sup>th</sup>-century music,<sup>10</sup> without ever using the terms expressionism and neoclassicism which are inevitable when talking about his older contemporaries Stravinsky and Prokofiev.

Shostakovich's strong, distinctive, provocative and very influential work deserves more. We should begin the jubilean reexaminations by changing the methods of approaching his work and analyze Shostakovich as a part of 20<sup>th</sup>-century European music tradition within categories that do not proceed from party and state recognitions and censures, but instead take into consideration his specific attitude towards tradition which he knew and understood thoroughly and modernity which he talked about boldly and strongly.

Translated by Jelena Nikezić

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<sup>10</sup> Andreis characterizes Shostakovich's first symphonic work as being enthusiastic, fresh, inspired and tastefully orchestrated, while he describes the operas *The Nose* and *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* as culminations in mastering the language of Modernism. The shift in the mid-1930's is estimated as an orientation towards monumentality and harmonically simpler music that is more expressive in terms of pathos, which culminates with the *Seventh Symphony* and is manifested in the abandoning of previous models and the return to models from the past, from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Mahler, Tchaikovsky, The Mighty Five). The striving for monumentality and late romantic pathos is subsequently recognized as a constant characteristic of Shostakovich's writing. The works are presented by determining their character and content and sometimes quality (characteristics belonging to different categories are mentioned: youthful freshness, inventiveness, autobiographic work, the subjective, the human, the hermetic, the abstract, as well as relaxedness, serenity, pessimism, polyphonic character). Cf. Josip Andreis, Šostakovič, Dmitrij Dmitrijevič, in: Krešimir Kovačević (glav. ured), *Muzička enciklopedija JLZ, III*, JLZ, Zagreb, 1974, 509-510.